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House Taken Over (“Casa Tomada”) by the renowned Argentine writer Julio Cortázar portrays the lives of the two siblings, the protagonist, and Irene, living in their family’s old and spacious house. As the title suggests, the house is gradually taken over by mysterious and unseen forces, leading the siblings to eventually leave their homes. “House Taken Over” is one of his famous short stories, and it showcases his ability to blend the ordinary with the mysterious and uncanny. “House Taken Over” is a short story that revolves around the lives of two siblings, the unnamed protagonist, and his sister, Irene. The story is set in an ancient house, which holds a deep significance for the siblings as it preserves memories of their great-grandparents, grandfather, parents, and their childhoods. The siblings love the house dearly, especially since old houses in the neighborhood are being torn down for their valuable construction materials. They cherish the memories and plan to continue living there until they pass away, passing it on to distant cousins in the future. Irene and the protagonist also seem to have grown used to staying in the house by themselves. The siblings’ closeness is evident, and it is revealed that they have never married. Irene rejected two suitors without any reason, while the protagonist’s potential engagement ended tragically when his other love interest, Maria Esther, passed away. They now consider their peaceful and united sibling relationship to be the legacy they must uphold, continuing the line established by their grandparents. The house becomes a significant character in the story. It holds not only their history but also represents a sense of security and belonging for Irene and the protagonist. The story beautifully describes their daily routines, such as Irene’s constant knitting and the protagonist’s visits to bookstores in search of new French literature, though little worthwhile has arrived in Argentina since 1939.However, mysterious events soon unfold, subtly introducing an element of the supernatural. They hear loud noises which grow louder and seem to encroach upon their living space. Alarmed, they decide to lock and barricade the door, isolating themselves to their half of the house. Over time, they adjust to living solely in the section they have preserved, though they mourn the loss of items left behind in the other part of the house. The daily routine continues, and they find contentment in their simple life together. Irene’s knitting, which previously brought her comfort and purpose, now takes on a deeper significance as an activity that cannot be undone or repeated. One night, when the noises become more pronounced, they decide to flee the house together. They leave everything behind, taking only what they have them. The siblings then decide to lock up the front door securely and discard the key down a sewer pipe to prevent anyone from entering the house. The story concludes with the siblings leaving their cherished home behind, uncertain of the nature of the unseen intruders. “House Taken Over” leaves the mystery unresolved, leaving readers to ponder the enigmatic presence that forced the siblings to abandon their ancestral house.House Taken Over | AnalysisOne of the story’s notable strengths lies in its open-mindedness. Cortázar skillfully introduces an eerie atmosphere and unexplained noises, making readers question the nature of the unseen intruders. By leaving the mystery unresolved, the author invites readers to engage with their interpretations and theories, creating a lingering sense of unease long after finishing the story. The house itself serves as a powerful symbol throughout the narrative. It represents both the family’s history and a sanctuary that encapsulates their memories. As the unknown forces begin to take over the house, it becomes a metaphor for the passage of time and the inevitable change that life brings, forcing the characters to confront the impermanence of their cherished past.The repetitive routines of the siblings’ daily lives contrast with the uncertainty of the noises they hear. Irene’s knitting serves as a metaphor for life itself. It represents the act of creating something tangible and meaningful, akin to how one weaves the fabric of their existence. The process of knitting and unraveling also mirrors life’s complexities, as some choices may seem futile and require redoing, much like a knitted garment.Cortázar was associated with the literary movement of surrealism, and “House Taken Over” showcases his talent for blending the mundane with the mysterious. The subtle supernatural elements leave readers questioning the boundaries between reality and the surreal, adding an unsettling dimension to the story.The story subtly comments on the passage of time and the changes in society. The decline of old houses due to urban development and the loss of literary significance, symbolized by the lack of new French literature, reflect broader societal shifts. Cortázar skillfully weaves these commentaries into the narrative, making the story both personal and socially relevant. Irene’s masteryfully crafts an atmosphere of suspense and intrigue throughout the story. The gradual increase in mysterious noises, coupled with the unexplained presence of intruders, keeps readers on edge and engrossed in the narrative. The uncertainty surrounding the nature of the unseen forces adds to the story’s enigmatic allure. The story’s ambiguous ending contributes to its enduring appeal. Cortázar deliberately leaves the mystery of the intruders unresolved, allowing readers to interpret the story in various ways. This invites readers to engage actively with the narrative and encourages contemplation about the unknown forces that influence human lives.House Taken Over | ThemesLoss and desertion are represented by the dissolution of the other half of the home and the arrival of unknown powers. The narrative delves into the feelings and doubts that come when one is forced to leave familiar and significant areas behind.The siblings’ decision to sequester themselves in their section of the house, along with the incursion of unknown forces, creates a sense of isolation and unease. The narrative delves into the dread of the unknown as well as the vulnerability that comes with unexpected changes. The home represents tradition and family history. The decision of the siblings to remain in the house and carry on their familiar line emphasizes the significance of maintaining tradition and legacy.House Taken Over | Character SketchIrene’s dedication to her brother and their shared life is evident throughout the story. She