The Visitor

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAY BRADBURY

Acclaimed science fiction author Ray Bradbury was born in Waukegan, Illinois in 1920 but grew up in Los Angeles, California. He began writing short stories while still in high school, selling his first in 1941, and found widespread literary fame following the 1953 publication of his novel *Fahrenheit 451*. All of Bradbury's eleven novels began as short stories. *The Illustrated Man*, for example, consists of eighteen previously published standalone stories strung together in a loosely building narrative. Bradbury had four daughters with his wife, Marguerite McClure, and died in 2012 at the age of 91. At the time of his death, Bradbury had published hundreds stories and received multiple honors, including a National Medal of the Arts, a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation, an Oscar nomination, and an Emmy Award.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Bradbury wrote "The Visitor" following the end of World War II, a time of both great technological achievement and anxiety. The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the war created a global fear of nuclear proliferation that appears in much of Bradbury's work, and indeed is vaguely referenced in "The Visitor" itself. With one war over and another, the Cold War, only beginning, Bradbury was writing at a time of broad uncertainty and instability—factors undoubtedly leading to his stories' frequent nostalgia for the simplicity of a more peaceful American past.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The admonishment of the corrosive nature of selfishness and greed of Bradbury's story echoes Leo Tolstoy's parable-like "How Much Land Does a Man Need?", in which a peasant farmer's insatiable desire for more land leads to his untimely death. Meanwhile, the "blood rust" in Bradbury's story—a horrific terminal disease that must be quarantined to protect the rest of the population—is reminiscent of other fictional of pandemics, including those in Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947), Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), and Stephen King's *The Stand*. John M. Barry's nonfiction account of the Spanish flu, *The Great Influenza*, discusses the disease that devastated the population in the early twentieth century, not long before Bradbury's writing career began. Bradbury's stories often express a distinct skepticism of technology as well as a desire for a simpler past, reflected in "The Visitor" by the exiled men's intense longing for a return to life as it once was on Earth. Such anxiety about the changing nature of society is evident in dystopian novels like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Visitor"
- **When Written:** 1940s
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1948
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Science fiction short story
- **Setting:** Mars
- **Climax:** While struggling for possession of Johnson's gun, Saul Williams accidentally shoots and kills Leonard Mark.
- **Antagonist:** Saul Williams, Johnson
- **Point of View:** Third person

PLOT SUMMARY

Saul Williams wakes to another quiet morning on Mars, and laments being so far from Earth. He wants nothing more than to be home, but he knows that, because he has "blood rust," this is impossible. He tries to imagine himself once again in New York City, yet his efforts prove futile.

Saul wants to die but lacks the nerve to kill himself. Instead, he naps, and awakens with a mouth full of blood; "blood rust" is terminal and incurable, causing its victims to die over the course of a year. Those suffering have all been quarantined on Mars.

Desperate for intellectual stimulation, a lonely Saul attempts to strike up a conversation about ancient philosophers with a man lying on a filthy blanket. The man is too sick for social interaction, however, and tells Saul that he, too, will soon not care about anything other than sleep. Saul looks out across the bottom of the dead Martian sea, where many other sick men are sleeping alone. Saul remembers that, upon first arriving, they had all huddled around campfires and talked about their intense longing for Earth.

Just then, a rocket lands on the dead sea floor. A man emerges, accompanied by two figures in protective suits. After setting up a tent for the man, the figures re-board the rocket and leave. Saul runs to meet the newcomer, who looks young and relatively healthy. The man introduces himself as Leonard Mark. Saul asks Mark how things are in New York City, and suddenly the city itself seems to erupt all around him. At first

Saul is confused and terrified, but as the city fades and the desolate Martian landscape returns, he realizes that Mark had somehow created the vision in Saul's mind. Saul joyously grabs Mark's hand and expresses how happy he is that Mark has come.

Mark later tells Saul that he was born with his telepathic abilities, likely because his mother was pregnant during the 1957 "blowup" of London. His visions affect all the senses at once, and at Saul's request, Mark makes him believe he is swimming in a beloved creek near his childhood hometown. So delighted is Saul after this that he attempts to pay Mark with his last bar of chocolate, but Mark refuses to accept it; he grants his visions solely because they make people happy.

Saul eagerly imagines all the places Mark will take him, as well as all the long-dead philosophers he'll be able to talk to. Such imaginative possibilities, Saul thinks, are even better than being healthy back on Earth. His musings are interrupted, however, by the realization that that other sick men have noticed Mark and are slowly walking toward them. Saul tells Mark they must head to the mountains, insisting that the others are insane and will kill each other, or even Mark, in order to "own" Mark and his abilities. Mark coolly responds that he doesn't belong to anyone, including Saul, and refuses to leave. Angry and desperate to keep Mark for himself, Saul smashes at the visitor's chin, knocking him out, and then carries him to a cave in the mountains.

Later, Mark awakens tied up in the cave and calls Saul a man driven crazy by loneliness. Saul says he will untie Mark only if he promises not to leave, but Mark again insists that he is a free man and belongs to no one. He adds that he had been perfectly willing to share his talents among all the men, but Saul, in his greed, has ruined everything.

Soon enough, five other men reach the cave. They argue ferociously though the night, each determined to keep Mark—"their treasure"—for themselves. Determined to settle things, Mark proposes a schedule in which each man gets an hour with him per week, while Mark is also allotted plenty of time for himself.

Though at first the men appear to agree, one of them, Johnson, proposes that they instead force Mark to perform for them whenever they want and torture him if he refuses. To this Mark responds that Johnson is crazy, and that he'll simply kill the others one by one. In fact, none of the men can trust the others not to murder them. What's more, Mark adds, one of the men has a **gun**.

At this news, the men all jump up, and a chaotic tussle ensues. Johnson pulls the gun from his jacket and begins shooting wildly. Mark screams at him to stop and begins to conjure New York City around them. Saul tackles Johnson to the ground, at which point the image of New York begins to collapse. The men turn to see Mark standing with a bloody hole in his chest and then toppling to the ground, dead.

