

C++ Smart Pointers (Conclusion)

CSE 333 Autumn 2025

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Relevant Course Information

- ❖ Exercise 13 due today by 5pm
 - Gradescope mistakenly listed 5pm, but we kept the extension!
 - N.B. exercises are always due at 10am on due date, *unless announced as an exception*
- ❖ Exercise 14 out, not due until Monday (11/10)
 - Short exercise using smart pointers (covered today + section)
- ❖ Short section this week → bring hard questions!
 - Smart pointer material rushed during lecture will be reviewed + conversions + casting
- ❖ Graded midterms and sample solutions released
 - N.B. regraded Q2 + adjusted scores UP for everyone on Q1b

Lecture Outline

- ❖ **Motivating Smart Pointers**
- ❖ **Introducing STL Smart Pointers**
 - `std::shared_ptr`
 - `std::weak_ptr`
- ❖ **Smart Pointer Limitations**
 - `std::weak_ptr`

Goals for Smart Pointers

- ❖ Should automatically handle dynamically-allocated memory to decrease programming overhead of managing memory
 - Don't have to explicitly call `delete` or `delete[]`
 - Memory will deallocate when no longer in use – ties the lifetime of the data to the smart pointer object
- ❖ Should work similarly to using a normal/“raw” pointer
 - Expected/usual behavior using `->`, `*`, and `[]` operators
 - Only declaration/construction should be different

Example: ToyPtr Class Template

ToyPtr.h

```
#ifndef TOYPTR_H_
#define TOYPTR_H_

template <typename T>
class ToyPtr {
public:
    ToyPtr(T* ptr) : ptr_(ptr) { }           // constructor
    ~ToyPtr() { delete ptr_; }                // destructor

    T& operator*() { return *ptr_; }          // * operator
    T* operator->() { return ptr_; }           // -> operator

private:
    T* ptr_;                                  // the pointer itself
};

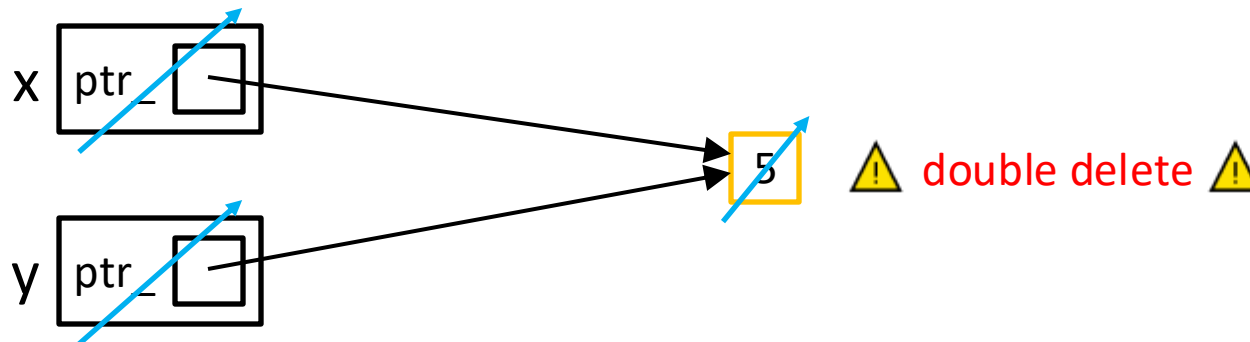
#endif // TOYPTR_H_
```

