

Marionettes, Inc.



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAY BRADBURY

Ray Bradbury was born in Waukegan, Illinois in 1920 but grew up in Los Angeles, California. While in high school, he began writing short stories—a hobby that quickly turned into a life calling. In 1941, he sold his first short story to a magazine called *Super Science Stories*. After publishing in niche magazines for a few years, one of Bradbury's stories was included in the 1946 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*, a popular annual publication. This, along with the 1953 publication of [Fahrenheit 451](#), propelled Bradbury to literary fame. Bradbury penned eleven novels in total, and all of them began as short stories, which he strung together in varying degrees to create a longer, more complex narrative. For example, in *The Illustrated Man*, the eighteen stories (all of which had already been published in magazines) can stand alone but also build on each other when read in succession. When he died at the age of 91, Bradbury had published several hundred short stories and received multiple honors, including a National Medal of the Arts, a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation, an Oscar nomination, and an Emmy Award. Bradbury married Marguerite McClure in 1947, and the pair were married until her death in 2003. The couple had four daughters together, Susan, Ramona, Bettina, and Alexandra.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Marionettes, Inc." was originally published in 1949, placing it at the tail end of a string of extraordinary technological advancements. During the 1940s, World War II catalyzed the invention of the helicopter, jet engine, radar, electronic computer, and of course, the atomic bomb. The human capacity to innovate felt boundless—an idea that's reflected in "Marionettes, Inc." through the creation of ultra-lifelike androids (marionettes) that look and behave exactly like real people. However, the 1940s were also rife with political conflict and instability. "Marionettes, Inc." was originally published four years after World War II, two years into the Cold War, and mere months before the start of the Korean War. These feelings of turbulence, uncertainty, and rivalry appear in the conflict between Braling and his marionette—both want autonomy, power, and control over one another, and Braling Two proves that he is willing to commit a grave act of violence (killing Braling) to get what he wants.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Marionettes, Inc." entertains the idea of what could happen if

robots outpaced their human creators. Piers Anthony's *To Be a Woman* follows a similar course, as a robot named Elesa gains consciousness and fights to be a "person" in her own right—aspirations that echo Braling Two's realization that he's in love with Mrs. Braling and wants to live out a long, happy life with her. Much darker in tone, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (the inspiration for the 1982 film *Blade Runner*) takes place in a futuristic world riddled with ultra-realistic, highly intelligent androids with the power to rebel against their human creators. Like in "Marionettes, Inc.," it is nearly impossible to tell the difference between a real human and a robot, underscoring the potentially fatal costs of technology and progress. "Marionettes, Inc." also bears thematic similarity to many of Bradbury's own short stories, like "The Other Foot," which details the Martians' plan to exact revenge on the Earth people—just as Braling Two wants revenge against Braling himself.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Marionettes, Inc."
- **When Written:** 1949
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles
- **When Published:** Originally published as a standalone story in 1949; later published in *The Illustrated Man* (a novel made up of short stories strung together) in 1951.
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Science fiction short story
- **Setting:** Earth
- **Climax:** When Braling Two tells Braling that it's his turn to be locked up in the toolbox.
- **Antagonist:** Braling Two
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

On the Radio. Bradbury's "Marionettes, Inc." was adapted for two radio programs in the 1950s, *Dimension X* and *X Minus One*.



PLOT SUMMARY

Smith has been trying to get his friend Braling to go out for a "quiet drink" for the past ten years, and tonight, Braling finally consented. Smith jokingly asks his friend if he had to put sleeping powder in Mrs. Braling's coffee in order to sneak out of the house. Braling says of course not—"that would be unethical."

The two men talk about their respective marriages, which have

Braling impedes Braling from going to Rio). He's also horrified when he realizes that Nettie tapped into their savings account, even though he was about to secretly do the very same thing. Even though he resents his wife in many ways, Smith knows that he should be grateful for her love and loyalty. Even though it's been ten years, he still can't believe that Nettie chose him instead of Bud Chapman, a man she used to like.

Nettie Smith – Nettie Smith is Smith's overly affectionate wife. According to Smith, Nettie constantly smothers him with hugs and kisses and rarely lets him out of her sight. Although Smith knows he should be grateful for Nettie's loving nature, he also feels suffocated by his wife and longs for a little break from her—even just one night a month. However, at the end of the story, it's clear that Nettie wanted a break from her husband, too, and purchased a marionette of her own. Smith's repeated observation that Nettie has been even more affectionate than usual the past month suggests that he has been unknowingly living alongside a marionette for over a month—thus, the real Nettie doesn't appear in the story whatsoever. When Smith realizes that the bulk of their money is gone, his first thought is that his wife gluttonously purchased several thousands of dollars' worth of hats, handbags, and perfume, consequently depicting Nettie as thoughtless and vain. However, Smith's second thought is that Nettie purchased—without permission—the small vacation home alongside the Hudson that she's been talking about for months. This small detail feels similar to Braling's desire to go to Rio, and his plan to buy a marionette to allow him to do so. This suggests that perhaps Nettie did the same thing, buying a marionette and running off to the place she's been dreaming about that her husband has barred her from. In addition, Smith's horror that Nettie did something without his permission implies that he is a domineering, controlling partner, and that perhaps the pair had an unhappy marriage.

Braling Two – Braling Two is Braling's marionette, which he secretly purchased from Marionettes, Inc. Braling Two looks (and even smells) exactly like the real Braling: both look to be about thirty-five and have slightly graying hair, "sad gray eyes," and a small mustache. The one differentiator is that instead of a heartbeat, Braling Two's chest makes a ticking sound. Braling purchased the marionette as a way to distract the controlling Mrs. Braling so that he can take a month-long trip to Rio without her knowing. However, Braling thinks Braling Two is "difficult specimen," because the marionette has thoughts, emotions, and aspirations that Braling didn't expect. For example, Braling Two dislikes being shut up in the locked toolbox, longs to go to Rio, and has a crush on Mrs. Braling. In addition, Braling Two has the agency to act on his desires, and ultimately does so by (presumably) locking the real Braling in the toolbox in the cellar.

Mrs. Braling – Mrs. Braling is Braling's hateful, controlling wife. She forced Braling into marrying her by threatening him with a

rape accusation (after the pair presumably had mutually consenting sex). Ten years later, she is still as controlling as ever. Even though Smith has been trying to get Braling to go out for a drink with him for ten years, Braling is only able to do so once he can distract Mrs. Braling with Braling Two. Mrs. Braling only appears in the final lines of the story. She is startled when "someone" (likely Braling Two) kisses her cheek while she is asleep, implying that the Bralings' marriage has been affectionless and stale for years. When Braling Two turns against Braling by attempting to lock him up in the toolbox (and presumably let him die), Braling frantically asks the marionette if Mrs. Braling put him up to this. The fact that Braling would even consider that his wife was behind his impending murder suggests that the pair's relationship is not just dysfunctional—it's built on true hatred and contempt.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Bud Chapman – A man that Nettie Smith used to like. She eventually chose to marry Smith instead—a decision Smith is still somewhat baffled by ten years later.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE COST OF TECHNOLOGY

In Ray Bradbury's "Marionettes, Inc.," thirty-five-year-old Braling buys a "marionette" (a lifelike android, not a traditional puppet with strings) to temporarily distract his controlling wife, Mrs. Braling, so that he can have a little time away from her. Although the ultra-realistic marionette seems like a creative fix for Braling's troubled marriage (and later, for that of his good friend Smith), things soon go terribly wrong. Although the story illustrates that technology can provide innovative solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems, it ultimately cautions readers about turning to technology as a quick fix for delicate, interpersonal problems. Doing so may only exacerbate the issue at hand or create several other—and bigger—problems to grapple with.