As the cave grows cold, the men begin to bury Mark. Saul, extremely weak, lies on the ground and attempts to conjure New York in his mind, but it's no use. It is gone forever, he realizes, and cries himself to sleep.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Saul Williams – A man exiled to Mars after contracting "blood rust," Saul is deeply bored and lonely. He desperately longs to return to Earth, or, really, for any intellectual stimulation whatsoever amidst the desolate Martian landscape. A lover of ancient philosophy, early in the story Saul attempts to engage the man on the blanket in conversation to no avail. He is the first to greet Leonard Mark upon his arrival and becomes elated upon learning of Mark's telepathic abilities. After Mark allows him to mentally visit a beloved childhood creek, Saul begins to imagine all of the places make will allow him to go—such as ancient Greece and Rome—and the long-dead philosopher's he'll be able to talk to. Upon noticing the other Martian exiles approaching, Saul quickly grows desperate to keep Mark—and his abilities—for himself. Despite their initial friendliness, he violently attacks Mark and brings him to an isolated cave. By the time Saul realizes how misguided he and the other men have been in their greedy desire to possess Mark, it is too late, and Mark is dead. At the end of the story, Saul cries himself to sleep, understanding that in his selfishness he has lost the chance of returning home for good. Saul represents the way the dangerous, misguided avarice of humankind will spell its doom.

Leonard Mark – The story's titular visitor, Leonard Mark is a young, relatively healthy arrival to Mars, with the fantastical ability to implant visions in others' minds. Upon meeting Saul for the first time, Mark makes New York City spring up around them, and later transports Saul to a beloved childhood creek. Mark explains his telepathic and hypnotic abilities as likely being the result of the "blow-up" of 1957, implying that there has been a nuclear explosion on Earth. He refuses payment for his services, saying that he simply enjoys making others happy. At the same time, Mark insists upon his freedom to use his power as he wishes, and that he, as a human being, does not belong to anyone. After Saul kidnaps him and brings him to a cave to hide him from the other Martian exiles, Mark mocks Saul's greed and asserts that his selfishness has ruined what he would have freely given. Later, when other men arrive, Mark suggests a schedule that would allow for the equal sharing of his abilities; the men refuse, however, and when Mark points out that one of them, Johnson, has a **gun**, chaos erupts. Johnson accidentally shoots and kills Mark in the subsequent fight. With the loss of Mark comes the loss of the potential for

escape from the lonely drudgery of the men's Martian existence. Mark more broadly represents the Earth itself, whose resources human beings have selfishly and greedily depleted.

Johnson – A Martian exile with blood rust who, along with four other men, finds Saul and Mark hiding out in a cave. When Mark suggests a schedule to share his abilities with all of the men equally, it is Johnson who quickly rejects the idea in favor of instead forcing Mark to do whatever the men want, even if this means brutally torturing him. Johnson is carrying a **gun**, and in the resultant chaos shoots and kills both Smith and Saul.

The Man on the Blanket – A Martian exile with blood rust who is far more along in his illness than is Saul. Early in the story, Saul tries to engage the man in conversation, but he proves too exhausted for social interaction. The man then asserts that, soon enough, Saul will also want to do little else besides sleep.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Smith – A Martian exile with blood rust who, along with Johnson and three other men, finds Saul and Mark hiding out in the cave. When a fight erupts between the men, Johnson shoots and kills Smith and Saul.

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.

SELFISHNESS AND GREED

Ray Bradbury's "The Visitor" is above all an allegory about the corrosive nature of greed. In the story, men who have contracted "blood rust"—a contagious and incurable terminal disease—have been sent to live out their final months on Mars. When the arrival of Leonard Mark, the titular visitor, offers an escape from the desolate isolation of their quarantine, every man grows eager to keep this new "treasure" for himself—yet in their violent selfishness, they end up destroying the very thing they're fighting over. Beyond condemning men's short-sighted selfishness, Bradbury's story ultimately argues that humankind's inability to share resources will spell its end.

Through a combination of telepathy and hypnotism, Mark is able to immerse others in illusions indistinguishable from real life—a highly desirable power for men forced to leave their homes and end their days in foreign solitude. When Saul, one of the Martian exiles, first learns of Mark's ability, he immediately begins to imagine all the things that the newcomer will do for him—from conjuring images of his childhood home, to allowing him to converse with ancient philosophers. So consumed is Saul by visions of how he will use Mark, that he overlooks the fact that Mark is an independent human being, and not Saul's personal plaything.

Upon seeing the others flock toward the visitor, Saul insists that they run off to protect Mark from the others' ravenous greed: "They'll kill each other—kill you—for the right to own you," Saul warns. Of course, Saul really just wants to keep Mark to himself, and the visitor is notably unfazed: "Oh, but I don't belong to anybody," he says, before looking at Saul pointedly and adding, "No. Not even you." Saul realizes he "didn't even think of that," underscoring the way in which intense focus on one's own needs can deny others the right to self-determination.

Despite this realization, Saul refuses to give up his prize. Instead, he viciously knocks Mark out and carries him to an isolated cave away from the other men. He then ties Mark up, refusing him freedom unless he promises not to run away. In response, Mark mocks Saul's obvious avarice: "Oh, a fine marriage this is—your greed and my mental ability." Mark refuses to play along, again insisting, much to Saul's frustration, that he is a "free agent" who doesn't "belong to anybody."

Soon enough, other men find the cave, and their subsequent "arguments and ferocities" ensue until dawn. Mark conjures a marble table, around which sit these "ridiculously bearded, evil-smelling, sweating and greedy men, eyes bent upon their treasure." Bradbury's language in this moment highlights the men's pathetic desperation, depicting them as having grown feral in their selfish desires. They, like Saul, deny Mark his humanity, viewing him instead only as a "treasure" to be won.