ToyPtr Class Issue

toyuse.cc

```
#include "ToyPtr.h"

// We want two pointers!
int main(int argc, char** argv) {
    ToyPtr<int> x(new int(5));
    ToyPtr<int> y(x);
    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```



Brainstorm ways to design around this. 🤔💡

Smart Pointers Solutions

❖ Option 1: **Reference Counting**

- `shared_ptr` (and `weak_ptr`)
- Track the number of references to an “owned” piece of data and only deallocate when no smart pointers are managing that data

❖ Option 2: **Unique Ownership of Memory**

- `unique_ptr`
- Disable copying (cctor, op=) to prevent sharing

Option 1: Reference Counting

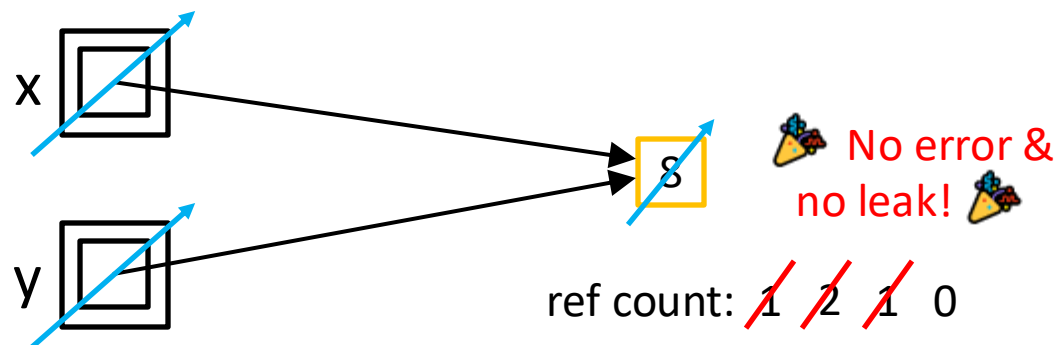
- ❖ `shared_ptr` implements **reference counting**
 - https://cplusplus.com/reference/memory/shared_ptr/
 - Counts the number of references to a piece of heap-allocated data and only deallocates it when the reference count reaches 0
 - This means that it is no longer being used and its lifetime has come to an end
 - Managed abstractly through sharing a *resource counter*:
 - Constructors will **create** the counter
 - Copy constructor and operator= will **increment** the counter
 - Destructor will **decrement** the counter

Now using `shared_ptr`

shareduse.cc

```
#include <memory>    // for std::shared_ptr
#include <cstdlib>    // for EXIT_SUCCESS

// We want two pointers!
int main(int argc, char** argv) {
    std::shared_ptr<int> x(new int(5)); // creates ref count
    *x += 3;                             // usage is the same
    std::shared_ptr<int> y(x);           // increments ref count
    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```



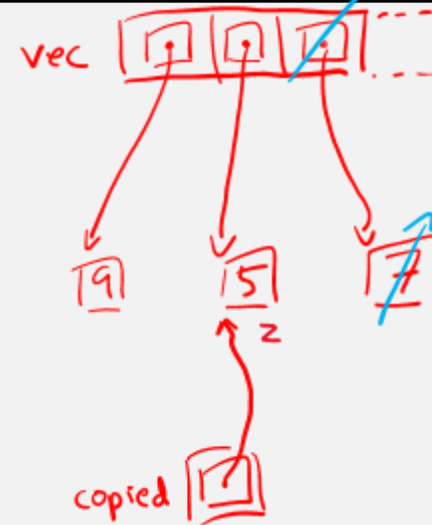
shared_ptrs and STL Containers

❖ Use `shared_ptr` inside STL Containers

- Avoid extra object copies
- Safe to do, since copy/assign maintain a shared reference count
 - Copying increments ref count, then original is destructed

```
vector<std::shared_ptr<int> > vec;  
  
vec.push_back(std::shared_ptr<int>(new int(9)));  
vec.push_back(std::shared_ptr<int>(new int(5)));  
vec.push_back(std::shared_ptr<int>(new int(7)));  
  
int& z = *vec[1];  
std::cout << "z is: " << z << std::endl;  
  
std::shared_ptr<int> copied(vec[1]); // works!  
std::cout << "*copied: " << *copied << std::endl;  
  
vec.pop_back(); // removes smart ptr & deallocates 7!
```

sharedvec.cc



Practice with Reference Counts

❖ What is the expected output of this program?

- **use_count** () – returns reference count
- **unique** () – returns ref count == 1 (bool)

sharedrefcount.cc

```
... // the necessary includes are here
```

```
int main(int argc, char** argv) {
    std::shared_ptr<int> x(new int(10));
```

```
    std::cout << x.use_count() << std::endl; // 1
```

```
    // temporary inner scope (!)
```

```
{
```

```
    std::shared_ptr<int> y(x);
```

```
    std::cout << y.use_count() << std::endl; // 2
```

```
} // y is destructed here!
```

```
std::cout << x.use_count() << std::endl; // 1
```

```
std::cout << x.unique() << std::endl; // true
```

```
return EXIT_SUCCESS; // x is destructed here (10 is cleaned up)
```

```
}
```



