

Name: _____

Class: _____

Showdown

By Shirley Jackson

2015

An American author, Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) is known for her works of horror and mystery. Two of her most famous pieces are the novel The Haunting Hill House and the short story "The Lottery". "Showdown" is included in the collection of previously unpublished works called Let Me Tell You: New stories, Essays and Other Writings. In this short story a teenager relives a haunting experience in a small town. As you read, take notes on how Billy learns he is experiencing something strange and how he tries to stop it.

[1] Visitors, if there had ever been any, would have said that the little town of Mansfield was haunted. It didn't look haunted, hidden comfortably away among green hills, with its placid¹ houses and cheerful-looking inhabitants, but nevertheless a visitor, if there had ever been any, would have said that it was definitely, but definitely, haunted.

Some notion of this entered Billy Manners's head as he sat on the front porch of his house looking down Mansfield's only street. Billy's father was the storekeeper, schoolteacher, and preacher in the church on Sundays, and Billy, at 15, felt that he had a responsible place in the community as the son of his prominent² father.



"Untitled" by Jon Tyson is licensed under CC0.

From his porch Billy could look down to his father's store, where school was held in the back room, and over to the church next door, and then past a few houses to where the hills began again.

About three hundred people lived in Mansfield, but it took only one to be haunted. And Billy had begun to feel that he was it.

1. **Placid** (*adjective*) calm and peaceful, tranquil
2. **Prominent** (*adjective*) important

[5] Golly,³ Billy thought, golly. There ought to be some way for a smart guy like me to figure this out.

Uneasily he went into the house, and out to the kitchen. He looked at the mail-order calendar on the wall, which read July 16, 1932. That's fine, Billy thought: Saturday. Pop will still be at the store. Mother is out visiting Mrs Baxter. I'll go fishing.

As though Billy's father had heard this thought, Billy heard his name being called. Billy ran out the front door and saw his father outside the store, calling him.

Golly, Billy thought, what did I forget to do? Full of apprehension,⁴ he hurried down the street to the store.

"Billy," his father said as he approached, "your mother wants you to hurry right over to the church and help her clean it out for tomorrow." "Going to be a good sermon tomorrow, Ray?" old Thad Ruskin called from the end of the store porch. "Full o' hellfire?" "Pop always preaches good sermons," Billy said with dignity. He detested⁵ Thad Ruskin; everyone in town did. Thad drank – where he got it no one knew; rumour had it that he ran a still⁶ up in the hills somewhere – and he had ruined his pretty daughter Susy's romance with Tom Harper, who had subsequently⁷ left Mansfield and had not been heard from since.

[10] Rumour also had it that Tom Harper had made a million dollars in the city, and was coming back someday to face down Thad Ruskin and carry off Susy. Susy was still waiting, on the off-chance. Nowadays, Susy spent all her time at home sewing towels and pretty clothes for her hope chest,⁸ while Thad, usually drunk, sat among the loafers⁹ in front of the store, repeating over that no Tom Harper was going to come into his home and steal off his daughter. Everyone hated Thad, sympathised with Susy, and hoped that Tom Harper would bring his million dollars back to town.

"And your mother wants you, first of all, to run over and help Mrs Baxter get the ladder up from the cellar so she can get down her top row of preserved peaches and see if the cat's had her kittens back there." "Then can I go fishing, Pop?" Billy asked without much hope.

"Promised me you'd help in the store this afternoon, didn't you?" Billy's father said.

-
3. an expression to show surprise
 4. **Apprehension** (*noun*) anxiety that something bad will happen
 5. **Detest** (*verb*) to intensely dislike
 6. an apparatus or machine to make homemade alcohol
 7. **Subsequent** (*adjective*) coming after something in time; following
 8. a chest containing household linen and clothing stored by a woman in preparation for her marriage
 9. A loafer is a person who idles time away.

"Yessir," Billy muttered. As he started despondently¹⁰ across the street to Mrs Baxter's house, a sudden commotion behind him made him turn. Voices were raised. A stranger was walking down the street. He was a ragged, tired-looking figure – looks like he's been walking for three days, Billy thought – and he was heading for the store. The loafers on the porch of the store were all standing, old Thad Ruskin well in front peering at the stranger and murmuring.

Why, it's Tom Harper! Billy thought. All ragged, and poor! Billy stood watching while Tom Harper – it was him – walked up to the steps of the porch and stood facing Thad Ruskin.

- [15] "You ruined my life once, Thad Ruskin," he said. "Now I'm going to finish yours." No one stepped forward to help Thad as Tom Harper went slowly up the steps, but as he closed in on Thad, the old man moved swiftly. "Come back to kill me?" he demanded, and Tom's body slipped to the ground. "Ain't nobody that smart." Billy had been hurrying across the street toward Tom for what seemed an eternity. By the time Tom's body lay on the ground, Billy had gotten there, and stood peering with the others at the man who was supposed to have made a million dollars, and who now lay with Thad Ruskin's knife in his chest.

