



**Sample Pages from
Master of Puppets**

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MASTER OF PUPPETS

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT BY
Jeffrey Harr



Master of Puppets

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Cast of Characters

2W+1M

MRS. SLATTIMORE: High school guidance counselor

JOANIE: High school senior

CHUCK: High school senior

A version of *Master of Puppets* also appears in *Stereotype High* by Jeffrey Harr.

Lights up on a desk with a nameplate that reads Mrs. Slattimore, Guidance Counselor, behind which sits MRS. SLATTIMORE, upright, her hands folded in front of her. Two chairs sit opposite her on the other side of the desk. JOANIE and CHUCK walk in, holding hands. Both look apprehensive, like they're in trouble.

JOANIE: Um... Mrs. Slattimore?

MRS. S: Hey, you two. C'mon in and have a seat.

They walk over and sit down.

MRS. S: Now, my guess is that the two of you are wondering why I called you out of English, right?

JOANIE: Well, yes, actually.

MRS. S: As seniors, you're probably totally wiggin', thinking that I'm going to tell you that your transcripts are screwed up and you can't graduate, or something like that. Am I right?

JOANIE: *(laughs uncomfortably)* Something like that, I guess.

MRS. S: *(puts her hand on JOANIE's, making JOANIE even more uncomfortable)* Let me guess. You've already been accepted to a really nice school. Someplace like, oh, I don't know, Cornell, or Barnard, or something like that.

JOANIE: Um... Wittenberg... actually.

MRS. S: Oh! Well, good for you, Joanie. Aren't we just the little rocket scientist of the class. And, now, what about you Chuck? Where will you be off to once this little shindig is over?

CHUCK: Uh... shindig?

MRS. S: High school, Chuck. Once high school's over. Are you going to college?

CHUCK: Oh. Uh... Kent State. I got a scholarship to play baseball.

MRS. S: Well, now isn't that impressive. Good for you, Chuck. You just go right ahead and take every cent they'll give you. And don't you dare let anyone tell you that you're wasting your time at Kent State. It's just as good as Wittenberg. *(makes crazy eyes at JOANIE as if to indicate that she's lying to CHUCK)* Besides, honey, who wants to hang out with all those snobby rich-kid mama's boys over at Wittenberg, anyway, right? *(kids are horribly confused as she keeps going without waiting for a response)* Okay, then. The point.

We, the guidance counselors of Ambrose High, have decided to help our senior couples by allowing them to voluntarily participate in a session we like to call, “Let’s Communicate: The Power of Talk.”

JOANIE: The power of talk?

MRS. S: Yup. Do you like the title? Came up with it myself.

JOANIE: Yeah, sure, it’s great. But, Mrs. Slattimore, I don’t think we need any help. Chuck and I, well, you know, we’re really happy, and we get along just fine. Right, Chuck?

CHUCK: (*with a blank expression he wears through much of the play*)
Uh... yeah.

JOANIE: See? So, thanks, but—

MRS. S: Let’s face it, Joanie. In just a few short months, you two’ll be out there on your own and we’ll never get a chance to share with you the infinite wisdom of our age and experience. Besides—and I hope I’m not getting too personal, here—but you’ve been dating long enough to have at least been thinking about engaging in behaviors that require a credit card and a password to see on the Internet. (*grasps their hands*) Am I right? So, I think it’s—

JOANIE: (*horribly distressed*) Mrs. Slattimore, I am extremely uncomfortable talking about this.

MRS. S: I know, I know, sweetie. It’s not easy for me, either, truth be told. I really hate to pry into the personal lives of our students, but believe me, if you don’t learn to communicate, to talk things out when there’s trouble, you’ll never last. Joanie, you’ll end up over at Wittenberg, forced to date future economists with big black glasses and bow ties while Chuckie hardball over here’s swingin’ for the fences with some girl he met at a frat party the night before the big game. Now, does that sound like how you envisioned your future? Huh? Either of you?

CHUCK: Uh... en... visioned?

MRS. S: Are you sure you’ve both been accepted to college? ‘Cause this playing dumb thing’s gettin’ kinda scary from my side of the desk. Know whatta’ mean?

JOANIE: Look. I don’t want to be rude, but we don’t need couples therapy, or whatever this is. (*to CHUCK*) Right, Chuck?

MRS. S: This is exactly what I’m talking about, Joanie. You’re not communicating, you’re telling.