Option 2: Unique Ownership

- ❖ A `unique_ptr` is the *sole owner* of a pointer to memory
 - https://cplusplus.com/reference/memory/unique_ptr/
 - Enforces uniqueness by disabling copy and assignment (compiler error if these methods are used)
 - Will therefore *always* call `delete` on the managed pointer when destructed
 - As the sole owner, a `unique_ptr` can choose to *transfer* or *release* ownership of a pointer

unique_ptr Cannot Be Copied

- ❖ `std::unique_ptr` has disabled its copy constructor and assignment operator
 - You cannot copy a `unique_ptr`, helping maintain “uniqueness” or “ownership”

uniquefail.cc

```
#include <memory>    // for std::unique_ptr
#include <cstdlib>    // for EXIT_SUCCESS

int main(int argc, char** argv) {
    std::unique_ptr<int> x(new int(5)); // 1-arg ctor (pointer) ✓
    std::unique_ptr<int> y(x);          // cctor disabled; compiler error ✗
    std::unique_ptr<int> z;             // default ctor, holds nullptr ✓
    z = x;                             // op= disabled; compiler error ✗

    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```

unique_ptrs and STL

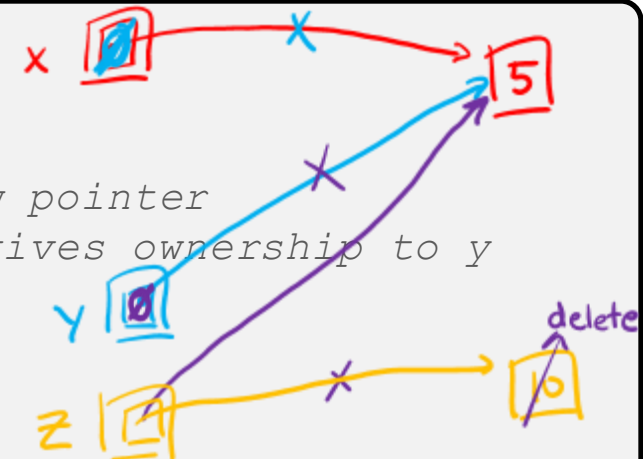
- ❖ `unique_ptr` *can* also be stored in STL containers!
 - Contradiction? STL containers make copies of stored objects and `unique_ptr` cannot be copied...
- ❖ Recall: *why* do container operations/methods create extra copies?
 - Generally to **move** things around in memory/the data structure
 - The end result is still one copy of each element – this doesn't break the sole ownership notion!

Passing Ownership

- ❖ As the “owner” of a pointer, `unique_ptr`s should be able to remove or transfer its ownership
 - `release()` and `reset()` free ownership

uniquepass.cc

```
int main(int argc, char** argv) {  
  ① unique_ptr<int> x(new int(5));  
    cout << "x: " << *x << endl;  
    // Releases ownership and returns a raw pointer  
  ② unique_ptr<int> y(x.release()); // x gives ownership to y  
    cout << "y: " << *y << endl;  
  ③ unique_ptr<int> z(new int(10));  
    // y gives ownership to z  
    // z's reset() deallocates "10" and stores y's pointer  
  ④ z.reset(y.release());  
    return EXIT_SUCCESS;  
}
```



unique_ptr and STL Example

- ❖ STL's supports transfer ownership of `unique_ptr`s using **move** semantics

uniquevec.cc

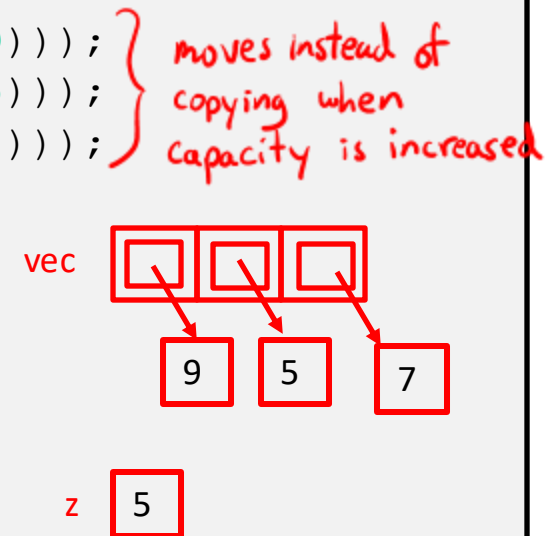
```
int main(int argc, char** argv) {
    std::vector<std::unique_ptr<int> > vec;

    vec.push_back(std::unique_ptr<int>(new int(9)));
    vec.push_back(std::unique_ptr<int>(new int(5)));
    vec.push_back(std::unique_ptr<int>(new int(7)));