chooses to remain unmarried and live with the protagonist in their ancestral house, showing contentment in their simple, routine-filled existence. Her commitment to this lifestyle highlights her loyalty to family traditions and values. When faced with mysterious intrusions, Irene exhibits resilience and adaptability. She accepts the loss of part of the house and the unknown presence without panicking or becoming overly distressed. Instead, she focuses on continuing her knitting, symbolizing her ability to carry on despite the uncertainties. Her composed demeanor contrasts with the protagonist’s occasional fear and anxiety, creating a balance in the narrative. Irene’s character leaves much to the reader’s imagination. While the protagonist’s perspective provides insight into their relationship and routines, Irene’s inner thoughts and emotions remain largely unknown, adding to her mysterious allure. Irene’s close relationship with her brother is a crucial aspect of her character. Their unbreakable bond is the foundation of the story, and it defines their shared choices and actions. Irene’s dedication to her brother contributes to the story’s themes of family, loyalty, and interconnectedness.Though Irene’s emotions are not explicitly stated, there are subtle hints of emotional depth beneath her calm exterior. Her dedication to her knitting and her potential emotional attachment to objects like the shawls and slippers suggest a sentimental aspect to her character. The protagonist of “House Taken Over” remains unnamed throughout the story, which adds to the sense of universality and allows readers to project themselves onto the character. The protagonist exhibits a strong sense of nostalgia and sentimentality toward the family’s history and the old house. He holds on to the memories of their ancestors and the entire lineage tied to the house, cherishing the traditions of the past.When the strange noises begin, the protagonist exhibits curiosity and fear in equal measure. He investigates the sounds to understand their origin, but as the intrusions escalate, he becomes increasingly fearful of the unknown. When faced with unexplained noises and potential danger, the protagonist takes decisive action to protect himself and Irene. He locks and barricades the door, and when the noises persist, he makes the difficult decision to leave the house entirely to ensure their safety.The protagonist is open-minded and reflective, allowing for multiple interpretations of the mysterious events in the story. He contemplates the implications of the intruders and the significance of their actions without jumping to conclusions, leaving room for readers to form their interpretations.House Taken Over | Literary DevicesThe house serves as a powerful symbol in the story, representing family history, tradition, and identity. The knitting also symbolizes life’s creative process and the inevitability of change. The mysterious noises and unseen forces can be interpreted as symbols of the unknown and the uncanny, reflecting the characters’ fears and uncertainties. The story utilizes foreshadowing to hint at the impending events. The initial reference to old houses being taken down and the loss of French literature in Argentina foreshadows the protagonist and Irene’s own fusion faced by the protagonist and Irene in their own home. The narrative is rich in vivid imagery, creating a detailed and evocative portrayal of the house, the characters’ daily routines, and the eerie events that unfold. The imagery of the knitting, the house’s architecture, and the sounds of the intruders contribute to the story’s atmospheric quality.The story employs repetition in describing the siblings’ daily routines, emphasizing the monotony of their lives, and contrasting it with the sudden disruption caused by the intrusions.The story’s open-ended ending serves as a literary device, leaving readers with unanswered questions and allowing for multiple interpretations. This technique invites readers to engage actively with the narrative and ponder its deeper meanings.Casa Tomada indirectly alludes to the broader societal changes and urban development happening around the characters through references to old houses being taken down in the neighborhood.Various symbolic elements and literary devices have been used in the narrative giving it a depth that is a common element of Julio Cortázar’s writing.House Taken Over leaves the reader with an ominous feeling pushing them to question themselves about existence, shared bonds, and familiar spaces. 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 her hand, mending robes and bedjackets 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 filling 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, unlessly 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 like flies. 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 Rodríguez Peña. 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 notes 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 hurried 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. 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 Hesperidin’s It happened repeatedly (but only in the first few days) that we would close some drawer or cabinet and look at one another sadly. “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 inflct 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 comfortable. 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 she 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 I 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 ruled by the sound. Irene noticed how brusquely I had paused, and came up beside me without a word. She 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 slipped and tumbled into the vestibule. “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 wool 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 I tighted 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 the difference with the house taken over. © Heirs of Julio Cortázar, 1951 Image: James Kerwin via Fubiz Julio Cortázar, born in Brussels in 1914 and passed away in Paris in 1984, stands one of the fundamental pillars of 20th-century Latin American literature. His work, spanning both short narratives and novels, is distinguished by its ability to merge the real with the fantastical, crafting unique and challenging literary universes. As a short story writer, Cortázar revolutionized the genre, introducing non-linear structures, linguistic plays, and a deep exploration of human psychology. First published in 1947 in the magazine “Los Anales de Buenos Aires,” edited by Jorge Luis Borges, “Casa Tomada” (House Taken Over) was later included in the book “Bestiario” (1951), Cortázar’s first short story collection. This work marked the beginning of a literary career that would establish Cortázar as one of the most prominent short story writers in the Spanish language. The story “Casa Tomada” (House Taken Over) tells the tale of two siblings, Irene and the narrator, who live together in a large, old family home inherited from their ancestors. Their life unfolds in daily routine, with Irene dedicated to knitting and the narrator handling household chores and buying wool for his sister. As the story progresses, a mysterious and undefined presence begins to “take over” parts of the house. This entity, never described or identified, forces the siblings to close off and abandon the sections of the house it has occupied, gradually reducing the space they can live in. Each time the presence expands, the siblings are compelled to confine themselves to smaller and smaller areas, taking with them the essentials. Ultimately, the mysterious presence takes over the entire house, forcing Irene and the narrator to leave their home. The story concludes with the siblings departing the house, and the narrator throwing the key into a sewer, a gesture that symbolizes their complete severance from the place they once called home. As the narrative unfolds, an unexplained and unsettling phenomenon begins to occur and what happens next is both chilling and self-reflective. In the heart of Buenos Aires, a grand family house stands as the central character of our story. This venerable home, passed down through generations, now shelters only two inhabitants: the narrator and his sister Irene. Their lives are entwined with the expansive walls and endless rooms of this abode, which they maintain tirelessly for five hours each day. This dedication to their ancestral home, the narrator muses, might be why neither sibling ever ventured into matrimony. He reminisces about Maria Esther, a lost love, and Irene recalls the marriage proposals she declined. Now in their forties, they see the house as their final dwelling, yet there’s an underlying fear that distant relatives might demolish it posthumously for profit. Irene’s world revolves around her knitting, creating practical items with a skill that sets her apart. The narrator, a connoisseur of French literature, often ventures out to procure wool for Irene and to quench his thirst for new books, a rite in Argentina. He stumbles upon a treasure trove of Irene’s colorful knitting, sparking curiosity and a hint of fear. Their lives are comfortably sustained by income from distant farms, a legacy that spares them the need for employment. The house itself is a divided realm: one wing houses the library, dining room, living room, and spare bedrooms, while the other contains their personal quarters, kitchen, and bathroom. United or divided by a large oak door, the house’s size is deceptive. Yet, the omnipresent dust from Buenos Aires makes their cleaning efforts almost Sisyphean. One evening, the tranquility is shattered by sounds of intrusion in the back wing. Acting swiftly, the narrator seals the oak door, forever splitting their world in two. He informs Irene, who takes the news with stoic resignation. They adapt to their constricted existence, reminiscing about the lost comforts of their former life, now reduced to the smaller portion of their home. Their days settle into a new rhythm, marked by Irene’s knitting and the narrator’s engagement with his father’s stamp collection. The simplicity of their life is punctuated by the small noises they make, disturbing the silence of their separate worlds. Their conversations echo in the kitchen, now a border with the unknown occupants of their home’s other half. Tragedy strikes again one evening. While seeking water, the narrator and Irene become aware of the intruders’ presence, too close for comfort. In a frenzied escape, they abandon their sanctuary, leaving behind not just possessions but a part of themselves. Irene’s knitting, connected to the inside by a trailing yarn, symbolizes their severed connection to the house. The narrator, realizing the gravity of their loss, secures the house one last time, condemning their memories and treasures to the hands of fate. With heavy hearts, they step into the unknown, leaving their once-grand home to its silent, unseen occupants. The grand house in Buenos Aires is not just a setting but a symbol of the narrator’s and Irene’s past and their family legacy. Their deep attachment to the house and the ritual of cleaning and maintaining it represent their connection to their family history and the weight of tradition. This attachment prevents them from pursuing personal aspirations and relationships outside the family sphere. The lesson here is about the powerful influence of family legacy and history on individual lives. It suggests that while respecting and maintaining family traditions can be valuable, it can also be limiting if it prevents personal growth and the pursuit of individual dreams. Throughout the story, the narrator and Irene exert great effort to maintain control over their environment, dedicating hours to cleaning and preserving their home. However, the sudden intrusion and their subsequent loss of half the house demonstrate how quickly circumstances can change, disrupting even the most meticulously maintained order. This theme teaches that life is inherently unpredictable and that our sense of control is often an illusion. It encourages adaptability and resilience in the face of unexpected changes, showing that while we may strive to control our environment, we must also be prepared to adapt when things beyond our control occur. The narrator and Irene, isolated in their large family home, develop a routine that revolves around simple tasks and hobbies, with little interaction with the outside world. Their self-imposed isolation is a response to their attachment to the house and the past. However, this isolation leads to a lack of meaningful connections and experience outside their immediate environment. The story underscores the importance of human connections and the risks of isolation. It serves as a reminder that while solitude can be comforting, human beings inherently need interaction and engagement with others to lead fulfilling lives. The siblings’ situation illustrates how isolation can limit perspectives and opportunities, emphasizing the value of balancing personal space with external social interactions. This story here effects on how physical spaces can become integral to one’s identity and how sudden changes can disrupt the very core of our existence. The characters’ deep connection to their home and their subsequent loss of