JOANIE: No, I'm not. I asked Chuck if we need to be here. To which—
(to CHUCK, with an angry expression) he hasn't responded, yet.

MRS. S: That's exactly my point, Joanie. Look at him. He's afraid to answer you. For all we know, he wants to stay, but he doesn't feel as though he can say so.

JOANIE: That's ridiculous. (to CHUCK, forcefully) Isn't it, Chuck?

CHUCK: (obviously confused) Uh... it is?

MRS. S: (to CHUCK) No, no, no, Chuck. Do you think that you and Joanie communicate well? Does she hear you when you speak?

CHUCK: Uh... yeah, her hearing's pretty good.

JOANIE rolls her eyes and folds her arms.

MRS. S: (giggles) That's a good one, Chuck. But that's not what we're talking about. Let's try this another way. Who calls the shots in the relationship?

CHUCK: Uh... the shots?

MRS. S: You know. Who makes the decisions? Where you go out, what you do, you know, as a couple?

JOANIE: Are you suggesting that I boss him around? Is that what this is about?

MRS. S: (very pleased) Fantastic, Joanie! Thank you. Now we're getting somewhere. Chuck, does Joanie boss you around?

JOANIE: That is NOT what I said! (to CHUCK) Don't you dare answer that.

MRS. S: Yes, Chuck. You *should* answer that. So, Chuck? What's it gonna be? In this hand— (puts out her left hand) we have communication: the path to truth, acceptance, and light. In this hand— (puts out her right hand) we have repression: the path to lies, silence, and darkness. You don't want darkness, do you, Chuck?

CHUCK: Uh... no?

JOANIE glares at him.

MRS. S: Okay! Fantastic. See, Joanie? Chuck wants some light. Light is good, right Chuck?

CHUCK: Uh... yes?

MRS. S: That's right. It is. Okay, here we go. Now, based on what we've discussed, I think I can help. I've seen this sort of thing before.

You guys are going to college, right? So big words shouldn't be a problem. Can either of you spell "emasculate?"

JOANIE: He is NOT emasculated! This is ridiculous!

MRS. S: And yet, Chuck hasn't answered the question, has he? Gee, I wonder why. (to CHUCK) Chuck, are you afraid to tell me whether or not Joanie bosses you around?

JOANIE: He is not afraid to tell you anything. (to CHUCK) Are you, Chuck?

CHUCK: Uh... no.

JOANIE: See, Mrs. Slattimore—he's his own man. Now, we're missing some very important notes on *Macbeth* right now, so we really should be getting back. (gets up, to CHUCK) C'mon, Chuck. We're going back to class.

MRS. S: (to CHUCK) Are you going to let her talk to you like that, Chuck? Tell you what to do? You've already got a mom, right?

CHUCK: Uh... what?

MRS. S: A mom, Chuck. You've got one already, and Joanie's not it. Does she ever act like it?

JOANIE folds her arms in disgust and looks at CHUCK like he's dead meat if he answers.

CHUCK: Well... uh... I guess... ya know... sometimes.

JOANIE: (angry) I am SO out of here.

JOANIE stands.

MRS. S: Oh, well that would be fine, Joanie. Chuck and I can have some time, then, to analyze this a bit... without you interfering. Actually, I'm sure Chuck would be more comfortable without you here. You know, so he can be completely, irrevocably honest.

JOANIE: (disgusted, grunts) Absolutely not. Fine. I'm staying.

JOANIE sits.

JOANIE: (to CHUCK) So, honey, sweetie, darling, why don't you tell Mrs. Slattimore all about how I have basically taken your manhood, so we can go back to English sometime this century.

CHUCK: Uh... you want me to?

JOANIE: Oh, sure, *baby*. Go right ahead. I swear I won't hold it against you later. Like, tonight, for example, at the party.

MRS. S: Ooh. Wow. That was harsh. (*to CHUCK*) See how much progress we're making? It's only been a few minutes, and you're getting a nice preview of married life with Joanie, Chuck. Can you say, "henpecked"?

CHUCK: Uh... what?

MRS. S: Go ahead, Chuck. Just say it: I'm afraid to be honest, because my girlfriend will cut me off.

CHUCK: Uh... cut... me off?

MRS. S: You know, Chuck. Withhold the goods? Make you sleep on the couch? Ix-nay on the boo-tay? Make you take a cold shower?