    // z holds 5
    int z = *vec[1];
    std::cout << "z is: " << z << std::endl;

    // compiler error!
    std::unique_ptr<int> copied(vec[1]);

    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```



See full lecture code of [uniquevec.cc](#)!

unique_ptr and Move Semantics

- ❖ “Move semantics” (as compared to “Copy semantics”) move values from one object to another without copying
 - <https://cplusplus.com/doc/tutorial/classes2/#move>
 - Useful for optimizing away temporary copies
 - STL’s use move semantics to transfer ownership of `unique_ptr`s instead of copying

uniquemove.cc

```
... (includes and other examples)
int main(int argc, char** argv) {
    std::unique_ptr<string> a(new string("Hello"));

    // moves a to b
    std::unique_ptr<string> b = std::move(a);
    // a is now nullptr (default ctor of unique_ptr)
    std::cout << "b: " << *b << std::endl; // "Hello"

    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```



Aside: Smart Pointers and Arrays

- ❖ Smart pointers can store arrays as well and will call `delete []` on destruction

uniquearray.cc

```
#include <memory>    // for std::unique_ptr
#include <cstdlib>    // for EXIT_SUCCESS

using std::unique_ptr;

int main(int argc, char **argv) {
    unique_ptr<int[]> x(new int[5]);

    x[0] = 1;
    x[2] = 2;

    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```

Choosing Between Smart Pointers

- ❖ `unique_ptr`s make ownership very clear
 - Generally the default choice due to reduced complexity – the owner is responsible for cleaning up the resource
 - Example: would make sense in HW1 & HW2, where we specifically documented who takes ownership of a resource
 - Less overhead: small and efficient
- ❖ `shared_ptr`s allow for multiple simultaneous owners
 - Reference counting allows for “smarter” deallocation but consumes more space and logic and is trickier to get right
 - Common when using more “well-connected” data structures

Lecture Outline

- ❖ Introducing STL Smart Pointers
 - `std::shared_ptr`
 - `std::weak_ptr`
- ❖ Smart Pointer Limitations
 - `std::weak_ptr`

Limitations with Smart Pointers

- ❖ Smart pointers are only as “smart” as the behaviors that have been built into their class methods and non-member functions!
- ❖ Limitations we will look at now:
 - Can't tell if pointer is to the heap or not
 - Circumventing ownership rules
 - Still possible to leak memory!
 - Sorting smart pointers *[Bonus slides]*

Using a Non-Heap Pointer

- ❖ Smart pointers will still call `delete` when destructed

```
#include <cstdlib>
#include <memory>

using std::shared_ptr;

int main(int argc, char** argv) {
    int x = 333;

    shared_ptr<int> p1(&x);

    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
} // invalid delete on destruction!
```

Re-using a Raw Pointer (`unique_ptr`)

- ❖ Smart pointers can't tell if you are re-using a raw pointer

```
#include <cstdlib>
#include <memory>

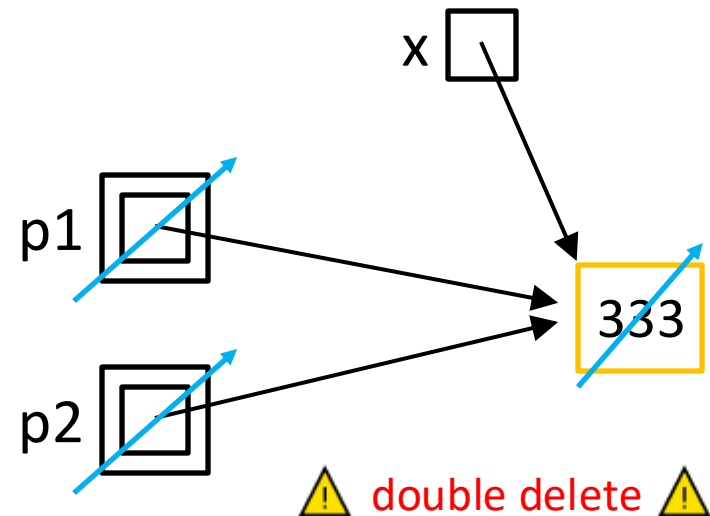
using std::unique_ptr;

int main(int argc, char** argv) {
    int* x = new int(333);

    unique_ptr<int> p1(x);

    unique_ptr<int> p2(x);

    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```



Re-using a Raw Pointer (`shared_ptr`)

- ❖ Smart pointers can't tell if you are re-using a raw pointer