"Go call Susy, someone," Thad said. "I want her to see what happens to people who try to cross me." "He's still breathing," Billy's father said. "Here, let's make him more comfortable." Someone had found Susy, who came running over to the store, and she sank down beside Tom's figure on the ground, crying.

Tom opened his eyes halfway. "Didn't forget me, did you, Susy?" he whispered.

"I won't ever forget you," Susy cried passionately, "and neither will anyone else. They all just stood here and let my father kill you! I'll see that they don't get off easy!" "I don't want anyone punished for this," Tom said weakly, "not even your father. Just don't forget me..." "Guess he's dead, Susy," Billy's father said gently.

Billy went fishing after that. In the general excitement it was easy for him to slip away. But he was late for dinner, and as he opened the front door warily,¹¹ he heard his father's voice from the kitchen, calling, "Billy!" Billy went into the kitchen and saw that there was fried ham and apple sauce for dinner. He hoped his mother would sneak some up to him later.

- [20] "You were supposed to help your mother and Mrs Baxter and then help me in the store, Billy," his father said sternly. "I think you'd just better run along up to bed." Billy turned meekly. It was no more than he had expected.

"Pop," he said as he left the kitchen, "Pop, what did they do to Thad Ruskin?" "They're going to settle that tomorrow," his father said. "And I don't want you hanging around the store while we

10. **Despondent** (*adjective*) in low spirits due to loss of hope or courage

11. **Wary** (*adjective*) showing or feeling caution about possible dangers or problems

men talk about it, either." Billy went upstairs to bed. The excitement of the day, combined with the hot sun and the walking he had done in the afternoon, had made him tired. He fell asleep before his mother could manage to escape his father's eye and sneak upstairs with a plate of ham and apple sauce.

It took a few days for Billy to decide that Mansfield was haunted. He never thought about it consciously, but now and then a shadow of a troubling idea seemed to come over him, like the next morning, as he sat on his front porch looking down the street. Golly, he thought. Golly. There ought to be some way for a smart guy like me to figure this out.

Soon after, he went into the kitchen, and saw that the date was July 16, 1932; Billy thought he might go fishing and forget about work. Just then he heard his name being called, and he hurried down the street to where his father was standing in front of the store.

"Billy," his father said, "your mother wants you to hurry right over to the church and help her clean it out for tomorrow." Old Thad Ruskin piped up, "Going to be a good sermon tomorrow, Ray? Full o' hellfire?" Billy said, "Pop always preaches good sermons," and then his father added: "And your mother wants you, first of all, to run over and help Mrs Baxter get the ladder up from the cellar so's she can get down her top row of preserved peaches and see if the cat's had her kittens back there." Without hope, Billy asked his father if he could go fishing and was reminded he had agreed to work in the store that afternoon. He started across the street, then heard a commotion and turned to see ragged Tom Harper walking toward the store. Billy watched Tom Harper approach old Thad, and Billy was across the street in time to see Tom fall at Thad's feet. When Susy promised Tom that no one would ever forget him, Billy murmured assent,¹² as did everyone else, and then he went fishing.

- [25] When he got home late for dinner his father was angry and sent him to bed without anything to eat, and Billy fell asleep before his mother could sneak him a plate.

The next morning Billy sat on his front porch and thought about it again. Somehow it always evaded¹³ him – the secret of why Mansfield was haunted. Nothing ever happened there, just the same things over and over every day, ever since Billy could remember.

Let me see, Billy thought. What happened yesterday? He had gone fishing, he remembered, and had gotten home late for dinner. What else? Probably just fooled around all day, he thought. Was today Saturday? He went in and looked at the calendar.

He thought he might go fishing again today. But when Billy ran down to the store after his father called, he found that excitement had really come to Mansfield; he saw Tom Harper, home from the city, try to kill old Thad Ruskin, but Thad killed Tom instead. Billy saw the whole

12. **Assent** (*noun*) expression of approval or agreement

13. **Evade** (*verb*) to escape or avoid

thing. Afterward, he went fishing.

The next day, just as Billy was crossing the street to go to Mrs Baxter's, he thought: Something's going to happen in a minute! And something did. The day after that, as he ran across the street to see Tom Harper die, he thought: Haven't I done this before? And the next day, as he ran down the street in answer to his father's call, he thought: How many million times have I done this? It was several hundred thousand times, anyway, and always on July 16, 1932, and in all that time something had been growing in Billy's head. From his first thought, as he ran across the street to see Tom Harper's body the first time, that here was something he wasn't going to forget in a hurry, there had grown in him a definite conviction that there was something wrong going on. Particularly since he could never remember what he had done the day before. Finally, Billy had a realisation.