JOANIE: (*to CHUCK, but talking to MRS. S.*) He knows what you're talking about. It's not like he's stupid. Right, Chuck? You're not stupid, are you? Like, some big, stupid jock?

CHUCK: Uh... no. I'm not.

JOANIE: (*ignores his answer*) See, Mrs. Slattimore? So, then, just to clarify, he knows what you mean, he knows what *I* mean, and he hasn't yet said that I boss him around. Which means, then, that it's quite possible that I don't boss him around at all. Wouldn't you agree, Mrs. Slattimore?

MRS. S: Well, I suppose you're right, Joanie. Although, it's quite possible that Chuck's holding back, which, again, is why you need to be here. Kinda like how you're holding back about Chuck's lack of brainpower.

JOANIE: I'm not holding back. Believe me, if I thought he was an idiot, I'd just say it.

CHUCK: Uh... you think... I'm an idiot?

JOANIE: (*pats his knee*) No, sweetheart. You're not an idiot. You're... um... a bit... intellectually challenged.

MRS. S: See what I mean, Joanie? C'mon, now. Let's be honest with each other. It can't be easy having to explain every little metaphor, every ironic turn of phrase, every extraliterary locution. Am I right? I mean, sure, he's cute. And probably a great athlete but, seriously, can he really understand the pressures of

having to make the sort of sacrifices necessary to get the kind of grades you need to get into Wittenberg? (to CHUCK) Can you, Chuck?

CHUCK: Uh... what?

JOANIE starts smiling for the first time but, after looking at CHUCK, stops.

JOANIE: Let's not go there, Mrs. Slattimore. Chuck's a good boyfriend... even if he's not...

CHUCK: (*suddenly interested*) Uh... not what?

MRS. S: That's it. That's it. Honesty. Truth. Open communication.

JOANIE: (*suddenly uncomfortable*) Well, you know, Chuck. C'mon. We both know you struggle to stay eligible. (to MRS. S) I help him with a lot of his homework so he can play baseball.

CHUCK: Uh... but you said you like to help.

JOANIE: Well, Chuck, I do. But ninth-grade math isn't as much fun the second time around, ya know?

CHUCK: (*with a look that shows he's starting to catch on*) Uh... are you saying I'm stupid?

JOANIE: (*chuckles*) Stupid? No, Chuck. You're not stupid. Let's just say that your brain is merely a little less... full... than most people.

CHUCK: (*thinking that one through*) Uh... okay... good... 'cause that'd be pretty uncool.

JOANIE: Wow, Chuck. Uncool. A polysyllabic word. I'm impressed.

CHUCK: (*mocks her*) Uh... wow, Chuck... a polyp-symsonic word. I'm impressed.

JOANIE: You can't even repeat it.

CHUCK: Uh... whatever, babe.

JOANIE: Did you just call me *babe*? What do you think I am, some bimbo who just walked in off the street? Let me tell you something, *Chuck*—

MRS. S: Okay, okay, kids. Now, I'm totally loving the open dialogue and, believe me, we are getting dangerously close to a breakthrough, but things are getting a little personal, so I think we need to find a safer way to express ourselves so we don't hurt one another.

Opening the lines of communication should be like crafting a quilt wherein all the different colors complement one another, not clash with one another.

Both kids look confused.

MRS. S: Oh, my. See what I just did there? Now, neither of you knows what I'm talking about. (*puts her hand on CHUCK's*) Make you feel any better, Chuck? Okay, then, here's what we're gonna do.

MRS. S. reaches into the bottom drawer of her desk and pulls out two puppets, a boy and a girl—preferably the sort with arms, one of which is attached to a rod for more options for the puppeteer.

CHUCK: Uh... those are puppets.

MRS. S: Good, Chuck. Well done. You're right. These are puppets.

JOANIE: What is this, kindergarten?

MRS. S: No, Joanie. Although someone's attitude is a bit juvenilish, huh? No, sweetie. This is psychology. You see, when one assumes a *persona*— (*to CHUCK*) that's another personality, kind of like pretending to be someone else, dear— (*to both again*) one feels more free to be honest. And, when it's the persona, *the puppet*, saying things that need to be said, well, it's just not as hurtful, because it's not your girlfriend or boyfriend saying it, it's the puppet. (*smiles, huge*) See? It gives you the freedom to be honest and straightforward without the stigma of having to say it yourself.

Awkward pause.

JOANIE: That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. There's no way I'm doing that.