```
#include <cstdlib>
#include <memory>

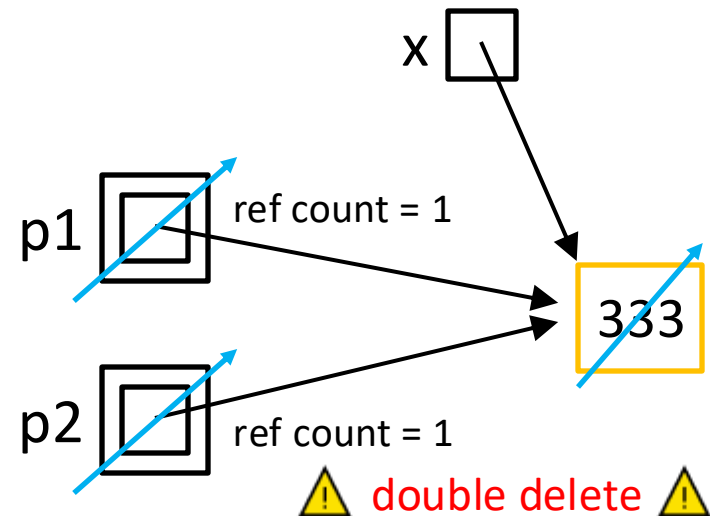
using std::shared_ptr;

int main(int argc, char** argv) {
    int* x = new int(333);

    shared_ptr<int> p1(x);

    shared_ptr<int> p2(x);

    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```



Solution: Don't Use Raw Pointer Variables

- ❖ Smart pointers replace your raw pointers; passing `new` and then using the copy constructor is safer:

```
#include <cstdlib>
#include <memory>

using std::shared_ptr;

int main(int argc, char** argv) {
int* x = new int(333);

    shared_ptr<int> p1(new int(333));

    shared_ptr<int> p2(p1);

    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```

Caution Using `get()`

- ❖ Smart pointers still have functions to return the raw pointer without losing its ownership
 - `get()` can circumvent ownership rules!

```
#include <cstdlib>
#include <memory>

// Same as re-using a raw pointer
int main(int argc, char** argv) {

    unique_ptr<int> p1(new int(5));

    unique_ptr<int> p2(p1.get());

    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```

Cycle of `shared_ptr`s

❖ What happens when `main` returns?

