13.8 — Partial template specialization for pointers

BY ALEX ON DECEMBER 5TH, 2016 | LAST MODIFIED BY ALEX ON JANUARY 23RD, 2020

In previous lesson **13.5 -- Function template specialization**, we took a look at a simple templated Storage class:

```
#include <iostream>

template <class T>
class Storage
{
private:
    T m_value;
public:
    Storage(T value)
    {
         m_value = value;
    }

    ~Storage()
    {
    }

    void print()
    {
        std::cout << m_value << '\n';
    }
};
```

We showed that this class had problems when template parameter T was of type char* because of the shallow copy/pointer assignment that takes place in the constructor. In that lesson, we used full template specialization to create a specialized version of the Storage constructor for type char* that allocated memory and created an actual deep copy of m_value. For reference, here's the fully specialized char* Storage constructor and destructor:

```
// You need to include the Storage<T> class from the example above here

template <>
Storage<char*>::Storage(char* value)
{
    // Figure out how long the string in value is
    int length=0;
    while (value[length] != '\0')
        ++length;
    ++length; // +1 to account for null terminator

    // Allocate memory to hold the value string
    m_value = new char[length];

    // Copy the actual value string into the m_value memory we just allocated
    for (int count=0; count < length; ++count)
        m_value[count] = value[count];
}

template<>
Storage<char*>::~Storage()
{
    delete[] m_value;
}
```

While that worked great for Storage<char*>, what about other pointer types (such as int*)? It's fairly easy to see that if T is any pointer type, then we run into the problem of the constructor doing a pointer assignment instead of making an actual deep copy of the element being pointed to.

Because full template specialization forces us to fully resolve templated types, in order to fix this issue we'd have to define a new specialized constructor (and destructor) for each and every pointer type we wanted to use Storage with! This leads to lots of duplicate code, which as you well know by now is something we want to avoid as much as possible.

Fortunately, partial template specialization offers us a convenient solution. In this case, we'll use class partial template specialization to define a special version of the Storage class that works for pointer values. This class is considered partially specialized because we're telling the compiler that it's only for use with pointer types, even though we haven't specified the underlying type exactly.

```
#include <iostream>

// You need to include the Storage<T> class from the example above here

template <typename T>
class Storage<T*> // this is a partial-specialization of Storage that works with pointer types
{
private:
    T* m_value;
public:
    Storage(T* value) // for pointer type T
    {
         // For pointers, we'll do a deep copy
         m_value = new T(*value); // this copies a single value, not an array
    }

    ~Storage()
    {
        delete m_value; // so we use scalar delete here, not array delete
    }

    void print()
    {
        std::cout << *m_value << '\n';
    }
};
```

And an example of this working:

```
int main()
{
    // Declare a non-pointer Storage to show it works
    Storage<int> myint(5);
    myint.print();

    // Declare a pointer Storage to show it works
    int x = 7;
    Storage<int*> myintptr(&x);

    // If myintptr did a pointer assignment on x,
    // then changing x will change myintptr too
    x = 9;
    myintptr.print();

    return 0;
}
```

This prints the value:

```
5
7
```

When myintptr is defined with an int* template parameter, the compiler sees that we have defined a partially specialized template class that works with any pointer type, and instantiates a version of Storage using that template. The constructor of that class makes a deep copy of parameter x. Later, when we change x to 9, the myintptr.m_value is not affected because it's pointing at its own separate copy of the value.

If the partial template specialization class did not exist, myintptr would have used the normal (non-partially-specialized) version of the template. The constructor of that class does a shallow copy pointer assignment, which means that myintptr.m_value and x would be referencing the same address. Then when we changed the value of x to 9, we would have changed myintptr's value too.

It's worth noting that because this partially specialized Storage class only allocates a single value, for C-style strings, only the first character will be copied. If the desire is to copy entire strings, a specialization of the constructor (and destructor) for type char* can be fully specialized. The fully specialized version will take precedence over the partially specialized version. Here's an example program that uses both partial specialization for pointers, and full specialization for char*:

```
#include <iostream>
#include <cstring>

// Our Storage class for non-pointers
template <class T>
class Storage
{
private:
    T m_value;
public:
    Storage(T value)
    {
        m_value = value;
    }

    ~Storage()
    {
    }

    void print()
    {
        std::cout << m_value << '\n';
    }
};

// Partial-specialization of Storage class for pointers
template <class T>
class Storage<T*>
{
private:
    T* m_value;
public:
    Storage(T* value)
    {
        m_value = new T(*value);
    }

    ~Storage()
    {
```

```
        delete m_value;
    }

    void print()
    {
        std::cout << *m_value << '\n';
    }
};

// Full specialization of constructor for type char*
template <>
Storage<char*>::Storage(char* value)
{
    // Figure out how long the string in value is
    int length = 0;
    while (value[length] != '\0')
        ++length;
    ++length; // +1 to account for null terminator

    // Allocate memory to hold the value string
    m_value = new char[length];

    // Copy the actual value string into the m_value memory we just allocated
    for (int count = 0; count < length; ++count)
        m_value[count] = value[count];
}

// Full specialization of destructor for type char*
template<>
Storage<char*>::~Storage()
{
    delete[] m_value;
}

// Full specialization of print function for type char*
// Without this, printing a Storage<char*> would call Storage<T*>::print(), which only print
s the first element
template<>
void Storage<char*>::print()
{
    std::cout << m_value;
}

int main()
{
    // Declare a non-pointer Storage to show it works
    Storage<int> myint(5);
    myint.print();

    // Declare a pointer Storage to show it works
    int x = 7;
    Storage<int*> myintptr(&x);

    // If myintptr did a pointer assignment on x,
    // then changing x will change myintptr too
    x = 9;
    myintptr.print();

    // Dynamically allocate a temporary string
    char *name = new char[40]{ "Alex" }; // requires C++14
```

```
    // If your compiler isn't C++14 compatible, comment out the above line and uncomment the
se
//  char *name = new char[40];
//  strcpy(name, "Alex");

    // Store the name
    Storage< char*> myname(name);

    // Delete the temporary string
    delete[] name;

    // Print out our name
    myname.print();
}
```

This works as we expect:

```
5
7
Alex
```

Using partial template class specialization to create separate pointer and non-pointer implementations of a class is extremely useful when you want a class to handle both differently, but in a way that's completely transparent to the end-user.

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61 comments to 13.8 — Partial template specialization for pointers

masterOfNothing
September 29, 2019 at 9:10 am · Reply

I should be asking about templates, but what bothers me is that

```
char *name = new char[40]{ "Alex" }; // requires C++14
```

doesn't seem to work for me. I do have C++14 enabled.

Alex
September 30, 2019 at 9:08 am · Reply

What happens when you try to do this?