MRS. S: Oh, my dear, Joanie. Look. I'll show you. It's remarkably freeing. (*picks up the female puppet and moves it to reflect her words, donning an entirely different voice*) Mrs. Slattimore spent almost a hundred thousand dollars going to school for six years to get a degree in psychology. And then, when she decided to get a job in a school, working with teens, her parents told her she was nuts. They said she was wasting all the money they spent on her outrageously expensive and useless education. (*gets a bit emotional*) But, you know, since Daddy's a raging alcoholic and Mommy's emotional distances could freeze hell, Mrs. Slattimore sorta takes their words with a grain of salt, right? Let's face it—she certainly didn't go into the field of psychology because her family's screwed up

six ways to Sunday. Nah. That can't be it. Right, Mom? Right, Dad?

MRS. S's puppet puts its hand to its head, breaks down a bit but recovers. The kids are stunned.

MRS. S: (*puts down the puppet, in her own voice, again, perky*) Whew! See what I mean? It's like a truth serum. Boy, that puppet's got some issues, huh? Because if it were *me* with those issues—wink, wink, nod, nod—I'd probably need some sort of profession help, ya know? So, whaddya say? Ready to give it a shot?

JOANIE: (*grabs the female puppet, holds it up, in her own voice*) Sure, Mrs. Slattimore. (*moves the puppet to reflect her words*) You're nuts.

MRS. S: That's the spirit, Joanie. But not to me, sweetheart. To Chuck. And remember, the whole idea is to use the puppet to help you find your voice, so try another voice. Let go. Chuck? (*grabs the male puppet and hands it to CHUCK*)

CHUCK takes the puppet but can't seem to figure out how to operate it.

MRS. S: (*helps him*) Like this, dear. (*once he's ready*) Okay, now. Move your chairs out a bit. Give yourselves some space.

The kids move their chairs away from the desk a bit and face out toward the audience as MRS. S. moves out from behind her desk, sitting on top.

MRS. S: Chuck, why don't you begin?

CHUCK: Uh... what am I supposed to... do, again?

MRS. S: I believe you were right on the cusp of explaining to Joanie how controlling she is, and how much you hate it.

CHUCK: Uh... right. I guess I... ya know... hate it.

MRS. S: Not you, Chuck. The puppet. Be the puppet, Chuck. Be the puppet.

JOANIE: (*disgusted*) This is so ridiculous.

MRS. S: See, Chuck. Controlling. All the time. How can you stand it?

CHUCK takes a few seconds to gather himself, holds the puppet up, thinks hard, like he's about to have a breakthrough.

MRS. S: That's it, Chuck. Don't be afraid.

CHUCK: (*moves the puppet's mouth and dons a ridiculous voice*) Uh... uh... Chuck doesn't like how you tell him what to do all the time.

MRS. S: Very good, Chuck. Progress. Isn't it fantastic? Okay, now, Joanie. A response?

JOANIE: (*without the puppet, still looking like she can't believe she's doing this, to MRS. S.*) I don't tell him what to do all the time.

CHUCK: (*still using the puppet and voice*) Uh... yeah, you do.

JOANIE: (*to CHUCK*) Shut up. I do not.

MRS. S. clears her throat in JOANIE's direction and uses her hand to imitate the action of the puppet.

JOANIE: (*exasperated*) Oh, for the love of God. Fine! (*holds up the puppet but uses her normal voice*) I do not tell you what to do all the time.

MRS. S: (*clears her throat, again, in JOANIE's direction, uses a strange voice*) Let... the puppet... talk.

JOANIE: Ahhhh! Fine! (*holds up the puppet, uses a ridiculous voice*) If Joanie *did* tell you what to do all the time, it would be because you were a total meathead.

MRS. S. baby-claps in excitement. During following exchanges between the kids, MRS. S. reacts to each comment as if she's watching a play.

CHUCK: (*as puppet, getting verbally smoother, now, without the uhs*) That was harsh.

JOANIE: (*as puppet*) No, not really. Harsh would be to say that Joanie's cat has a better chance of passing algebra. Of course, Fluffy wouldn't have to take it three times, but whatever.

CHUCK: (*as puppet*) Joanie's cat couldn't take algebra three times, 'cause she'd never let it out of her house, where she wouldn't be able to tell it what to do all the time. What would she do without something to boss around? Oh, that's right. She's got *him*.

CHUCK's puppet points at CHUCK.