*memory leak!
nodes not deallocated*

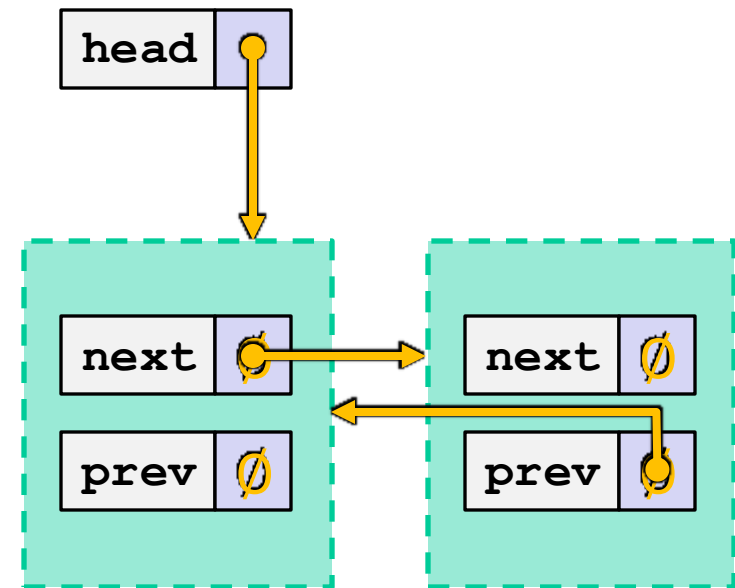
```
#include <cstdlib>
#include <memory>

using std::shared_ptr;

struct A {
    shared_ptr<A> next;
    shared_ptr<A> prev;
};

int main(int argc, char** argv) {
    shared_ptr<A> head(new A());
    head->next = shared_ptr<A>(new A());
    head->next->prev = head;

    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```



⚠ both head AND 2nd node have access to shared reference count for 1st node

sharedcycle.cc

Solution: `weak_ptr`

- ❖ `weak_ptr` is similar to a `shared_ptr` but *doesn't affect* the reference count
 - https://cplusplus.com/reference/memory/weak_ptr/
 - Not really a pointer as it **cannot be dereferenced** (!) – would break our notion of shared ownership
 - To dereference, you first use the **lock** method to get an associated `shared_ptr`

Breaking the Cycle with `weak_ptr`

❖ Now what happens when `main` returns? *No memory leak!*

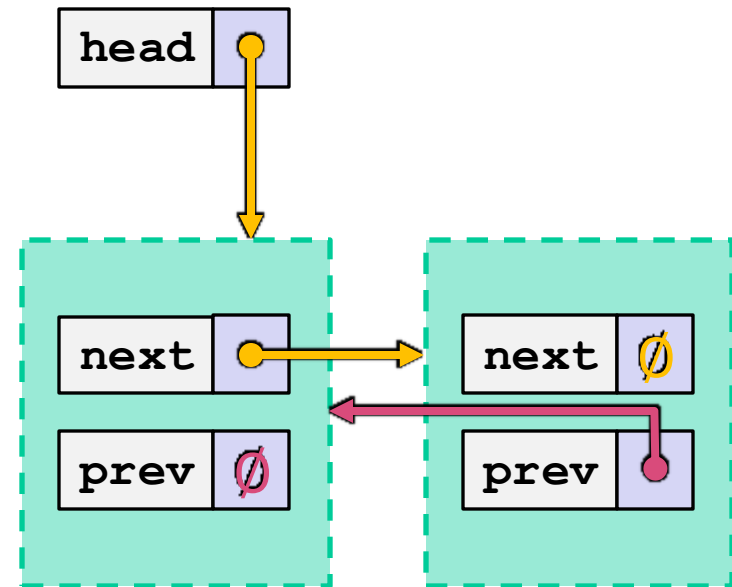
```
#include <cstdlib>
#include <memory>

using std::shared_ptr;
using std::weak_ptr;

struct A {
    shared_ptr<A> next;
    weak_ptr<A> prev;
};

int main(int argc, char** argv) {
    shared_ptr<A> head(new A());
    head->next = shared_ptr<A>(new A());
    head->next->prev = head;

    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```



`weakcycle.cc`

Dangling `weak_ptr`s

- ❖ `weak_ptr`s don't change reference count and can become "*dangling*"