The story initially shows that technology can provide innovative solutions to complicated issues. For over ten years, Braling has dreamed of going to Rio, but his nervous, controlling wife has always stood in the way of his travels. When Braling (somehow) stumbles across the top-secret company called Marionettes, Inc., he realizes that having his own lifelike marionette is the perfect solution. By using his marionette, Braling Two, the real Braling can slip off to Rio, and

Mrs. Braling won't even know he left—thereby avoiding her controlling tendencies, anxiety, and rage altogether. Similarly, seeing how the marionette will help Braling solve—or at least sidestep—some of the problems in his marriage, Smith decides that he wants one, too. Smith's problem is that his wife, Nettie, "overdoes it." Exasperated, Smith explains to Braling that "when you've been married ten years, you don't expect a woman to sit on your lap for two hours every evening, call you at work twelve times a day and talk baby talk." Having a marionette, Smith thinks, will allow him a "respite." Nevertheless, Smith is also grateful for his wife and knows that he's lucky to have her. Therefore, the marionette seems like an ingenious solution to Smith's discontent: it would allow Smith to have a break from Nettie even just one night a month without hurting her feelings.

However, the story is also cautious about using technology to solve such sensitive interpersonal problems. Through Smith and Braling's interactions with marionettes, the story shows that technological solutions can actually create new, bigger problems. Although Smith doesn't follow through with his plan of purchasing his own marionette, his wife does. The marionette costs nearly eight thousand dollars (and Nettie takes an additional two thousand dollars to live on for a while), leaving the couple with a mere five thousand dollars in their once-cushioned joint bank account. Seeing such a dramatic drop in his savings sends Smith into a panic: "His heart throbbed violently. His tongue dried. He shivered. His knees suddenly turned to water. He collapsed." While Nettie may have been trying to find her own "respite" from her husband—or perhaps wished to leave him entirely but couldn't bear actually doing so—her seemingly innovative solution ends up sending him into a fit of anxiety, first because of the monetary cost of the marionette and then because of the emotional blow. Upon realizing that his wife has, in fact, skipped out on him and left a marionette in her place, Smith is overcome by "terror," "loneliness," "fever," and "disillusionment" in tandem. Nettie's solution to her marital problems emotionally crushes her husband, possibly more so than if she just talked to him about her feelings.

Meanwhile, Braling's plan of distracting his wife with a marionette ends up hurting himself the most, further underscoring the costs of using technology to fix one's problems. On his very first night of "employment," Braling Two goes rogue, claiming that he's fallen in love with Mrs. Braling and plans to take over Braling's entire life. To do so, the marionette vows to lock human Braling in the cellar toolbox and lose the key forever. Although the story ends ambiguously—with "someone" going back upstairs to rejoin Mrs. Braling—it seems that the marionette has overpowered the human due to his quick thinking, "metal-firm grip," and ability to withstand "all physical wear." In this way, the novel darkly points out that technological solutions can sometimes prove fatal, harming the very people they were supposed to

help.

In "Marionettes, Inc.," Bradbury provides a nuanced view of technology, showing how it can help solve (or completely avoid) certain problems while also underscoring how technology invites a slew of its own problems into the mix. He uses Braling, Smith, and Nettie—three characters who either covet or actually purchase their own marionette—to caution readers about turning to technology to quickly fix their problems.



CONTROL

In "Marionettes, Inc.," two friends, Braling and Smith, are unhappy with their respective marriages and decide that marionettes—extraordinarily lifelike androids—will solve their marital problems. With the marionettes standing in for them once in a while, both men think that they will get a much needed break from their wives, and their wives will never suspect a thing. Braling's wife is too controlling (and would never agree to give her husband a little space), while Smith thinks his wife, Nettie, is annoyingly clingy, and wishes she would "relax her grip a little bit." Charting the characters' interactions with one another and with the marionettes, the story highlights how the desire for control is rooted in selfishness, and that attempting to control another person actually has the opposite effect: inspiring them to rebel. From the very beginning, the story suggests that the desire for control is an act of selfishness. Ten years ago, the future Mrs. Braling coerced Braling into marrying her by threatening to accuse him of rape after the two had what the story implies to be consensual sex. Mrs. Braling "tore her clothes and ruffled her hair and threatened to call the police unless [Braling] married her." At the time, Braling was about to leave for a much-anticipated trip to Rio, but the soon-to-be Mrs. Braling got in the way of those plans. Even now, ten years later, Braling still dreams of visiting Rio. He's not even allowed to have a one-night reprieve by going out for a drink with his friend Smith (he can only manage to do so with help from his marionette, Braling Two). In this way, Mrs. Braling's desire to control Braling—who he marries, where he travels, who he spends time with, whether he can go out at night—is an act of selfishness. It seems she wants Braling to be tied down to her at all times (even if, according to Braling, she "hate[s]" him).

Smith is similarly selfish about his relationship, which manifests as a desire to control his wife. The story never spells out why Smith is incapable of simply talking to Nettie about his feelings about their marriage—or, if he's *that* unhappy, why he can't divorce her. Smith depicts Nettie as being overly loving, bubbly, girlish, and clingy, suggesting that a serious discussion about their marriage would be a huge emotional blow for her. Considering how much Nettie irritates Smith, however, it doesn't seem that he necessarily wants to protect his wife from having such a difficult, emotional discussion. Instead, it seems that Smith wants to protect himself from having to deal with

Nettie's emotional fallout, which, considering her characterization, is likely to be overblown and emotionally taxing for Smith.

Besides being an indication of selfishness, trying so hard to control someone is actually unproductive, as it can have the opposite effect and make the other person more likely to rebel. Braling depicts his wife as being controlling and manipulating due to her "nervous" nature. However, Mrs. Braling's attempts to control her husband only make him want to escape from her clutches even more. In fact, Mrs. Braling's desire for control over her husband is what inspires Braling to purchase Braling Two in the first place, so that the human Braling can spend an entire wifeless month in Rio. Further, Braling tries to control his marionette, Braling Two. The human Braling treats Braling Two as an employee (and when the marionette shows early signs of falling in love with Mrs. Braling, Braling ignorantly says he's glad the marionette is "enjoying [his] employment"). However, being treated as such gets Braling Two "thinking," and makes him want to rise up against Braling, which he eventually does.

Similarly, Smith attempts to control his wife financially, which also inspires her rebellion. When Smith decides that he's going to spend eight thousand dollars on a marionette for himself, he has no hesitation about slipping the large sum of money out of his and Nettie's joint bank account—even though it's over half of their savings, and the account belongs to *both* of them. However, when he finds out that Nettie drew several thousand dollars from the account herself, possibly to buy "that little house on the Hudson she's been talking about for months," Smith is furious. Mostly, he can't believe that his wife took the money "without so much as a by your leave"—that is, without Smith's permission. Stunned by his half-drained bank account, Smith repeatedly cries, "What've you done with my money! [...] What've you done with my money!" Even though it's a joint bank account, Smith refers to the money as specifically *his*, once again emphasizing his controlling nature. Although Smith's attitude toward his wife and money is reflective of traditional gender norms, it also suggests that his controlling tendencies (like repeatedly ignoring her dreams about buying "that little house on the Hudson") may have spurred Nettie to defy her husband.