Mark rationally suggests creating a schedule so that each man gets an hour with him per week, and which also leaves Mark with some time for himself. Rather than accept this deal—which Mark points out "should be better than nothing"—one man, Johnson, declares that they should simply *make* Mark do whatever they want, even if that means torturing him. The problem is, however, in addition to sowing violence, greed robs men of trust. Mark angrily declares that, one by one, the men will kill each other out of the need to be the sole possessor of Mark's abilities: "This is a fool's conference," he says. "The minute your back is turned one of the other men will murder you." Greed and selfishness have not only blinded the men to the humanity of that which they desire, but also to one another's; trust, reason, and empathy, the story argues, cannot co-exist with the single-minded brutality that greed fuels.

Indeed, Mark's assertion immediately proves correct. The men begin to fight, and in the ensuing chaos accidentally kill Mark. The irony, of course, is that Mark had been prepared to give his talents freely, explicitly telling Saul he desired no reward for his services and simply wanted to bring others joy: "You wanted me all to yourself," he says. "You were afraid the others would

take me away from you. Oh, how mistaken you were. I have enough power to keep them all happy. You could have shared me, like a community kitchen." In their greedy inability to share this joy, however, the men have destroyed it altogether.

Bradbury's story is not simply a condemnation of interpersonal squabbles. The tale is more broadly an allegory for the depletion of natural resources and disrespect of the planet—which provide the real versions of everything Mark conjures, and yet which human beings treat with no more respect than the men do their telepathic would-be savior. Indeed, Bradbury subtly hints at the way the Martian drama plays out on a planetary level through Mark's backstory: Mark implies his abilities are the result of the "blow up" of 1957, ostensibly in reference to a nuclear explosion. This would suggest that those on Earth, like those on Mars, have refused to share resources (resulting in nuclear war), or have used them to their own ends without regard to the potential danger to the planet. "Blood rust" itself could, like Mark's telepathy, even be a byproduct of environmental degradation and nuclear fallout. The human tendency toward greed and selfishness, then, creates a self-perpetuating cycle of violence that will ultimately spell humankind's doom.

ISOLATION, LONELINESS, AND HOME

Saul Williams's first thought upon waking up to another quiet Martian morning is "how far away" the Earth is. Well before Leonard Mark's arrival, Bradbury establishes the incredible sense of isolation that Saul—and all the Martian exiles—must feel, having been torn from the familiarity not simply of their individual homes, but of their entire home planet. By emphasizing the men's intense longing for Earth and desperate wish for meaningful social interaction, Bradbury argues for the importance of both home and human contact. Life without either, the story suggests, not only drives men to dangerous extremes, but is, in fact, not really life at all.

The desolation of Mars is immediately evident in Bradbury's bleak description of the landscape outside Saul's tent, which is "still" and "silent," the sky "empty." Underscoring the sense of stifling monotony and hopelessness is the detached, straightforward prose used to describe Saul's morning routine, which makes even his attempts to kill himself seem utterly mundane: "Later in the morning Saul tried to die," Bradbury writes. "He lay on the sand and told his heart to stop. It continued beating." The extreme dreariness of life on Mars contrasts sharply with the vibrancy of that on Earth, which Bradbury later describes as "explod[ing] in electric color."

That Saul wants Earth "so bad it hurts [...] more than food or women or anything" further imbues the concept of home with the importance of any other basic human need. Saul's first request of Mark—the place he would like to be "most of all" in that moment—is notably a beloved childhood creek. Though he ultimately harbors ambitions of visiting places of grand historic importance through Mark's power, of primary importance is the comfort and familiarity of home.

Without this comfort, the story implies, men grow weak and listless. Saul recalls that, at first, the Martian exiles would gather around a campfire and talk wistfully about nothing but Earth. Yet as their sickness progressed, even this grew too taxing. Now, illness has robbed the men of the ability to interact at all; instead, the sickest huddle across the dead sea "like so many emptied bottles flung up by some long-gone wave [...] all of them sleeping alone [...] each grown into himself, because social converse was weakening and sleep was good." Not only have the men been cut off from Earth, but they have also been completely isolated from one another. That they are lying on a dead sea bottom symbolically reflects that, unable to communicate or even dream of the homes they've lost, the men themselves are already dead.

It is no wonder, then, that Saul is repeatedly referred to (and refers to himself) as "lonely." Such loneliness is "an affliction of the rusted ones," a nearby man lying on a blanket tells Saul when the latter tries to strike up a conversation. Because of their illness, the men are completely devoid of genuine human contact. Even when the healthy-looking Mark arrives, Saul notes that his carriers wear "protective germicide suits" and depart quickly, physically connoting their separation from and aversion to the doomed Martian exiles.

Only upon having established the devasting bleakness of the men's situation does Bradbury reveal their bloodthirsty greed. Saul calls the other exiles "insane," to which Mark responds, "Isolation and all make them that way?" After Saul later kidnaps Mark, the visitor accuses Saul himself of having been driven "insane with loneliness." Bradbury underscores that the men's selfish desperation is fueled by their intense isolation and longing for connection with a world that has cast them aside like so many "emptied bottles." The real tragedy of blood rust, it seems, is not simply that it kills its victims, but that it forces them to die alone—tossed off like trash to another planet, to spend their days "bleeding all the time, and lonely."

That's why Mark's death proves so devasting to Saul, as he realizes he has lost all hope of reconnecting with, and will spend his final, painful days searching for, a home he will never see again: "He would rise every morning and walk on the dead sea looking for it, and walk forever around Mars, looking for it, and never find it," Bradbury writes. "And finally lie, too tired to walk, trying to find New York in his head, but not finding it."

Bradbury's judgment is not reserved for the men of Mars, but also targets those on Earth who sent the infected off to Mars in the first place. Men are not meant to spend their final days rotting in a foreign atmosphere, the story argues, and treating human beings like refuse is at once maddening and inhumane. In sending these men to Mars, the people of Earth have abandoned those in need and denied them basic decency and

comfort at their end of their days. Bradbury's story argues that such unfeeling quarantine is cruel because, in denying men their homes and human contact, it effectively denies them their humanity.

