

A CULTURAL STUDY OF THE CHAIR

A Thesis by

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I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

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ABSTRACT

This research traces the cultural significance of chairs. It examines the ways in which chairs are used to create and reinforce boundaries between individuals and/or groups of people within various social contexts. Gender, racial, and socio-economic factors were among the major chair-related divisions explored. Building from the cultural interpretation of chairs, the thesis moves towards a close reading of the chairs that are located in several literary texts, including *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Invisible Man*, and “*The Human Chair*,” a short story by Japanese writer Edogawa Rampo.

Chair (char), *n.* **1.** a seat, esp. for one person, usually having four legs for support and a rest for the back and often having rests for the arms. **2.** something that serves as a chair or supports like a chair: *The two men clasped hands to make a chair for their lame companion.* **3.** a seat of office or authority. **4.** a position of authority, as of a judge, professor, etc. **5.** the person occupying a seat of office, esp. the chairman of a meeting: *The speaker addressed the chair.* **6.** See **electric chair**. **7.** See **sedan chair**.

8. *Railroads Brit.* A metal block for supporting a rail and securing it to a crosstie or the like. **9.** (in reinforced-concrete construction) a device for maintaining the position of reinforcing rods or strands during the pouring operation. **10.** a glassmaker's bench having extended arms on which a blowpipe is rolled in shaping glass. **11. take the chair, a.** to begin or open a meeting. **b.** to preside at a meeting; act as chairman. – *v.t.*

12. to place or seat in a chair. **13.** to install in office or authority. **14.** to preside over; act as chairman of: *to chair a committee.* **15.** *Brit.* Traditionally, to place (a hero or victor) in a chair and carry aloft in triumph; carry on the shoulders of several members of a triumphant team or crowd. [ME *chaiere* < OF < L *cathedr* (*a*); see CATHEDRA] –**chair less, adj.**

Webster, 244

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. Walt Whitman's "The Sleepers"	2
2. The Cultural Relevance of Chairs	7
3. "The Three Bears"	14
4. <i>Lady Audley's Secret</i>	17
5. <i>Invisible Man</i>	25
6. "The Human Chair"	37
BIBLIOGRAPHY	47

1.

Walt Whitman's "The Sleepers"

One sits in a comfortable chair . . .and one feels comfortable. What could
be simpler?

Witold Rybczynski, *Home*

Some of the most beautiful chairs in all of literature stand in section six of Walt
Whitman's poem "The Sleepers." There are three of them: the dinner chairs in which the
speaker and his mother sit while she recalls the story of the red squaw, the chairs that the
red squaw has come to repair with her bundle of rushes, and the bench by the fireplace
upon which the mother insists that the red squaw sit.

Now what my mother told me one day as we sat at dinner
together,
Of when she was a nearly grown girl living home with her
parents on the old homestead.

A red squaw came one breakfast-time to the old homestead,
On her back she carried a bundle of rushes for rush-
bottoming chairs,
Her hair, straight, shiny, coarse, black, profuse,
half-envelop'd her face,
Her step was free and elastic, and her voice sounded
exquisitely as she spoke.

My mother look'd in delight and amazement at the stranger,
She look'd at the freshness of her tall-borne face and full
and pliant limbs,
The more she look'd upon her she loved her,
Never before had she seen such wonderful beauty and
purity,
She made her sit on a bench by the jamb of the fireplace,
she cook'd food for her,
She had no work to give her, but she gave her remembrance
and fondness.

The red squaw staid all the forenoon, and toward the middle
of the afternoon she went away,
O my mother was loth to have her go away,
All the week she thought of her, she watch'd for her many
a month,
She remember'd her many a winter and many a summer,
But the red squaw never came nor was heard of there again.

These chairs in Whitman's poem help to tell the story of the speaker's mother's life that has become his own. There is a continuity to her story that is rooted in chairs, that is rooted in memory. First we see the mother sitting with her son at dinner. Although the chairs here are not explicitly mentioned, their presence is intrinsic to the memory. The dinner table is the material center of this memory. His mother sits and he sits, and their chairs provide a place for them to exist together-- to partake of food to fuel the body and partake of history to fuel identity. The table and chairs are as much a part of the speaker's memory as the story his mother tells. The chairs provide a place where action stops, where rest is dictated, where memories may be, as we see, relived, recounted, and remade. The mother's memory becomes a part of the son's memory. The mother uses this chair time to pass on her memory from long ago, the son uses this chair time to create a memory.

In this instance the memories are of fondnesses. They are gentle and they tell of the beauty of generations and of human(e) contact. The mother gives this memory to the son, the son gives to his mother the closest thing to immortality that she can have-- remembrance. The chairs are places where this begins. In the mother's memory, too, chairs exist as the impetus for human communion.