In "Marionettes, Inc.," Bradbury illustrates how attempting to control someone else is not only selfish, but also futile. Braling, Smith, and Nettie go to great lengths to control their partners, begging the question of why they can't just talk openly with one another about how they feel. In trying to control one another, the characters add additional complications and strain to their relationships. Bradbury ultimately reveals to the reader that resorting to control is not only unethical but also unproductive, and that there are simpler, more direct (and more honorable) ways to deal with other people.



LOVE AND MARRIAGE

At the center of Ray Bradbury's "Marionettes, Inc." are two deeply unhappy marriages. The introduction of the marionettes (the extremely lifelike androids that stand in for specific people) complicates both marriages, as many characters use a marionette to evade their spouse. The story uses the shortcomings in Braling's marriage to the controlling Mrs. Braling, as well as his friend Smith's marriage to the clingy Nettie Smith, to highlight why these marriages are toxic and destined to fail. Using these two negative examples of marriage, Bradbury consequently illustrates that three things must be mutual for a marriage to be healthy and thrive: affection, decision-making, and, most crucially, the desire to stay in the relationship.

In a healthy marriage, affection is consensual, but in both marriages that appear in "Marionettes, Inc." the desire to give and receive affection is extremely unbalanced, which fuels everyone's discontent in their respective relationships. In the closing lines of the story, "someone" (most likely Braling Two, Braling's marionette who is implied to have just done away with the human Braling forever by trapping him in the cellar) rejoins Mrs. Braling in the bedroom and wakes her up with a kiss on the cheek: "She put her hand to her cheek. Someone had just kissed it. She shivered and looked up. 'Why—you haven't done that in years,' she murmured. 'We'll see what we can do about that,' someone said." Mrs. Braling's startled reaction reveals that her relationship has been stale and affectionless "for years." While earlier Braling had claimed that his wife "hate[s]" him, Mrs. Braling seems pleased by the sudden kiss, suggesting that she *does* desire love and affection from her husband, but he's not interested in giving it.

Nettie and Smith also appear to have an unbalanced desire for affection, which dooms their marriage. According to Smith, Nettie coos in his ear, calls him twelve times a day while he's at work, sits on his lap for two hours every night, and talks in a baby voice to him. Smith finds all of this incredibly irritating and assumes that Nettie's behavior means that she craves a lot of attention and love. However, when it is clear that Nettie has skipped out on her husband (temporarily or otherwise) and left a marionette in her place, the story suggests that Nettie also didn't like playing the role of the clingy, overly loving wife and also wanted space. Meanwhile, Smith cringes at the thought of Nettie's smothering love. He tells Braling, "remember the old poem: 'Love will fly if held too lightly, love will die if held too tightly! I just want [Nettie] to relax her grip a little bit.'" Although Smith thinks Nettie is irritating, he does claim to love her. However, her suffocating, constant affection is a major deterrent and is exactly what prompts Smith to get the **business card** for Marionettes, Inc. from Braling.

Besides showing mutual affection, spouses in a healthy marriage must also take part in decision-making together—whether that means coming to a consensus or

making a willing compromise, neither of which the characters in “Marionettes, Inc.” successfully do. Throughout their ten-year marriage, Mrs. Braling prevents her husband from visiting Rio, which is his lifelong dream. In retaliation, Braling buys a marionette so that he can finally go to Rio in peace. This disagreement about Rio spurs much of the conflict in the story and even leads to—the story implies—Braling’s death. Just as Mrs. Braling keeps her husband from going to Rio, so too does Smith prevent his wife from buying the small vacation house on the Hudson River that she’s been pining over for months. Once again, the decision is lopsided. Since Nettie takes more money from the pair’s joint account than is needed to purchase a marionette, the story implies that she perhaps fled to the Hudson (and possibly bought or rented the vacation property she had her eye on) just as Braling planned to take his much-anticipated trip to Rio. Smith is distraught when he realizes that Nettie took the money “without so much as a by your leave,” meaning without permission. Although this initially seems like Smith is advocating for an egalitarian decision-making process in his marriage, he is actually just affirming what he perceives as his own authority in the relationship. Prior to discovering that Nettie took ten thousand dollars from their account, Smith also planned on slipping several thousand dollars from their joint account. He decided that, if Nettie asked, he’d vaguely attribute the large withdrawal to some “business venture.” Clearly, Smith planned to give Nettie no say in the decision.

Crucially, the desire to stay in the relationship must also be consensual for a healthy, satisfying marriage. Although none of the characters express outright a desire to leave their marriages, none of them express a desire to *stay* in their marriages either, and nearly all of the characters try to somehow escape their spouses. Before realizing his “wife” is actually a marionette, Smith reaffirms several times that, in the last month, Nettie “loved [him] more wildly than ever before.” Considering this sudden change in behavior, the story suggests that Nettie has been gone for at least a month. Meanwhile, Smith wants a marionette of his own so he can finally have a “little respite. A night or so, once a month even.” Like Nettie and Braling, Smith sees the marionette as a way in which he can avoid his spouse.

Considering all of the trouble the characters go through to escape or alleviate their strained marriages, it’s a wonder that none of the characters just talk plainly with their spouses about how they feel. The marriage between Braling and Mrs. Braling, as well as that of Smith and Nettie, both lack a commitment to mutual understanding, which is exacerbated by their failure to talk honestly with one another. Neither couple demonstrates healthy, consensual affection, and neither couple illustrates spouses making decisions together. Even more significantly, none of the characters seem particularly keen on continuing their marriages, ultimately illustrating that both marriages are destined to fail—if they haven’t already.



SECRECY AND DECEPTION

In “Marionettes, Inc.,” the protagonist, Braling, illegally buys a lifelike android (called a marionette) so that he can have a temporary escape from his overbearing, controlling wife, Mrs. Braling. By setting up the marionette (Braling Two) in his place, Braling thinks he will be free to travel for a month without his wife even knowing. Braling’s good friend Smith has a similar problem with his own wife, Nettie, though she is overbearing in the sense that she is annoyingly loving and clingy. Through the characters of Braling, Braling Two, Smith, and Nettie, Ray Bradbury demonstrates how secrecy and deception are dangerously self-perpetuating.

The very concept of the marionette illustrates that secrecy is self-perpetuating—that is, harboring secrets only creates more secrets. According to *Marionettes, Inc.’s business card*, “Clients must be pledged to secrecy, for while an act is pending in Congress to legalize Marionettes, Inc., it is still a felony, if caught, to use one.” Significantly, the company claims that it is a felony to use a marionette only if the user is *caught*. Besides showing some murky morality, this wording highlights how *Marionettes, Inc.’s* underground operation forces its customers to also use their marionettes discreetly, thereby perpetuating a cycle of secrecy. The repercussions of this are massive, especially for Braling. Since Braling is forced to use Braling Two in secret—the only person who knows about the marionette is Smith—Braling’s (presumable) murder at the hands of the marionette will also likely remain a secret. In this way, Braling’s secret about his marionette feeds Braling Two’s secret about killing Braling.

Smith and Nettie’s tenuous marriage also highlights how deception breeds even more deception. Smith is convinced that his wife, Nettie, “loves [him] madly.” He tells Braling, “My wife loves me so much she can’t bear to have me gone an hour.” However, by the end of the story, it’s clear that the real Nettie has been gone for at least a month, leaving a marionette in her place. It seems, then, that Nettie has been deceiving her husband by putting on an act that makes him think she is crazy about him, when in actuality, she also desires some space. It’s unclear why she would pretend to be so clingy and loving—perhaps she felt compelled to play the part of the “good, loving wife”—but nonetheless, her deception is what spurs Smith to covet his own marionette so that he can have a little space from his wife. This is sad, because it’s likely that Nettie thought that *Smith* was the one who craved an exorbitant amount of love and affection—spurring her to purchase a marionette who could do so more convincingly and also give Nettie a break. Unknowingly, both Nettie and Smith were deceiving one another and consequently encouraging further dishonesty.