MEANING AND IMAGINATION

Despite being terminally ill, the exiled Martian men seem not to fear death itself so much as the lack of mental stimulation that their long, drawn out dying entails. Mars is distinctly devoid of opportunities for intellectual stimulation, a fact that proves especially challenging for the philosophy-loving Saul Williams. Saul rejects desire for bodily pleasures like women and food, instead insisting that all he wants is Earth, "a thing for the mind and not the weak body." His despair comes not only from intense homesickness, but also from the fact that "intellectuals never get the blood rust and come up" to Mars, and that his fellow exiles have grown too ill to talk at all, let alone discuss Plato and Aristotle. As the sick men find themselves unable to think of anything "but sleep and more sleep," Bradbury suggests that their existence itself begins to lose any sense of meaning or purpose. "The Visitor," then, is an argument for the importance of the life of the mind.

For Saul, there is little joy to the mundane monotony that being on Mars entails. "Another morning," he remarks early in the story, suggesting a certain bored pattern to his days that is further reflected in the oppressive stillness of the Martian landscape. In the opening line of the story, Saul awakens to "the still morning." Everything is "quiet" and the dead sea-bottom is "silent—no wind on it."

Before Leonard Mark's arrival, Saul attempts to engage in conversation with a man lying on a blanket nearby, but the man is too sick to do anything other than sleep. Saul even longs for the day when he, too, will be too sick to care about anything other than sleep because, though this will mean he is closer to death, it would be preferable to staring down a seemingly endless stretch of empty, boring Martian days.

Leonard Mark, then, is a sort of messiah figure, come to deliver the exiles from their monotonous Martian hell and into an imagined heaven. For Saul, Mark presents the opportunity not only to see home once again, but to explore worlds Saul never knew: "We'll be in Greece, he thought. In Athens. We'll be in Rome, if we want, when we study the Roman writers. We'll stand in the Parthenon and the Acropolis. […] To sit and talk with Nietzsche in person, with Plato himself...!" Saul notably calls such imagined opportunities *better* than life on Earth ever was, again suggesting that intellectual pursuits instill life with an invaluable sense of wonder.

Notably, Mark cannot cure the men, nor can he actually, physically return them to the homes they so sorely miss. He can only offer vibrant images of a world beyond their immediate surroundings. He calls this, in part, hypnosis, underscoring the fact that it isn't real. Indeed, when Saul believes himself to be swimming in a beloved childhood creek, to Mark it looks simply like he is flailing about in the Martian sand. In a moment of anger, Saul calls Mark's conjuring "a lie," and Mark himself refers to it as "a mirage." Nevertheless, these images—these possibilities for mental removal from the Martian emptiness—prove powerful enough to drive the men to kidnapping and murder in their attempt to access them.

Such a profound desire for an imagined escape raises the question of whether reality is more important than illusion. For these men, it doesn't matter that the scenes Mark conjures aren't real; all that matters is their experience of them, their ability to remove themselves from the simultaneous existential terror and numbing drudgery of their lives in exile. The story does not offer an answer as to whether such escapism actually grants life meaning or, on the contrary, is a mask for the ultimate meaningless of life itself. What is clear in Bradbury's tale, however, is that when the characters reach the point of illness where they can do nothing but sleep—that is, when they can no longer engage in the life of the mind—they have ceased to live.

Saul knows this will happen to him, too; after Mark's death, he envisions the shape his final months will take, realizing that he will "finally lie, too tired to walk, trying to find New York in his head, but not finding it." As he drifts to sleep, he hears the figurative "tremendous crash of metal and golden mist and odor and color and sound," as "New York collapsed, fell, and was buried." The implication is that Saul, like all the rest, will become too weary to even dream of the world he has left behind. And without such dreams, he has, in effect, already been buried in the Martian soil.

SYMBOLS

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

JOHNSON'S GUN

In Bradbury's "The Visitor," Johnson's gun symbolizes the destructive nature of selfishness and greed. When five exiled Martian men confront Saul and Leonard Mark in a cave, they argue ferociously over who will get to keep the powerful visitor. In their greed, they fail to see Mark as an autonomous human being, instead viewing him only as a "treasure" to be possessed. Even as Mark proposes a rational solution in which each man gets to spend equal time with him, Johnson, the de facto ringleader, refuses, instead insisting that the men torture Mark into doing whatever they want. This greed quickly spurs violence, as the men turn on each other. Johnson pulls his gun from his jacket and begins to fire wildly, coldly killing another one of the men, Smith; his

greed has turned him into a murder.

Saul then tackles Johnson to the ground and wrestles the gun from him, yet accidentally sets it off again in the process—shooting and killing Mark. This death, however unintentional, again reflects the corrosive, ruinous power of greed. In their desire to keep their "treasure" for themselves, the men have destroyed the very thing they desire most. Saul throws the gun as far away has he can and refuses to watch where it lands, attempting to distance himself from the dark impulses that have left them all "worse than lost." It is too late, however; Saul knows that he will never be able to return to Earth without Mark. The damage done by greed and selfishness is total and irreversible.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *The Illustrated Man* published in 1981.

"The Visitor" Quotes

❝ After that he wanted very much to be back on Earth. During the day he tried every way that it was possible to be in New York City. Sometimes, if he sat right and held his hands a certain way, he did it. He could almost smell New York. Most of the time, though, it was impossible.

Related Characters: Saul Williams

Related Themes:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

Early in the story, Bradbury establishes Martian exile Saul Williams's desperate desire to return to Earth. Immediately after having breakfast, the first thing Saul thinks of is how badly he wants to be back on his distant home planet. His futile attempts to mentally conjure New York City around him underscore the intense isolation and loneliness he feels, and also foreshadow Leonard Mark's telepathic abilities—which will work where Saul's imagination fails. This moment will be reflected at the end of the story, after Mark's death, when Saul once again attempts to envision himself back on Earth to no avail—and before forced to accept, once and for all, that he will never return to New York City.