JOANIE: (*as puppet*) If Joanie didn't boss him around, how would he know to breathe? To eat? TO DO ANYTHING!

MRS. S. reaches behind her into one of her desk drawers and pulls out a previously popped bag of popcorn. She starts munching as she watches.

CHUCK: *(as puppet)* Chuck doesn't need to know, because every second of every day, his GIRLFRIEND is right there to make sure he's doing it! AND, if he does it WRONG, she's there to tell him he's DOING it wrong! And, HE'S getting pretty SICK and TIRED of it!

JOANIE: *(as puppet)* Well, maybe SHE'S pretty SICK and TIRED of bearing the risk of catching STUPID from her BOYFRIEND!

CHUCK: *(as puppet)* Well, maybe HE'S tired of his GIRLFRIEND being such a—

JOANIE: *(as puppet, cuts CHUCK off, moves close enough to him to get her puppet in his face)* Don't... you... DARE.

CHUCK: *(as puppet)* Ya know? Maybe Chuck needs... *(puppet hangs its head slightly)* some time to... be alone.

JOANIE: *(as puppet, makes puppet look taken aback)* What... what are you trying to say?

CHUCK: *(as puppet, its head still hung)* I dunno... it's just that... well... if Joanie doesn't love Chuck anymore... well... maybe Chuck needs to be alone for awhile.

MRS. S., shocked by this turn of events, tears up, pulls a tissue out of the tissue box on her desk and starts wiping her eyes.

JOANIE: *(as puppet, moves toward CHUCK)* Are you... *(puppet turns its back suddenly, torn apart)* are you saying that Chuck wants to... break up? Is that what we're hearing?

CHUCK: *(as puppet, moves puppet to JOANIE's puppet, puts his puppet's hand to her puppet's face)* Chuck's sorry. But he thinks it's for the best. For... all of us.

JOANIE: *(as puppet, makes puppet nod in reluctant agreement, obviously hurt)* Okay. Okay, then. But Joanie's not letting you break up with her. No way, son. SHE'S breaking up with YOU.

CHUCK: *(as puppet, puppet looks at CHUCK and the two of them nod at one another)* Chuck's cool with that.

JOANIE: *(as puppet)* FINE. Joanie is SO outta here! *(stops, looks at the puppet as if to say, What in the hell am I doing talking through a puppet?, then, in her own voice)* I AM SO OUTTA HERE!

JOANIE walks to MRS. S. and hands her the puppet.

JOANIE: (*starts to cry*) This was one of the stupidest things I have ever done in my entire life.

JOANIE starts to leave.

CHUCK: (*as puppet, notices how upset JOANIE is*) Joanie! Wait. Maybe... Chuck's been a little... uh... hasty. That's a word, right?

JOANIE: (*stops, turns back to him*) Yeah. That's a word, ya big lug.

CHUCK: (*as puppet*) Um... now that we've had a second to think about this... is there any chance you might... um... change your mind? Ya know... if Chuck... tries to be a little... smarter?

JOANIE: (*melts, walks back*) You don't have to be any smarter, Chuck.

MRS. S. holds out the puppet to JOANIE and clears her throat. JOANIE smiles and takes the puppet.

JOANIE: (*as puppet*) But Joanie can work on not being so... bossy.

CHUCK: (*as puppet*) Chuck would really like that.

JOANIE: (*as puppet, puts her puppet up close to CHUCK's puppet*) Would Chuck like a kiss to seal the deal?

CHUCK: (*as puppet, makes the puppet nod*) Chuck likee. Chuck likee very, very much.

Their puppets move in close and begin to kiss, slow at first, then more and more passionately. MRS. S.'s expression goes from one of finding this scene sweet to finding it unsettling.

Suddenly, CHUCK and JOANIE realize the absurdity of the moment, stop, and start looking at one another like they're about to start making out.

MRS. S: (*leaps off her desk, gets between the two*) Okay. That's enough, you two. Whew! (*fans herself*) Somebody's puppets need to get a room, know what I mean? Geez. You better hand them over before one of them does something it'll regret in the morning.

JOANIE hands hers over. CHUCK hangs onto his.

CHUCK: (*as himself, takes his hand out of the puppet*) I'm gonna miss this guy, Mrs. Slattimore. I don't think I could have been so honest without him.

MRS. S: I understand, Chuck. I get that a lot. Now, hand over the puppet.



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