- Data referenced may have been `delete'd`

`weakrefcount.cc`

```
... (includes and other examples)
int main(int argc, char** argv) {
    std::weak_ptr<int> w;

    { // temporary inner scope
        std::shared_ptr<int> y(new int(10));
        w = y; // assignment operator of weak_ptr takes a shared_ptr
        std::shared_ptr<int> x = w.lock(); // "promoted" shared_ptr

        std::cout << *x << " " << w.expired() << std::endl;
    }
    std::cout << w.expired() << std::endl;
    w.lock(); // returns a nullptr

    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```

Summary of Smart Pointers

- ❖ A `shared_ptr` utilizes *reference counting* for multiple owners of an object in memory
 - `delete`s an object once its reference count reaches zero
- ❖ A `weak_ptr` works with a shared object but doesn't affect the reference count
 - Can't actually be dereferenced, but can check if the object still exists and can get a `shared_ptr` from the `weak_ptr` if it does
- ❖ A `unique_ptr` ***takes ownership*** of a pointer
 - Cannot be copied, but can be moved

Some Important Smart Pointer Methods

Visit <http://www.cplusplus.com/> for more information on these!

- ❖ `std::unique_ptr<T> U;`
 - `U.get()` Returns the raw pointer U is managing
 - `U.release()` U stops managing its raw pointer and returns the raw pointer
 - `U.reset(q)` U cleans up its raw pointer and takes ownership of q
- ❖ `std::shared_ptr<T> S;`
 - `S.get()` Returns the raw pointer S is managing
 - `S.use_count()` Returns the reference count
 - `S.unique()` Returns true iff `S.use_count() == 1`
- ❖ `std::weak_ptr<T> W;`
 - `W.lock()` Constructs a shared pointer based off of W and returns it
 - `W.use_count()` Returns the reference count
 - `W.expired()` Returns true iff W is expired (`W.use_count() == 0`)

BONUS SLIDES

Some details about sorting the owned data within a container of smart pointers.

These slides expand on material covered today but won't be needed for CSE333; however, they are relevant for general C++ smart pointer usage in STL containers.

Smart Pointers and “<”

- ❖ Smart pointers implement some comparison operators, including `operator<`
 - However, it doesn't invoke `operator<` on the pointed-to objects; instead, it just promises a stable, strict ordering (probably based on the pointer address, not the pointed-to-value)
- ❖ To use the `sort`() algorithm on a container like `vector`, you need to provide a comparison function
- ❖ To use a smart pointer in a sorted container like `map`, you need to provide a comparison function when you *declare* the container

unique_ptr and STL Sorting

uniquevecsort.cc

```
using namespace std;
bool sortfunction(const unique_ptr<int> &x,
                 const unique_ptr<int> &y) { return *x < *y; }
void printfunction(unique_ptr<int> &x) { cout << *x << endl; }

int main(int argc, char **argv) {
    vector<unique_ptr<int> > vec;
    vec.push_back(unique_ptr<int>(new int(9)));
    vec.push_back(unique_ptr<int>(new int(5)));
    vec.push_back(unique_ptr<int>(new int(7)));

    // buggy: sorts based on the values of the ptrs
    sort(vec.begin(), vec.end());
    cout << "Sorted:" << endl;
    for_each(vec.begin(), vec.end(), &printfunction);

    // better: sorts based on the pointed-to values
    sort(vec.begin(), vec.end(), &sortfunction);
    cout << "Sorted:" << endl;
    for_each(vec.begin(), vec.end(), &printfunction);

    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
}
```

Compare pointed-to values

swapping for sort done via move semantics

unique_ptr, "<", and maps

- ❖ Similarly, you can use `unique_ptr`s as keys in a `map`
 - Reminder: a `map` internally stores keys in sorted order
 - Iterating through the `map` iterates through the keys in order
 - By default, "<" is used to enforce ordering
 - You must specify a comparator when *constructing* the `map` to get a meaningful sorted order using "<" of `unique_ptr`s
- ❖ Compare (the 3rd template) parameter:
 - "A binary predicate that takes two element *keys* as arguments and returns a `bool`. This can be a function pointer or a function object."
 - `bool fptr(T1& lhs, T1& rhs);` OR member function
→ `bool operator() (const T1& lhs, const T1& rhs);`

unique_ptr and map Example

uniquemap.cc

```
struct MapComp {
    bool operator()(const unique_ptr<int> &lhs,
                    const unique_ptr<int> &rhs) const { return *lhs < *rhs; }
}; // function object
```

still compares pointed-to values

```
int main(int argc, char **argv) {
    map<unique_ptr<int>, int, MapComp> a_map; // Create the map
```

```
    unique_ptr<int> a(new int(5)); // unique_ptr for key
    unique_ptr<int> b(new int(9));
    unique_ptr<int> c(new int(7));
```

```
    a_map[std::move(a)] = 25; // move semantics to get ownership
    a_map[std::move(b)] = 81; // of unique_ptrs into the map.
    a_map[std::move(c)] = 49; // a, b, c hold NULL after this.
```

move

```
    map<unique_ptr<int>, int>::iterator it;
    for (it = a_map.begin(); it != a_map.end(); it++) {
        std::cout << "key: " << *(it->first);
        std::cout << " value: " << it->second << std::endl;
    }
    return EXIT_SUCCESS;
```