❝ Along the shores of the dead sea, like so many emptied bottles flung up by some long-gone wave, were the huddled bodies of sleeping men. Saul could see them all down the curve of the empty sea. One, two, three—all of them sleeping alone, most of them worse off than he, each with his little cache of food, each grown into himself, because social converse was weakening and sleep was good.

Related Characters: Saul Williams

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

The morning before the titular visitor's arrival, Saul looks out upon the mass of blood rust-infected men sleeping on the dried-up bottom of the Martian sea. The men are further along in their illness than Saul is, and have lost the will to do anything apart from sleep. Bradbury's description of the men as "emptied bottles flung up" reflects that they have been treated as refuse, callously shipped off from Earth to spend their final days in isolation. The fact that each man is sleeping "alone [...] each grown into himself" further underscores this intense feeling of isolation and establishes the bleak environment that will eventually drive some exiles to violent ends. Finally, the men's presence on an empty, dead sea suggests that these sleeping exiles, having lost the will to do anything apart from huddle alone on their blankets, are effectively already dead.

❝ New York grew up out of the desert, made of stone and filled with March winds. Neons exploded in electric color. Yellow taxis glided in a still night. Bridges rose and tugs chanted in the midnight harbors. Curtains rose on spangled musicals.

Saul put his hands to his head, violently.

"Hold on, hold on!" he cried. "What's happening to me? What's wrong with me? I'm going crazy!"

Leaves sprouted from trees in Central Park, green and new. On the pathway Saul strolled along, smelling the air.

Related Characters: Saul Williams (speaker), Leonard Mark

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

Moments after meeting Leonard Mark, Saul asks the visitor,

who has recently arrived on Mars from Earth, how things are back in New York. Without pause, Mark uses his telepathic abilities to make the city erupt all around Saul. Bradbury's description of the city in this moment emphasizes the way it overwhelms all the senses. Saul can feel the wind, see explosions of color, hear the cars, and smell the air. The vision is made all the more vibrant and extraordinary for its sharp contrast with the oppressive stillness of the Martian desert, and this scene helps establish why men like Saul (and later, Johnson) will become so dangerously intent upon keeping Mark's ability for themselves.

> Saul lay on the sand. From time to time his hands moved, twitched excitedly. His mouth spasmed open; sounds issued from his tightening and relaxing throat.
>
> Saul began to make slow movements of his arms, out and back, out and back, gasping with his head to one side, his arms going and coming slowly on the warm air, stirring the yellow sand under him, his body turning slowly over.
>
> Leonard Mark quietly finished his coffee. While he drank he kept his eyes on the moving, whispering Saul lying there on the dead sea bottom.

Related Characters: Saul Williams, Leonard Mark

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

Upon Saul's request, Mark has made him believe he is swimming in a beloved creek outside his childhood hometown back on Earth. This moment, seen from Mark's perspective, underscores the fact that the visions he grants are just that—*visions*; they aren't real no matter how well they fool the senses. While Saul genuinely feels as though he is submerged in a body of water, he is in fact simply flailing about in the dead Martian sea. For men like Saul, however, this difference between reality and illusion is entirely inconsequential. The ability to *believe* he has escaped his Martian prison is as valuable as any physical return to Earth.

> We'll be in Greece, he thought. In Athens. We'll be in Rome, if we want, when we study the Roman writers. We'll stand in the Parthenon and the Acropolis. It won't be just talk, but it'll be a place to be, besides. This man can do it. He has the power to do it. When we talk the plays of Racine, he can make a stage and players and all of it for me. By Christ, this is better than life ever was! How much better to be sick and here than well on Earth without these abilities!

Related Characters: Saul Williams (speaker), Leonard Mark

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

Soon after meeting Leonard Mark, Saul begins envisioning all the ways the visitor's talent will help him escape the drudgery of his Martian quarantine. Saul, who is obsessed with ancient philosophy, dreams not simply of visiting his personal home, but also all those distant lands and times that have for so long fascinated him. Saul's interest in conversing with ancient philosophers reflects the importance the story places on the life of the mind and the value of intellectual stimulation. More broadly, the fact that Saul declares the ability to *imagine* himself elsewhere as preferable to *actually* returning to the Earth he previously professed so sorely missing suggests that imagination imbues life with meaning.

> "Come on. Don't you realize what'll happen once they discover your talent? They'll fight over you. They'll kill each other—kill you—for the right to own you."
>
> "Oh, but I don't belong to anybody," said Leonard Mark. He looked at Saul. "No. Not even you."
>
> Saul jerked his head. "I didn't even think of that."

Related Characters: Leonard Mark, Saul Williams (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

While talking with Mark, Saul notices the other Martian exiles in the distance slowly making their way towards the two of them. Immediately, Saul declares that he and Mark must leave for Mark's own protection. Of course, whether he admits it to himself or not, Saul really just wants to keep

Mark's talents for himself, even though Mark clearly is against this. Saul's comment that the men will kill each other and Mark in their greed proves prescient, as this is exactly what will happen in the end of the story. In this moment, however, Mark sees through Saul's attempt to gain possession over him and coolly asserts his autonomy as a human being. In his reveries about all the things Mark could do for him, Saul had entirely forgotten to consider Mark's humanity.

"If you'd had any sense and done things intelligently, we'd have been friends. I'd have been glad to do you these little hypnotic favors. After all, they're no trouble for me to conjure up. Fun, really. But you've botched it. You wanted me all to yourself. You were afraid the others would take me away from you. Oh, how mistaken you were. I have enough power to keep them all happy. You could have shared me, like a community kitchen."

Related Characters: Leonard Mark (speaker), Saul Williams

Related Themes:

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

As Mark sits tied up in a cave, having been kidnapped by Saul in his efforts to keep the visitor's talents to himself, he bluntly points out the foolishness that Saul has been driven to in his greed. Saul's refusal to share Mark with the others has led to physical violence. The irony, of course, is that Mark had been perfectly willing to bring help Saul prior to this betrayal; in fact, he had plenty of power to help any man who asked. Saul selfishness and greed, then, have robbed him of the very thing he most desires. This pattern will soon prove not to be unique to Saul, however, as other Martian exiles (like Smith and Johnson) repeat Saul's mistakes in their own refusal to share Mark's powers.