“Marionettes, Inc.” largely deals with the dangers of secrecy and deception, ultimately revealing how both are self-perpetuating. All the characters in the story are guilty of

harboring secrets and acting deceptively, which only invites more secrecy and deception. In this way, Bradbury uses strong negative examples—that is, examples of how *not* to behave—in order to teach his audience about the value of honesty and transparency.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BUSINESS CARD

The business card for Marionettes, Inc. that Braling gives to Smith symbolizes the two men's impulse to solve complicated, delicate interpersonal problems with a technological quick fix. Both men are more willing to spend eight thousand dollars to sidestep their marital problems than they are to simply talk openly with their respective wives and get to the root of the issue. The business card itself is ominously worded, underscoring the danger and uncertainty in turning blindly to technology to solve one's personal problems. The card reads, "MARIONETTES, INC. Duplicate self or friends; new humanoid plastic 1990 models, guaranteed against all physical wear. From \$7,600 to our \$15,000 deluxe model." The other side of the card states, "Clients must have a mold made of their body and a color index check of their eyes, lips, hair, skin, etc. Clients must expect to wait for two months until their model is finished. [...] Marionettes, Inc., is two years old and has a fine record of satisfied customers behind it. Our motto is 'No Strings Attached.' Address: 43 South Wesley Drive." The demands placed on the customer are manifold—committing to complete secrecy, agreeing to commit a felony by owning a marionette, and allowing an illegal company to have full access to every single intimate detail about oneself. When reading all of these requirements, Smith simply says to himself that two months is "Not so long" to wait. Paradoxically, the motto of Marionettes, Inc. is "No Strings Attached," but by design, marionettes are puppets that are controlled from above via several strings. This inconsistency suggests that there are, in fact, many "strings attached" (complications and requirements) when it comes to solving one's problems with a marionette.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon and Schuster edition of *The Illustrated Man* published in 1949.

"Marionettes, Inc." Quotes

☞ "What did you do, put sleeping powder in your wife's coffee?"

"No, that would be unethical."

Related Characters: Braling, Smith (speaker), Mrs. Braling

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

While walking home from their unsatisfyingly short night out together, Smith asks his friend Braling how he managed to get out of the house in the first place, insinuating that Mrs. Braling would never agree to Braling's plans to get a drink with his friend. According to Smith, the only way Braling could have possibly escaped from his wife's clutches that night was if he drugged her. Although Smith appears to be making a joke, his hyperbolic comment says a lot about Mrs. Braling, as it depicts her as a controlling, bossy wife.

Braling thinks using sleeping powder is "unethical," which is understandable. However, when he later reveals that he used a lifelike android (called a marionette) to distract his wife for the evening, Braling defends his method as being "highly ethical." It seems strange, then, that Braling would consider sleeping powder morally wrong but a high-tech android positively virtuous. Braling's hazy moral compass introduces the theme of secrecy and deception, which eventually leads to his own downfall.

☞ "[I'm] married to a woman who overdoes it. I mean, after all, when you've been married ten years, you don't expect a woman to sit on your lap for two hours every evening, call you at work twelve times a day and talk baby talk. And it seems to me that in the last month she's gotten worse. I wonder if perhaps she isn't a little simple-minded?"

Related Characters: Smith (speaker), Braling, Nettie Smith

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

As Smith and Braling walk home from their night out, they talk about their respective marriages, which are both unhappy ones. While Braling's problem is that his wife (so he claims) is hateful and controlling, Smith's problem is that

his wife is overly loving and attached at his hip. Smith depicts Nettie as being childlike, obsessive, and “simple-minded.” Smith is clearly uncomfortable with Nettie’s lavish displays of love, underscoring how important mutual affection is in a marriage.

Furthermore, Smith’s assertion that “in the last month she’s gotten worse” is an important moment of foreshadowing—later, he comes to understand that this change in behavior might be because she’s actually a marionette. If this is true, then Smith is largely selling his wife short by considering her “a little simple-minded.” In actuality, Nettie is incredibly clever and deceptive.

●● MARIONETTES, INC.

Duplicate self or friends; new humanoid plastic 1990 models, guaranteed against all physical wear. From \$7,600 to our \$15,000 deluxe model.

Related Characters: Braling Two, Smith, Braling

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

This passage discloses what’s on the Marionettes, Inc. business card, which Braling gives to Smith when he voices interest in purchasing a marionette for himself. The business card lists the towering financial cost of a marionette, consequently revealing that Braling spent somewhere between eight thousand and fifteen thousand dollars for the sake of avoiding his wife. This underscores just how desperate Braling is to have time away from Mrs. Braling (and to finally fulfil his dream of going to Rio). The detail about the marionettes being “guaranteed against all physical wear” seems like a bonus for customers, reassuring them that their (sizable) purchase will always be in top condition. However, this also implies that the marionettes are physically indestructible, which could be incredibly dangerous for humans.

In addition, the mention of “1990 models” reminds the reader that the story, originally published in 1949 and republished in 1951, is set in a somewhat distant future. Bradbury may have believed that such “humanoid[s]” would be the norm in forty years. In this way, the story functions as a thinly veiled warning to readers to be cautious about

blindly turning to new technology, like “new humanoid plastic 1990 models,” to solve personal problems.

●● “It may be splitting hairs, but I think it highly ethical. After all, what my wife wants most of all is me. This marionette is me to the hairiest detail. I’ve been home all evening. I shall be home with her for the next month. In the meantime another gentleman will be in Rio after ten years of waiting.”

Related Characters: Braling (speaker), Mrs. Braling, Braling Two, Smith

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Braling defends his plan to distract his wife with a marionette, telling Smith that it is actually “highly ethical.” Using the idiom “It may be splitting hairs,” Braling asserts that arguing the moral rightness of the marionette is inconsequential and unnecessary. Of course, the moral rightness of Braling’s plan seems to be exactly the issue at hand. Furthermore, Braling appears defensive about the plan, which suggests that he is aware that it is ethically problematic.

In addition, in saying that Braling Two “is me to the hairiest detail,” Braling reaffirms that the marionette is so convincingly lifelike that it is practically Braling himself. By calling himself “another gentleman,” Braling willingly gives up his identity, muddying the distinction between the human Braling and the robot Braling. This moment foreshadows the marionette’s later attempt (and implied success) at taking over the human’s entire life.

●● “Thank you [...] You don’t know what this means. Just a little respite. A night or so, once a month even. My wife loves me so much she can’t bear to have me gone an hour. I love her dearly, you know, but remember the old poem: ‘Love will fly if held too lightly, love will die if held too tightly.’ I just want her to relax her grip a little bit.”

Related Characters: Smith (speaker), Braling, Nettie Smith

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Braling has just given Smith the business card for Marionettes, Inc. so that Smith can purchase his own marionette and have “a little respite” from his wife, Nettie. Smith quotes an anonymous poem, which reads, “Love will fly if held too lightly, love will die if held too tightly.” This means that if someone is too indifferent toward their spouse, then their spouse may leave them. On the other end of the spectrum, if someone tries to control and cling to their spouse too much (like Nettie does), the relationship will suffocate. Through the poem, Smith points out how marriages are a delicate balance of several factors, and that what Smith and Nettie struggle with the most is reciprocal affection.

