

Eugène Ionesco

The Chairs

Summary

An Old Man and an Old Woman in their 90s, hereafter referred to as "man" and "woman," are on a semicircular stage in dim light. The man looks out the window, up on a stool. The woman tells him to close the window. She says she gets dizzy from being on their island house. She drags him over to the chairs and he sits down on her lap. She praises his intellect, and said he could have had a powerful occupation, if he had any ambition. He scoffs at this and complains of boredom.

The woman asks the man to tell the story that begins "Then at last we arrived," but he has told it to her and performed imitations every night of the seventy- five years they have been married. She says she takes a dose of salt each night to erase her memory of the story. He tells the story and they repeat phrases from the story until their laughter dies down.

The man cannot recall what came after Paris. Though he admits he has difficulty expressing himself, he feels he must "tell it all." He says he has hired a professional Orator who will speak in his name. Hidden from view, they introduce themselves to the guest and help her put away her coat, then re-enter, leaving space for an invisible Lady. They carry on a casual conversation with her and the woman tells the Lady to sit on one of the chairs present, and she sits at the other one.

The doorbell rings. The man tells the woman to get another chair, and he opens one door while she hobbles toward a concealed door. He formally and nervously greets an invisible Colonel. The doorbell rings and the man goes to answer it. The woman leaves to find a chair while the man greets Belle, an elderly friend of his who was once beautiful, and her husband, a Photo-engraver. The woman gets another chair. He introduces the new guests to the others. The light brightens, and it continues to do so as more guests arrive. The woman flirts and makes sexual gestures to the photo-engraver. The man reminisces with Belle about their romantic youth, and how they could have been happy together.

The man and woman sit on opposite ends of the chairs and listen to the conversations. The woman discusses their one son who left them when he was seven. The man says they never had a child. The doorbell rings and the man lets in a handful of newspapermen while his wife gets more chairs. He introduces the other guests to the newspapermen, there to hear the Orator. He says the Orator will soon speak on his behalf about a system he's perfected.

There's a loud noise and the main door opens. A powerful light floods in, and the invisible Emperor stands there. The man and woman show their respects, introduce the Emperor to the crowd, and stand up on the stools to get a better look at him. The Orator, a real person, enters through the main door. He glides along the wall to the center door, bows to the Emperor, and mounts the dais. He signs invisible autographs.

The man introduces himself and thanks the crowd for coming, and thanks the Orator and everyone else involved with the evening. He says he and his wife can die happily now that his message will be communicated and he can make his philosophy known to the universe. He says he and his wife must die after years of aiding humanity. The man and woman throw themselves out the window. The Orator addresses the crowd, and makes it clear that he is deaf and dumb. He mumbles some unintelligible sounds, then gives up and writes several nonsense words on the blackboard. When he does not get the reaction he was hoping for, he leaves through the main door.¹

¹ "The Chairs, Eugène Ionesco", **Sparknotes**, www.sparknotes.com/drama/chairs/summary/