By dawn the arguments and ferocities still continued. Mark sat among the glaring men, rubbing his wrists, newly released from his bonds. He created a mahogany paneled conference hall and a marble table at which they all sat, ridiculously bearded, evil-smelling, sweating and greedy men, eyes bent upon their treasure.

Related Characters: Leonard Mark (speaker), Smith, Johnson, Saul Williams

Related Themes:

Page Number: 203-204

Explanation and Analysis

After five other Martian exiles discover Saul and Mark in their cave, the group argues all throughout the night about what to do with Mark. As Saul predicted, each man proves eager to keep the visitor's talents to themselves. The sleek conference hall and marble table conjured by Mark contrast with the men's disheveled, filthy appearance, which Bradbury highlights in this moment to suggest the extent to which they have been grotesquely distorted by both their isolation and immense greed. That the men fix their eyes "upon their treasure" again reflects that, in their selfishness, they fail to see Mark as a full human being. Instead, they selfishly appreciate him only for what he can do for them.

"The rest of the week I'm to be left strictly alone, do you hear?" Mark told them. A little should be better than nothing. If you don't obey, I won't perform at all." [...]

"Let me talk," said Johnson. "He's telling us what he'll do. Why don't we tell *him*! Are we bigger than him, or not? And him threatening not to perform! Well, just let me get a sliver of wood under his toenails and maybe burn his fingers a bit with a steel file, and we'll see if he performs! Why shouldn't we have performances, I want to know, every night in the week?"

Related Characters: Leonard Mark, Johnson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

To end the men's arguments, Mark rationally proposes a schedule that allots each of them an hour of his talents a week, while also providing Mark himself with some much-needed solitude. Rather than accept this reasonable offer, however, one of the men, Johnson, declares that the others simply force Mark to do whatever they want. Having only a little of Mark is not enough; he wants to wring Mark's talent dry. In their greed, the men have again dehumanized Mark, reducing him to a performer who must cater to the other men's desires. Johnson's readiness to use physical torture to get his way reflects the corrosive nature of selfishness and greed. Furthermore, Johnson's selfishness in this

moment also symbolically reflects humankind's exhaustion and destruction of natural resources. This ecological strand runs throughout Bradbury's story, as he urges readers to see how they're behaving like Saul or Smith or Johnson, intent on using every last drop of Mark's power—symbolizing the planet's resources—for their own selfish enjoyment.

> The men gazed suspiciously at each other with little bright animal eyes. What was spoken was true. They saw each other in the days to come, surprising one another, killing—until that last lucky one remained to enjoy the intellectual treasure that walked among them.

Related Characters: Leonard Mark (speaker), Smith, Johnson, Saul Williams

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

After Johnson proposes forcing Mark to do the men's bidding, Mark declares that none of the men can trust one another at all; as soon as they turn their backs, the others will strike in an effort to keep Mark's "treasure" to themselves. Greed has no only driven the men to deny Mark his humanity and commit violence against him, but it has also robbed them of their ability to trust their only companions on Mars. This is an especially ironic and tragic result given the desperate isolation and loneliness of life in quarantine. This moment instills the story with a sense of suspense and tension, soon to erupt as the men attack each other, accidentally killing Mark in the process and destroying the very thing they desired.

> It didn't work. It wasn't the same. New York was gone and nothing he could do would bring it back. He would rise every morning and walk on the dead sea looking for it, and walk forever around Mars, looking for it, and never find it. And finally lie, too tired to walk, trying to find New York in his head, but not finding it.
>
> The last thing he heard before he slept was the spade rising and falling and digging a hole into which, with a tremendous crash of metal and golden mist and odor and color and sound, New York collapsed, fell, and was buried.

Related Characters: Leonard Mark (speaker), Saul Williams

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

In the final moments of the story, following Mark's accidental death, an exhausted Saul lies on the Martian ground and realizes just how much they all have lost. As in the beginning of the tale, Saul tries to imagine New York City around him, but without Mark it is no use; any chance of seeing Earth again—of escaping the stifling Martian hell—is gone. As the men bury Mark, they also bury the hope the visitor represented for a glimpse into the world beyond the men's dismal quarantine. As he falls asleep, Saul hears the world he longs for collapsing around him, suggesting that, without hope of intellectual stimulation or connection, his life is effectively over.

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.

"THE VISITOR"

Saul Williams wakes in his tent at seven o'clock in the morning, and laments how far he is from Earth. He longs to go home, but with lungs "full of the 'blood rust'" knows this is impossible. The Martian morning is quiet and still, without any wind.

The reader's first introduction to Saul is notably accompanied by a description of his intense longing for Earth, immediately establishing the extreme isolation of his quarantine and his intense loneliness.

Saul, desperate for Earth, tries to imagine himself in New York City to no avail. He then attempts to die by mentally telling his heart to stop; this also proves futile, and he lacks "the nerve" to take more direct action such as leaping from a cliff or slitting his wrists.

Saul's attempt to imagine Earth around him foreshadows the titular visitor's telepathic abilities and will also be echoed at the end of the story following Mark's death. Bradbury's detached description of Saul's wish for death underscores the desperate, oppressive monotony of the Martian landscape and Saul's life upon it.

After a nap, Saul's mouth has filled with blood. Blood rust is an incurable, contagious disease that kills its victims slowly over the course of a year. Those suffering have been quarantined on Mars, where Saul now remains, "bleeding all the time, and lonely."

The fictional disease cruelly leeches life from its victims slowly, forcing them to grow increasingly isolated and lonely as they die. The fact that such victims have been shipped off from Earth suggests a sort of cruelty on the part of the rest of humanity, who, in an effort to save themselves, have sent these men to die utterly alone.