Smith spends the majority of the story complaining about Nettie and reiterating his desire for a break from her (the desire being so strong, that he’s willing to spend eight thousand dollars on his own marionette for a “night or so, once month” away from her). With this deep discontent in mind, it’s interesting that Smith claims to “love [Nettie] dearly.” Very little in the story provides evidence that Smith does, in fact, love his wife.

☝ “Really, you make me feel like a criminal. You have been such a good, loving wife. Sometimes it is impossible for me to believe you married me instead of that Bud Chapman you once liked. It seems that in the last month you have loved me more wildly than *ever before*.”

Related Characters: Smith (speaker), Bud Chapman, Nettie Smith

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

After his night out with Braling, Smith returns home and watches his wife sleeping peacefully. He tells the sleeping Nettie that she makes him “feel like a criminal” for wanting to escape her grasp. Once again, it doesn’t seem that Smith actually loves his wife. In this passage, he merely expresses guilt for not warmly receiving her indulgent displays of love, and he voices pride in that she chose him “instead of that Bud Chapman [she] once liked.”

The mention of Bud Chapman is interesting because it is

fairly jarring, as his name appears suddenly and is never brought up again. This detail may be significant, though, because it introduces the possibility that Nettie never stopped liking Bud Chapman—and perhaps that she ran away from Smith to be with Bud. This speculation is strengthened by Smith’s twice-repeated observation that Nettie has loved Smith “more wildly than *ever before*” during the past month, suggesting that Nettie has actually been gone for a month and left a marionette in her place.

☝ And then, the horrid thought. And then the terror and the loneliness engulfed him. And then the fever and disillusionment. For, without desiring to do so, he bent forward and yet forward again until his fevered ear was resting firmly and irrevocably upon her round pink bosom. “Nettie!” he cried. *Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick.*

Related Characters: Smith (speaker), Nettie Smith

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Smith frantically begs his wife to tell him what she’s done with ten thousand dollars of their money (which Smith refers to as *his* money). In this moment, it seems as if Smith realizes what ten thousand dollars can buy—a marionette. When he grasps this, Smith is “engulfed” by horrible feelings of “terror,” “loneliness,” “fever,” and “disillusionment.” For much of the story, Smith has been planning on deceiving Nettie with a marionette of his own, and never seemed to consider the dubious ethical nature of the plan or the emotional impact it would have on Nettie were she to find out her beloved husband was actually a marionette. Here, however, Smith gets an unwanted taste of the costs of using a marionette to solve marital problems.

Further, the fact that Nettie set up a marionette in her place (and likely did so an entire month prior to this moment) casts doubt on Smith’s confident assertions that his wife loves him “madly” and is practically obsessed with him. It doesn’t seem that Smith was making it up that Nettie acts clingy and overly loving. Instead, it seems more likely that Nettie was either putting on an act and resigning herself to the role of “good, loving wife,” or was acting genuinely but was disheartened by Smith’s standoffishness. Either way, it’s clear that Nettie was *not* happy in the relationship and was willing to riskily purchase a marionette to sidestep her

marital problems just like Braling did and Smith was about to.

“They didn’t tell me at the marionette shop that I’d get a difficult specimen.”

“There’s a lot they don’t know about us,” said Braling Two. “We’re pretty new. And we’re sensitive.”

Related Characters: Braling Two, Braling (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Braling voices confusion and discontent at Braling Two’s refusal to get back into the toolbox until Braling embarks for Rio. Braling refers to the marionette as a “difficult specimen,” frustrated that the marionette won’t simply do as he’s told. Braling Two’s ominous response marks a shift in the story’s tone, indicating that the events to follow will be dark and even tragic. In claiming, “We’re pretty new. And we’re sensitive,” Braling indicates that the human inventors at Marionettes, Inc. have little idea of what they’ve just created and unleashed out into the world. Further, Braling Two’s use of the word “we” points to a collective force of all marionettes. This seems threatening, as it suggests a humans-versus-marionettes dynamic and implies that marionettes could very well band together and overthrow humankind.

“Did my wife put you up to this?”

“No.”

“Did she guess? Did she talk to you? Does she know? Is *that* it?”
[...]

“You’ll never know, will you?” Braling Two smiled delicately. “You’ll never know.”

Braling struggled. “She *must* have guessed; she *must* have affected you!”

Related Characters: Braling Two, Braling (speaker), Mrs. Braling

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

Braling Two has just told Braling that he is in love with Mrs. Braling and would like to go to Rio. In this passage, Braling accuses his wife of finding out about the marionette and “affect[ing]” Braling Two—that is, turning the marionette against Braling. In his certainty that his wife is to blame, Braling reveals that he truly believes his wife hates him, so much so that she would encourage an android to take over her husband’s life. Mrs. Braling has not yet physically appeared in the story (but will soon), so Braling’s depiction of her remains unconfirmed and seems hard to believe. Considering Mrs. Braling is the one who forced Braling to marry her, and that she won’t let Braling go to Rio or even leave the house to get a drink with his friend Smith, it appears that Mrs. Braling is a possessive (rather than hateful) wife. Furthermore, earlier in the story, Braling tells Smith that Mrs. Braling has “always [been] nervous,” which also suggests that her desire to control her husband is rooted in anxiety and fear, not contempt.

“Ten minutes later, Mrs. Braling awoke. She put her hand to her cheek. Someone had just kissed it. She shivered and looked up. “Why—you haven’t done that in years,” she murmured.

“We’ll see what we can do about that,” someone said.

Related Characters: Mrs. Braling (speaker), Braling Two, Braling

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which immediately follows the ominous conversation between Braling and Braling Two in the cellar, depicts “someone” rejoining Mrs. Braling in the bedroom. This passage is ambiguous, as it doesn’t reveal if that “someone” is the human Braling or the robotic Braling Two. Two possibilities exist, with one more likely than the other. Perhaps Braling somehow outsmarted Braling Two, managed to lock him up, and then committed himself to being a better husband to Mrs. Braling—as seen by the uncharacteristic kiss on her cheek.

However, the story previously pointed out that the marionette has a “metal-firm grip” and is “guaranteed against all physical wear,” which makes the Braling Two seem somewhat invincible. In this way, it seems that the marionette could have easily overpowered the human

Braling, locked him up, and succeeded in taking over Braling's life. Considering Braling Two's twice-noted "fond[ness]" for Mrs. Braling, it also makes sense that he would kiss her on the cheek. Further, if "someone" does refer to the marionette, it also makes sense that he says, "We'll see what we can do about that," regarding Mrs. Braling's surprise following the abnormal act of affection. By saying this, Braling Two implies that Mrs. Braling can turn over a new leaf in her marriage, and that Braling Two

will be a more loving husband than Braling ever was. Lastly, this passage is also significant because of Mrs. Braling's reaction to the unexpected kiss. She "shiver[s]," and softly says, "Why—you haven't done that in years." This is not a violent, agitated reaction; instead, Mrs. Braling seems pleased by the kiss. In this way, it seems that Braling's wife does not hate her husband—rather, she desires more affection and love from him than he's willing to give.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

“MARIONETTES, INC.”

Smith and Braling walk down the street together around 10:00 P.M. Both men are about thirty-five years old, and both are “eminently sober.” Smith complains that Braling has cut their night far too short—it’s Braling’s “first night out in years,” and yet he wants to go home at 10:00 P.M. Braling attributes the short night to his “nerves.”

Smith says he doesn’t know how Braling “managed” to go out tonight at all. He says that he’s been unsuccessfully badgering Braling about going out for “a quiet drink” for ten years. Now that Braling finally agreed, however, he “insist[s] on turning in early.” Braling says dejectedly that he can’t push his luck. Smith asks how Braling got out of the house in the first place, claiming that he must have “put sleeping powder in [his] wife’s coffee.” Braling says “that would be unethical.” He says Smith will understand shortly how Braling managed to get out of the house.