[30] I do these things again and again, he thought one day, running across the street to the store to see Tom Harper die. I bet I've run from Mrs Baxter's over to the store lots of times for lots of reasons, but I don't remember ever running across for anything but to see Tom Harper.

The next thought, of course, was: Suppose I don't run across to see Tom Harper? It didn't work. Every time Billy turned around and saw Tom Harper walking up onto the porch to meet Thad Ruskin he began to run, and he always got across the street just in time to see Tom's body topple at his feet.

Suppose I hurry?, Billy wondered. He tried to speed himself up crossing the street. With a prodigious¹⁴ effort he managed to reach the store porch before Tom had started to fall. Everything else was the same, but Billy had arrived a fraction of a second sooner.

He hurried home from fishing a fraction of a second earlier, that afternoon, but was still too late for dinner. The next morning he really tried to hurry. He went into the kitchen a fraction of a second sooner than he felt he ought to; he thought, I'll go fishing, then had to wait for his father to call him; he said, "Pop always preaches good sermons" to Thad Ruskin just as Thad was finishing "hellfire"; and he crossed the street in time to see the knife go into Tom's breast.

He was still late for dinner, though. He entered his house, knew his father was sitting at the kitchen table eating ham and apple sauce, and went right on upstairs. He had just reached the top of the stairs when he heard his father begin: "You were supposed to help your mother and Mrs Baxter." All this time, Billy didn't quite know what he was doing. He was still going on with the same motions every day, but his doubt — something that made him know the whole business was fishy — also made him go faster. After three or four days of speeding up, he was beginning to arrive at the store several seconds before his father stepped out front and called "Billy!" He was answering Thad Ruskin's remark before Thad said it.

14. **Prodigious** (*adjective*) extraordinary in bulk, quantity, or degree

[35] He was beginning to remember more, too. When he heard his own voice saying “Pop always preaches good sermons” to thin air, and then a minute later heard Thad Ruskin's remark, Billy was beginning to realise what was going on. By this time he had managed to get across the street in time to walk up the store steps with Tom Harper and stand next to him as the knife went in.

The idea that was coming to Billy was vague.¹⁵ It finally materialised¹⁶ into a strange thought, one morning as he sat on his front porch. If I should see a murder somewhere, he thought suddenly, and if I could be there in time, what I should do is step between the two guys and grab for the knife.

"Showdown" from LET ME TELL YOU: NEW STORIES, ESSAYS, AND OTHER WRITINGS by Shirley Jackson, edited by Laurence Jackson Hyman and Sarah Hyman DeWitt, copyright © 2015 by Laurence Jackson Hyman, J. S. Holly, Sarah Hyman, DeWitt, and Barry Hyman; Biographical note, compilation and Afterword copyright © 2015 by Penguin Random House LLC. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Unless otherwise noted, this content is licensed under the [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

-
15. **Vague** (*adjective*) uncertain or unclear meaning
 16. **Materialize** (*verb*) to come into existence

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which statement best describes a main theme of the story?
 - A. Achieving perfection is impossible even if given infinite opportunities.
 - B. Disobeying parents for selfish reasons will have negative consequences.
 - C. Failing to stop injustices can have unintended consequences for many people.
 - D. Grief over the loss of a loved one can have profound effects on one's community.

2. How does Tom Harper's death affect Billy?
 - A. It forces Billy to take responsibility and help his parents.
 - B. Billy realizes that the loafers are not people on which he can rely.
 - C. Billy stops caring about what happens to his family and community.
 - D. It forces Billy to relive the day Tom died and reflect on what he can change.

3. What structural choice contributes most directly to building suspense?
 - A. background information on Thad Ruskin showing he is not a good person
 - B. repetition of the details of the day as Billy begins to realize something is wrong
 - C. short paragraphs that represent the short span of time that Billy is experiencing
 - D. dialogue between characters that gives the reader insight into their thoughts and feelings

4. Which statement best explains why Mansfield is repeating the day Tom Harper died?
- A. "Rumour also had it that Tom Harper had made a million dollars in the city, and was coming back someday to face down Thad Ruskin and carry off Susy." (Paragraph 10)
 - B. "I won't ever forget you," Susy cried passionately, "and neither will anyone else. They all just stood here and let my father kill you! I'll see that they don't get off easy!" (Paragraph 18)
 - C. "I bet I've run from Mrs Baxter's over to the store lots of times for lots of reasons, but I don't remember ever running across for anything but to see Tom Harper." (Paragraph 30)
 - D. "He was still going on with the same motions every day, but his doubt — something that made him know the whole business was fishy- also made him go faster." (Paragraph 34)
5. How does Billy's realization that he is reliving the day of Tom Harper's death contribute to the theme of the story? Use evidence from the text to support your response.