Saul walks towards a man lying on a filthy blanket near the ruins of an ancient city. Decrying his loneliness, Saul says he wishes the other man could talk, and asks why "intellectuals" never catch the disease nor get sent to Mars. The man tells Saul he has grown too weary to think, and recalls one day, months earlier, when they had talked about Aristotle. Saul wishes he were sicker so that he wouldn't care about being an intellectual. The man then says that, in about six months, Saul will be as sick as he is, and will care about nothing but sleep—which is "a nice thought."

Saul's wish for intellectual stimulation reflects the story's emphasis on the importance of the life of the mind. Saul wishes he wishes he could be sick enough to think of nothing but sleep, because it is torturous to be fully aware of how little he currently has to make his life worth living.

Saul walks away and looks out over the bottom of the dried-up Martian sea, where many other men lay sleeping. They are all alone, Saul observes, "each grown into himself." When Saul first arrived, the men used to gather around a fire and talk about nothing but Earth. Now, social interaction is too exhausting.

The state of the sleeping men further emphasizes the intense isolation and loneliness of life on Mars. That they are sleeping on a dead sea further symbolizes that, without human contact or intellectual stimulation, these men are effectively already dead.

Again, Saul wants to be back on Earth "so bad it hurts." He wants Earth "more than food or a woman or anything," reflecting that Earth is "a thing for the mind," whereas those other pleasures are for "the weak body."

Saul rejects fleeting bodily pleasures in favor of a deeper connection to his home, again reflecting the importance the story places on the life of the mind.

There is a flash of metal in the sky, and a rocket suddenly touches down on the dead sea bottom. Two men in protective suits lead a third onto the planet's surface, construct a tent, and then promptly re-board the rocket, leaving the third man behind.

The protective suits the men wear present an added insult to the Martian exiles, reflecting their status as mere sources of contamination to be discarded rather than actual human beings.

In his excitement, Saul ignores his exhaustion and rushes over to the new arrival. He appears surprisingly young and "fresh in spite of his illness." The young man introduces himself as Leonard Mark.

So starved is Saul for connection and stimulation that he overcomes the immense exhaustion of his illness to run towards the visitor.

Saul asks Mark about the state of New York, at which point the city itself suddenly erupts around him—neon lights, taxis, harbors, and all. Terrified and confused, Saul screams for it to stop. The city fades, and Saul is again standing on Mars across from Mark. Saul asks if Mark created the vision with his mind, which Mark confirms. Suddenly elated, Saul tells the visitor how glad he is that he's there.

This is the first introduction to Mark's power. The vibrancy of the vision of New York that surrounds Saul is overwhelming, and sharply contrasts with the desolate emptiness of the Martian landscape he has come to know so well.

At noon that day, over coffee, Mark tells Saul that he was born with his ability, which he describes as "telepathy and thought transference," or "a form of hypnotism which affects all of the sensual organs at once." Mark's mother was in the "blowup of London" in '57, and he used to travel the world with his "act." Most people thought he was faking his power, and he preferred having only a select few aware of the true extent of his abilities.

Mark's reference to a past "blowup" implies that there has been some kind of nuclear explosion—likely an atomic bomb—in the not too distant past. Nuclear fallout caused Mark's abilities, which he has been hesitant to fully share with others so far—a wise choice, given the greed his powers will soon inspire in the Martian men. This reference to a nuclear explosion also points back to the fact that the story was originally published in 1948, just three years after World War II.

Mark asks Saul what he would prefer to be doing more than anything else, and Saul responds that he'd like to be swimming in a beloved childhood creek. Almost immediately, Saul is there in his mind, diving into the water; to Mark, Saul is flailing around on the Martian sand. Upon returning from the vision, Saul tries to thank Mark by giving him his last bar of chocolate. Mark refuses, insisting he's only using his power because it makes Saul happy.

The fact that Saul immediately chooses to return to a beloved childhood memory again highlights his immense homesickness and loneliness. That Mark sees Saul simply "swimming" in the Martian desert underscores that this is all illusion. However, to Saul, the reality of the situation does not matter. What does matter is the life of the mind, and reliving this memory is satiating enough.

Saul images all the places Mark will take him and all of the philosophers he'll be able to talk to through Mark's talent. He will visit Greece and Rome and talk to men like Darwin and Nietzsche. This ability, Saul decides, is even "better than life ever was."

Saul's fascination with ancient philosophy further reflects the importance the story places on the life of the mind, as well as how starved he is for intellectual stimulation. Saul is also quick to assume Mark will do whatever he wants, already suggesting Saul's greed.

Coming down from his reverie, Saul spots other men in the distance slowly moving towards him and Mark. He tells Mark they must leave, because the other men are "insane" and will fight—even kill—to "own" Mark and his power. Mark scoffs, asserting that he is a free man and belongs to no one—including Saul. Saul realizes he hadn't considered this.

Saul's prediction that the other men's greed will drive them to murderous violence will ultimately prove correct. In this moment, though, Mark sees right through Saul's thinly veiled attempt to get Mark away from the other men—Saul really just wants to keep Mark's powers for himself.

Saul again insists Mark leave, but Mark calls him "too possessive." Growing angry, Saul feels "an ugliness" rise within himself and violently attacks Mark, knocking him unconscious. He lifts Mark in his arms and carries him away to the hills, falling once, but not stopping.

Selfishness and greed rapidly push Saul toward physical violence, even though he was friendly with Mark just moments earlier. His desperation is again evident in the fact that despite being deathly ill he finds the strength to run while carrying Mark.

Mark awakens tied up in a dark cave. He calls Saul, who is tending to a fire, a fool and mocks his greed. Saul snaps at Mark to shut up. Mark then conjures hell around them, complete with pits of brimstone and walls of flame, before laughing and deeming himself "the intellectual bride of a man insane with loneliness."

Already the foolishness of Saul's actions is becoming clear: he can physically attack Mark, but he cannot force Mark to use his powers. Mark's comment in this scene further reflects the incredible sense of isolation men like Saul feels.