As the two men turn a corner, Smith says that he knows Braling has a terrible marriage. Braling tries to attest it hasn’t been that bad, but Smith continues, saying that word “got around” about how Braling’s wife got Braling to marry her—it was 1979, right when Braling was about to leave for Rio. Braling cuts off his friend’s flashback, lamenting that he never did get to see Rio.

Smith continues, recounting how the future Mrs. Braling “tore her clothes,” “rumpled her hair,” and “threatened to call the police” unless Braling would agree to marry her. Braling tells Smith that he needs to realize that his wife has always been “nervous.” Smith says that regardless, the whole situation was “unfair.” After all, Braling didn’t even love her. Smith asks Braling if he ever made that clear to his wife before he married her, and Braling says that he did—he “was quite firm on the subject.” Smith can’t believe that Braling still chose to marry her, but Braling admits that he had to. He did it for the sake of his business and for his parents—something “like that would’ve killed them.”

Smith’s comment about it being their “first night out in years,” coupled with the two men being “eminently sober,” suggests that they used to be more carefree and wild but have since grown up—especially Braling, who seems prudent and nervous.



Smith is joking when he says that the only way Braling could possibly leave his house is to drug his wife with sleeping powder. Nonetheless, his joke reveals that Mrs. Braling is incredibly controlling and upright, and Braling feels trapped in his marriage. It’s significant that Braling deems sleeping powder “unethical,” as readers will soon learn that Braling’s own method for getting out of the house isn’t exactly virtuous.



Smith implies that Mrs. Braling somehow coerced Braling into marrying her, introducing the theme of secrets and deception that resonates throughout the story. Meanwhile, Braling’s dream about going to Rio—and the fact that he’s never been able to visit, presumably because of his wife’s controlling nature—will resurface later in the story. In addition, the detail about the year 1979 highlights that this story, which was originally published in 1949, is set in the future.



Here, Mrs. Braling escalates from controlling to crazy, as Smith details how she threatened Braling into marriage with a (probably false) rape accusation. Braling attributes his wife’s behavior to “nervous[ness],” echoing his earlier assertion that he’s cutting the night short because of “nerves.” Perhaps Braling is nervous about inflaming his wife’s anxiety. Regardless, it’s clear that the Bralings’ marriage is not built on love, mutual affection, or understanding—one of the story’s first negative examples of marriage.



Smith reflects that the Bralings have been married for ten years. With his “gray eyes steady,” Braling says that all of that is about to change. He pulls out a blue ticket, and Smith gasps—“it’s a ticket for Rio on the Thursday rocket.” Smith is delighted that Braling will finally be able to visit Rio, but he tentatively asks if doing so won’t upset Braling’s wife. With small, nervous smile, Braling says that it won’t upset his wife because she won’t even know he’s gone. Braling will be back from Rio in a month, and the only person who will know he ever left is Smith.

Sighing, Smith says that he wishes he could go to Rio, too. Braling notes that Smith’s marriage “hasn’t exactly been roses” either, and Smith agrees. His problem, he asserts, is that his wife, Nettie, “overdoes it.” He remarks to Braling that after ten years of marriage, you’d think your wife would no longer “sit on your lap for two hours every evening, call you at work twelve times a day, and talk baby talk.” Gravely, Smith says that it’s only getting worse—this past month is the clingiest Nettie has ever been. Smith wonders if his wife is “a little simple-minded.” Braling thinks that assessment is “conservative.”

The two men arrive at Braling’s house, and Braling tells Smith that he will now reveal his big secret regarding how he snuck out of the house. Braling gestures to the second floor of the house, and Smith notices a man peering down at him from the window above. The man (later called Braling Two) is about thirty-five years old, has slightly greying hair, “sad gray eyes,” and a small mustache.

Smith exclaims in disbelief that the man in the window looks exactly like Braling. When Braling hushes Smith, Braling Two disappears from the window. Thinking he is seeing things, Smith wonders if he’s going insane. Seconds later, the front door opens, and the Braling lookalike steps outside to speak with the men. The two Bralings greet each other, and Smith asks if they’re identical twins. Braling says that they’re not and tells Smith to press his ear against Braling Two’s body. Hesitantly, Smith does so and hears a faint ticking noise coming from inside Braling Two’s chest. Smith exclaims that “It *can’t* be,” and listens again, only to hear the same ticking noise.

Strangely, Smith says that Braling is taking a “rocket” instead of an airplane to Rio. This detail reminds the reader that the story, originally published in 1949, is set forty years in the future (around the year 1990), and Bradbury is imagining a distant, high-tech future. Although technology hasn’t played a large role in the story yet, it will be pivotal later on. In addition, Braling’s plan to somehow deceive his wife and go to Rio echoes her own deceitful tendencies (like coercing him into marriage), suggesting that dishonesty is self-preserving.



Smith rudely writes his wife off as being “a little simple-minded,” but later it is revealed that Nettie is much more shrewd, intelligent, and deceitful than Smith realized. Smith’s complaints about his marriage reveal how important mutual affection is in marriage. While Smith feels inundated by Nettie’s love, it seems that Nettie is still hungry for affection based on the way she “overdoes it.”



The description of the man in the window echoes the earlier detail of Braling’s “gray eyes,” suggesting that Braling and the mysterious man look alike and may even be identical twins.



The ticking noise suggests that Braling Two is an extraordinarily lifelike robot who passes for Braling himself. Because of this likeness, it’s no wonder that Braling Two was a surefire distraction for Mrs. Braling, consequently allowing the real Braling to get out of the house for an evening. Smith’s disbelief at the robot emphasizes how convincing Braling Two is as a stand-in for the real Braling—something that is helpful now but dangerous later on.



Smith “stagger[s] back,” and his eyes “flutter.” Reaching out to touch Braling Two’s warm cheeks and hands, Smith asks where Braling got such a thing. Braling answers, “Isn’t he excellently fashioned?” Smith asks again where Braling got it. Braling tells Braling Two to give Smith his card. Performing a “magic trick,” Braling Two produces a **business card** that reads, “MARIONETTES, INC. Duplicate self or friends; new humanoid plastic 1990 models, guaranteed against all physical wear. From \$7,600 to our \$15,000 deluxe model.”

Still in disbelief, Smith asks how long “this [has] gone on,” and Braling answers that he’s had Braling Two for a month, but this is the first time he’s actually put him to use. For the past month, Braling has kept the marionette in a locked toolbox in the cellar. After all, Braling’s wife never goes into the cellar, and Braling is the only one with the key to the box. Tonight, he simply told his wife he was going on a walk to purchase a cigar, went down into the cellar instead, and sent Braling Two back upstairs. The real Braling then slipped out of the house so he could go out with Smith.

Smith says Braling Two even smells like the real Braling—“Bond Street and Melachrinos” (cigarettes). Braling admits that “It may be splitting hairs,” but he thinks using his marionette is “highly ethical.” What Braling’s wife really wants is Braling himself, and that is what she is getting. Braling explains, “I’ve been home all evening. I shall be home with her for the next month. In the meantime, another gentleman will be in Rio.” He notes that when he returns from his month abroad, he’ll simply put Braling Two back in his locked toolbox in the cellar.

After mulling the situation over for a few moments, Smith asks if Braling Two can go without some sort of “sustenance” for a whole month. Proudly, Braling says that his marionette can last six months without sustenance and can eat, drink, sleep, and even sweat like a human. Braling asks the marionette if he will take good care of Braling’s wife. Braling Two answers, “Your wife is rather nice.[...] I’ve grown rather fond of her.”

The small detail that Braling Two’s cheeks are warm also underscores that Braling is incredibly lifelike—he’s not a clunky metal contraption, but rather a highly sophisticated android. The repetition of Smith’s question regarding where Braling got the robot (later referred to as a marionette) implies that Smith wants one for himself. Meanwhile, the business card illustrates the steep cost of buying one’s own marionette. Braling’s apparent willingness to spend several thousand dollars on his own marionette emphasizes just how badly he wants a break from his wife.



Here, Braling explains the events that took place mere hours before the story began. At the beginning of the story, Braling claimed that it would be “unethical” to put sleeping powder in his wife’s coffee, but his actual method of using a high-tech marionette seems just as deceitful—if not more so. Once again, the fact that Braling is going to such great lengths to escape from his wife, rather than simply asking or telling her that he’s going out with Smith for a few hours, underscores that Mrs. Braling is extremely controlling.



Comically, Braling argues that using the marionette is “highly ethical,” although he implies that this point is so trivial that doesn’t need to be argued. In reality, the ethics of using a marionette to distract Mrs. Braling seems like the very crux of the issue. In addition, Braling also blurs the line between himself and the marionette by claiming that “I’ve been home all evening,” which is a moment of foreshadowing.



It’s strange that Smith’s very first question (besides asking Braling where he purchased the marionette) is how long the marionette can go before it needs to be recharged. This again implies that Smith wants one for himself and thus needs to know how long the marionette would allow him to avoid his wife. Meanwhile, Braling Two’s “fond[ness]” for Mrs. Braling reveals that marionettes have thoughts and feelings just like humans—which could be potentially dangerous for Braling.



Shaking with excitement, Smith asks how long Marionettes, Inc. has been in business, and Braling says they've been operating in secret for two years. Tentatively, Smith asks if he could possibly purchase a marionette too. Braling hands Smith the **business card**, and Smith turns it around in his hands, thanking his friend profusely. He says all he wants is "a little respite," even just once a month. Currently, Smith's wife hates when he's out of the house for even an hour. Even though he loves her, Smith just wants some space. He asks Braling if he remembers the poem that reads, "Love will fly if held too lightly, love will die if held too tightly."

Braling says that Smith is actually fortunate—Nettie loves Smith too much, while Mrs. Braling simply hates Braling. Smith says the problem is that Nettie loves him "madly," when he really just wants her to love him "comfortably." Braling wishes his friend luck and reminds him to visit Braling Two a few times over the next month—it would look suspicious if Smith suddenly stopped coming over. Smith agrees to stop by, and the two friends say their goodbyes.

Walking down the street, Smith smiles to himself and begins to whistle quietly, **business card** in hand. The card reads, "Clients must be pledged to secrecy, for while an act is pending in Congress to legalize Marionettes, Inc., it is still a felony, if caught, to use one." Smith continues reading. The card also says that "Clients must have a mold made of their body and a color index check of their eyes, lips, hair, skin, etc. Clients must expect to wait for two months until their model is finished." Smith thinks to himself that two months isn't all that long to wait. In just two months, his ribs will be healed from being constantly crushed by Nettie's embrace. His hand will be healed from being constantly squeezed and held, and his bruised lip will repair itself, too.

Smith thinks to himself that he doesn't wish to seem "ungrateful." Turning the **business card** over, Smith reads, "Marionettes, Inc. is two years old and has a fine record of satisfied customers behind it. Our motto is 'No Strings Attached.' Address: 43 South Wesley Drive." The city bus pulls up, and Smith climbs on, humming as he does. He thinks about how he and Nettie have fifteen thousand dollars in their joint bank account. He can just "slip eight thousand out as a business venture, you might say." Besides, in some ways, the marionette will actually pay itself off—with interest.

Smith confirms that he does, in fact, want a marionette for himself. He claims that he just wants a break from his wife one night per month, which begs the question as to why Smith can't simply talk to Nettie about this seemingly small request—instead, he's willing to spend eight thousand dollars to ensure he has a few hours alone per month. His serious interest in purchasing a marionette suggest his marital problems run far deeper than he's letting on.



Smith's assertions of Nettie's obsession with him borders on arrogance—later in the story, he will realize that he has been misinterpreting Nettie's behavior altogether. Later, the story will also cast doubt on Braling's confident declaration that his wife hates him.



Smith is unphased by the ominous wording of the business card—he appears entirely willing to spend eight thousand dollars, commit a felony by using a marionette, buy from an illegal company, and give said company all of the most intimate details about himself. Once again, this emphasizes the extent of Smith's unhappiness in his marriage. This is underscored by the way he describes Nettie's affection as torture—for example, he doesn't say that Nettie hugs him tightly, he says she crushes his ribs.



Marionettes from Marionettes, Inc. don't have physical strings, since they are lifelike androids. However, the motto of Marionettes, Inc., "No Strings Attached," is ironic because traditional marionettes do have strings attached to them and are operated from above by a puppeteer. This suggests that the robot marionettes do actually have some sort of strings attached—that is, hidden complications and restrictions. Further, "No Strings Attached" could also underhandly refer to the fact that the company is illegal and operates in secret, and that customers are committing a felony by purchasing a marionette. If a problem were to arise, a customer couldn't just sue Marionettes, Inc., because the customer would be turning themselves in, too.



Smith arrives at his house and wanders into his bedroom and finds Nettie—“pale, huge, and piously asleep.” He is overwhelmed by the sight of her “innocent face.” Softly, he says to Nettie that, if she were awake, she would “smother” him with affection. He accuses her of making him “feel like a criminal,” because she’s been a sweet, loving wife. He says he sometimes can’t believe that she picked him over Bud Chapman. He also can’t believe that she only seems to love him more and more each day, and that in the past month, she’s loved him “more wildly than ever before.”

Crying, Smith suddenly feels like he wants to rip up the **business card** and forget about the marionette altogether. When he moves to reach the card, however, his body protests in pain: “his hand ached and his ribs cracked and groaned.” He wanders out into the hall and into one of the other rooms in the house.

Humming, Smith opens his desk drawer and reaches in for the bankbook. He tells himself that he’s only taking eight thousand dollars and not a penny more. When he opens the bankbook, however, he realizes that something terrible has happened—ten thousand dollars have suddenly gone missing, leaving the couple with only five thousand dollars in their account. Immediately, Smith blames Nettie, yelling that she’s purchased “More hats, more clothes, more perfume.” He thinks she’s even purchased that little vacation house on the Hudson River that she’s been going on about for months—“without so much as a by your leave!”

Smith runs back into the bedroom, yelling for Nettie to wake up explain what she’s done with his money. At first, Nettie doesn’t wake up, but when she finally begins to stir, Smith’s mouth goes dry, and his knees give in. Collapsed by Nettie’s bedside, Smith frantically asks her again what she’s done with his money.

Smith clearly feels guilty for wanting to have a little space from his wife. This passage also contains Smith’s second mention of how Nettie has loved him even more fiercely this past month than she has throughout the rest of their ten-year relationship—this is an important moment of foreshadowing. Meanwhile, the casual, one-time mention of Bud Chapman is strange for a story with so few characters already. This leaves open the possibility that later, when Smith realizes the real Nettie is gone, she may have run off with her former lover.



In wanting to rip up the business card, Smith wants to also destroy his impulse to escape from his wife. However, his physical pains—from Nettie’s suffocating hugs—remind him that affection is not reciprocal in their relationship, and that he feels smothered by Nettie’s love.