Saul tells Mark he'll free him if he promises not to run away, but Mark again insists that he is not anyone's property. He admonishes Saul, saying he had been more than happy to conjure "these little hypnotic favors," and could have kept all of the men happy if only Saul had been willing to share.

That Mark had been perfectly willing to share his talents with Saul—and all the exiled men—make his eventual death all the more tragic and ironic. Saul's greed and selfishness will prove to be all of their undoing.

Saul cries that he is sorry, but that the other men would never have agreed to that. Mark accuses Saul of being no different from the others, before saying that he heard a noise at the entrance to the cave.

Though Saul professes to be sorry, he has yet to fully accept the extent of his own selfishness. Given the story's allegorical connotations for humankind's destruction and depletion of natural resources, this moment also points to humanity's denial of environmental destruction at large.

Saul goes to investigate the noise; finding nothing, he returns to a now-empty cave. He shouts frantically for Mark but receives no answer. However, he notices a large boulder near the cave's wall, and approaches it with a knife. Before he can plunge it into the stone, the boulder disappears; in its place stands Mark. Saul looks crazed, and grips Mark by the throat. In Mark's gaze, however, Saul recognizes that if he kills the visitor, he also kills any hope of escaping his Martian existence. Just as Saul releases Mark, five men appear at the entrance to the cave. Mark laughs and invites them inside.

Saul's selfishness and greed have again driven him to violence—this time, even to murder. His actions, Mark points out, are at this point entirely irrational: if he kills Mark, he will destroy the very thing he desires. Of course, this is exactly what will come to pass by the end of the story.

The men argue ferociously until dawn. Mark has conjured a conference hall and marble table, around which the men sit. They are filthy and greedy-eyed, intent on possessing "their treasure."

The men see Mark not as a human being, but as a "treasure" they can use toward their own ends, again reflecting the corrosive nature of greed.

In an effort to settle things, Mark suggests creating appointments so that each man gets equal time with him every week. Saul, however, will be on probation for his past behavior; Saul apologizes, insisting he didn't realize what he was doing.

Mark's proposal is entirely rational and fair, and, for a moment, presents the men with the opportunity to overcome their greed by sharing his abilities.

Mark offers up a schedule, which includes time to himself as well. The other men seem to nod in agreement as he doles out appointment times. Mark insists that this should be "better than nothing."

The fact that Mark includes time for himself is an effort to remind the men that he is not simply their plaything, but an autonomous human being.

One of the men, Johnson, proposes that they instead force Mark to perform, and torture him if he refuses. They are five against one, Johnson insists, and as such should be the ones telling Mark what to do.

Johnson's greed pushes him to reject Mark's reasonable offer and instead resort to cruel violence to get what he wants.

Mark urges the others not to listen to Johnson, calling the man crazy and asserting that as soon as the others let their guards down, Johnson will kill them. In fact, Mark continues, none of the men can trust each other; they will all attempt murder in the name of keeping Mark for themselves.

Not only has their selfishness and greed propelled the men towards violence, but it has also resulted in their inability to trust each other at all—ironically robbing them of the human connection they deeply crave.


The men look at each other with suspicion and understand that Mark is correct. Saul, meanwhile, begins to understand the gravity of his mistake, realizing that they "were *all* wrong," and "worse than lost."

Saul finally comes to accept his error, but at this point it is too late; selfishness and greed have led the men too far astray to easily return to where they started from.

After a tense silence, Mark speaks up again, saying that one of the men has a **gun**, and the others must find it before it's too late. At this, the others jump up and wildly try to search each other. Johnson pulls the gun out of his jacket and shoots another man, Smith, in the chest. Smith falls to the ground, dead, yet Johnson continues shooting.

The gun in the story symbolizes the corrosive nature of selfishness and greed, which inevitably (and irreversibly) leads to man's downfall. Johnson has grown irrationally murderous, creating violent chaos where there could have been joyous calm had only the men been willing to share.

Mark screams for the men to stop and begins conjuring New York City around them. The men grow confused in the midst of the blossoming city, yet Johnson keeps firing his **gun**. Saul rushes to tackle Johnson to the ground and wrench away the gun, which goes off a final time. The men stop fighting as a "terrible silence" ensues.

Saul attempts to right his wrongs by stopping Johnson, but his greed—again symbolized by the gun—has grown too powerfully destructive.

New York begins to collapse, buildings crumpling in on themselves with hisses and sighs. Mark stands in the middle of it all, a red hole in his chest. He collapses. The men stand blinking in horror.

In the tussle, either Johnson or Saul have accidentally shot and killed the very person they were fighting over. Who pulled the trigger is ultimately inconsequential; all of their selfishness is to blame.

The cave grows cold. Realizing he still has the **gun** in his hand, Saul throws it as far as he can without watching where it lands. He calls out Mark's name and grabs his limp hand, but the body is still. "We've killed him," Saul says, before instructing the others to bury him. He wants nothing more to do with any of them.

Saul attempts to distance himself from his actions by throwing the gun, but it is too late. Reading the story as an allegory for humankind's depletion of natural resources, this can be understood as reflecting that some damage cannot be undone.

Saul lies on the ground, too weak to move, and hears someone digging in the background. He wants to sleep, and to dream of New York. Saul wonders how Mark brought them the visions and tries his hardest to imagine the city around him. It is no use; the city is gone forever, Saul understands. He will spend the rest of his days searching for it but never finding it, not even in his dreams. Before he falls asleep, Saul hears the spade digging a hole in the earth, "into which, with a tremendous crash […] New York collapsed, fell, and was buried." He cries himself to sleep.

As in the beginning of the story, Saul tries to imagine himself back on Earth to no avail. He finally understands that, in his greed, he has lost any hope of being freed from his Martian hell until he, like all the others, dies. The possibility of escape—even just mentally—is buried with Mark. That Saul ends the story by sleeping suggests that, without the chance for connection or mental stimulation, his life is effectively already over.

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