When he realized Nettie took the money “without so much as a by your leave” (without permission), Smith automatically assumes Nettie has spent ten thousand dollars on hats, clothes and perfume—a comical assumption that suggests Smith views his wife as foolish and impractical. He then speculates that she bought the vacation home on the Hudson that she’s been talking about for several months—a desire to travel and a fixation on one particular place that mirrors Braling’s longing for Rio (and the way his wife stands in the way of his plans).



Smith repeatedly calls the money his instead of theirs—even though it’s a joint bank account. This paints Smith as a traditionally masculine, domineering husband who is responsible for making and managing the couple’s money. It seems, then, that Smith is the controlling one in the relationship, just as Mrs. Braling plays that role in her marriage to Braling. Since Mrs. Braling’s insatiable need for control makes Braling want to flee to Rio, the story implies that perhaps Smith’s controlling nature makes Nettie want to run, too.



Suddenly, Smith has a “horrid thought,” and “terror and loneliness” overwhelm him, followed by “fever and disillusionment.” Although he doesn’t want to confirm his suspicion, he leans into Nettie and presses his ear against her chest. All he hears is “Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick.”

This is a pivotal moment for Smith, as he realizes that Nettie is actually a marionette—her chest makes the same ticking sound that Braling Two’s chest made. As much as Smith has complained about his wife and dreamed of having a break from her, when he realizes that he’s the one who’s been abandoned, he feels terrified, lonely, and frantic.



Smith walks alone in the street in the middle of the night. Meanwhile, Braling and Braling Two chat on their way to the cellar. Braling tells the marionette that it’s time to get into the toolbox, but Braling Two hesitates, saying, “That’s what I want to talk to you about [...] The cellar. I don’t like it. I don’t like that toolbox.” Braling says he’ll try to make more comfortable arrangements for Braling Two, but the marionette continues, saying that “Marionettes are made to move, not lie still. How would you like to lie in a box most of the time?” He reminds Braling that there’s no way to shut him off.

The brief image of Smith walking down the road alone in the middle of the night is the story’s last mention of him. Perhaps he’s going back to Braling’s house for consoling, or maybe to the bus station or airport in an attempt to locate the real Nettie. Meanwhile, Braling Two is shown to have thoughts and feelings of his own, making him less of the obedient employee that Braling assumed he would be. Earlier, Braling blurred the line between himself and the robot (in claiming that “Braling” would be with his wife all month, while “another gentleman” would be in Rio). Braling Two gestures to the hazy differentiation between robot and human by asking the real Braling how he would feel being locked in a toolbox.



Braling tells Braling Two that he only needs to be in the toolbox for a few days—just until Braling leaves for Rio. The marionette protests, saying that after Braling comes back from his month of “having a good time,” the marionette will be forced back into the box. Concerned, Braling says that the people at the marionette shop didn’t tell him that he was getting “a difficult specimen.” Braling Two replies, claiming, “There’s a lot they don’t know about us.”

Braling Two’s responses grow increasingly dark and ominous, setting the stage for the conflict ahead. His discontent with being in a toolbox—especially after the real Braling’s trip to Rio—suggests that Braling Two may want to take over Braling’s life completely.



Braling Two says he dislikes the thought of Braling spending a month in warm, happy Rio while Braling Two and Braling’s wife are “stuck here in the cold.” Braling protests, claiming that he’s dreamed of this trip for his whole life. He squints, imagining the tranquil waves, golden sand, and good wine. The marionette cries, “I’ll never get to go to Rio. Have you thought of that?”

Braling Two’s argument against Braling’s trip to Rio sounds as if it’s coming from Mrs. Braling herself, persuading her husband over the past ten years to give up his dream of visiting Rio. This implies that Braling Two has decided where his loyalty lies, and it’s with Mrs. Braling, not Braling.



Braling Two continues, saying that he’s “grown quite fond” of Mrs. Braling. Braling says he’s glad the marionette is “enjoying [his] employment,” but the marionette explains that it’s not quite that—he’s in love with Braling’s wife. Braling sputters, but the marionette continues, saying he’s “been thinking [about] how nice it is in Rio,” and how he’ll never be able to travel. He’s also been thinking about Braling’s wife, and how they could be “very happy” together.

This passage points back to the marionette’s previous declaration that he’s “grown rather fond” of Mrs. Braling over the course of the evening. It’s clear that the marionette sees himself as a true contender for Mrs. Braling’s love—not a mindless, obedient employee of Braling. The marionette’s capacity to think and feel proves dangerous, as it’s clear he wants Mrs. Braling and the Rio trip for himself.



Braling walks nervously toward the cellar door and stutters, saying that he needs to make a quick phone call, and that Braling Two should wait a few moments for him. The marionette challenges Braling by asking if he is calling Marionettes, Inc. to come pick Braling Two up. Braling quickly says, “No, no—nothing like that,” but tries to dash out of the cellar.

Braling Two grabs Braling with a “metal-firm grip,” and tells him not to run. Braling asks the marionette if Mrs. Braling “put [him] up to this,” but the marionette says no. Continuing, Braling asks if she found out about the marionette. With a smile, the marionette tells Braling that he’ll never know. Squirming unsuccessfully to get out the marionette’s grasp, Braling cries, “She *must* have guessed; she *must* have affected you!”

With Braling still in his grasp, Braling Two explains that he is going to put Braling in the toolbox, lock it, and get rid of the key. Then, he’ll buy a plane ticket to Rio for Braling’s wife. Braling cries out that they need to “talk this over,” but the marionette simply says, “Good-by[e], Braling.” Panicked, Braling asks the marionette what he means by “good-by[e].”

Ten minutes later, Mrs. Braling wakes up to a kiss on her cheek. She whispers, “Why—you haven’t done that in years.” In reply, “someone” says, “We’ll see what we can do about that.”

Braling’s nervousness and stutter show that he’s finally internalized the costs of using a marionette—Braling Two wants (and probably has the power) to take over the real Braling’s life. Braling has been so captivated by the chance to go to Rio that he’s failed to fully process the potential repercussions of using a top-secret, poorly understood, illegal piece of technology to do so.



Braling Two’s “metal-firm grip” emphasizes that, although he looks human, he’s still a product of technology and has abilities and strength beyond that of humans—making the outlook for the real Braling appear rather bleak. Interestingly, Braling is certain that Mrs. Braling is somehow behind the plan for the marionette to take over the human Braling’s life. In this way, Braling affirms again that his wife hates him—though the story will later suggest that this isn’t exactly the case.



Earlier, Braling Two asked Braling if he would like being locked up in the toolbox in the cellar. At the time, this seemed like the marionette searching for empathy from the human Braling, but now it’s clear that the marionette intended to lock Braling up all along. The marionette simply says goodbye to Braling, implying that he means to lock Braling up forever—allowing him to die in the process.



The fact that it took ten minutes for someone (be it Braling Two or the real Braling) to rejoin Mrs. Braling in the bedroom suggests that there was a longer struggle between the two Bralings than the story showed. However, because of Braling’s earlier “metal-firm grip,” it seems nearly impossible that the human Braling could have overpowered the marionette. This detail, coupled with the sudden act of affection toward Mrs. Braling, suggests that the marionette succeeded in taking over Braling’s life and locking him up forever.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Weeks, Rachel. "Marionettes, Inc.." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 10 Aug 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Weeks, Rachel. "Marionettes, Inc.." LitCharts LLC, August 10, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/marionettes-inc>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Marionettes, Inc.* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Bradbury, Ray. *Marionettes, Inc.*. Simon and Schuster. 1949.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Bradbury, Ray. *Marionettes, Inc.*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1949.