So we pass from the memory of the son as a child, the memory of dinnertime bonding, and we move to the memory of the mother as a young woman, before her son

even existed. The memory is of a red squaw, a presumably young woman since she possessed a “freshness of . . . face.” The son’s mother is enamored of the woman. “The more she look’d upon her she loved her,” and the feeling seems to have been reciprocated. Despite the fact that the mother had no work for her, she stayed for the morning and well into the afternoon. These two women who are so fundamentally different bond over their common currency-- their chairs.

The memory is introduced as having happened on the “old homestead” of her parents. “Old homestead” is repeated again in the next line so that we are made to take note of the primitive roughness and new permanence of their situation. This repetition drives home the quality of homestead life that we remember from our high school textbooks. The homestead is dangerous, isolated, rough, but it is to become their home. That the homestead is old serves to root it to the earth. The homestead is rooted in memory, in hers, in her son’s, and even in the cultural memory of the reader. Contrast the implications of “homestead” to what is apparent of the “red squaw.” She simply appears one morning, stays for several hours, and leaves in the afternoon. She is never seen nor heard from again. Her life is also rooted to the earth, but is transient. She is not bound to a specific plot or a specific hearth.

For the Indian woman the chair provides a purpose for movement-- her reason to travel among the homesteaders. She has adapted her craft of weaving to create for herself a place among the new homesteaders. Most certainly she has always been a weaver-- the rush has most certainly been her medium, but the chair is something new. It is not a fixture among the Native American tribes, but a fixture of these new people who have come and set up permanent lives among them. The “red squaw” weaves chair bottoms as

a means to create her place among these new homesteaders. For the speaker's mother, the pioneers, the chairs are a symbol of domesticity. They are a luxury that implies leisure, comfort, staying put. For the "squaw," the bundle of rush on her back-- the makings of the chairs, establish a different kind of place, but a place just the same, and one not bound to four walls or a specific acreage.

The young homesteader girl reads in the visage of the "squaw" an inherent purity and freedom that is missing from the homesteader life. The same thing that liberates the "squaw" binds the son's mother. So while the young homesteader can offer the Indian girl no work, she offers her the only thing she can-- a taste of the homestead, a bench by the hearth-- another chair, if you will. This hearthside seat is a permanent fixture. It offers a sense of having come home, and this is the object of the pioneer woman's labor. To create this illusion of stability and permanence in the middle of the empty frontier is to say that one belongs here, that it is one's place. The son's mother cooked for the Indian girl and gave her a place to rest. More importantly, however, "she gave her remembrance and fondness," so that even now, a generation later, the memory of the "red squaw" survives to be passed on in a new seating arrangement. In this section of the poem, the chair is the medium of remembrance. The bundle of dried rush on the squaw's back, the bench by the hearth, the chairs at the dinner table-- memory would die without these chairs. The times of sitting and stillness and listening and talking all rest on the chairs.

It is the chair that is the currency between these two women. They exchange their chairs in different ways. The "red squaw" is from a traditionally chair-less culture that eschews the bulky furniture in favor of more portable things to rest on: furs or woven

mats or simply the earth itself. Her skill with weaving, adapted to complement the pioneers' affinity for furniture, affords her a purpose to roam. This freedom is a trait much admired by the young pioneer woman, probably because she finds it so wanting in her own life. In return for this breath of freedom, the young homesteader plies her own craft. She cooks; she offers respite from labor. She draws her Indian counterpart close to the hearth and to her heart. She sits her in a chair.

These chairs in Whitman's poem are beautiful ideas. They bring to mind the chairs of our own childhoods, the chairs of the childhoods of our mothers and of their mothers. Stories have been told and read and created from these chairs. Histories have been recounted and recreated from them.

I remember sitting on a vinyl upholstered aluminum framed chair, the kind with the boomerang pattern that matched the Formica table. My mom with her heavy wooden rolling pin rolls out a heavy dough for egg noodles. As she works the dough, she tells me about growing up on the farm in Western Kansas, about being chased around by a crazy pet duck named Daffy Down Dilly. She tells me about an uncle named Rex who used to go around in his pick-up truck on Saturday summer days. All the cousins would pile into the back and he would drive them into town for an ice cream cone. I am amazed at the primitiveness of it all. Sometimes when I am rolling out my own dough, for piecrusts, or even my own egg noodles, my daughter or one of my sons stands at the counter on a chair they have dragged over from the kitchen table. I tell them that when I was a kid we had only three television channels and that sometimes you could see only one of them because of bad reception. I tell them that when I was little, on summer nights, all the grownups would meet on one of the neighbor's front lawns and sit in lawn chairs and tell

stories and smoke cigarettes while we kids caught fireflies and played hide and seek up and down the block. My kids cannot believe how primitive it sounds.

2.

The Cultural Relevance of Chairs

Take the word *chair*. When one says chair, one thinks vaguely of an average chair. But collect individual instances, think of armchairs and reading chairs, and dining room chairs and kitchen chairs, chairs that pass into benches, chairs that cross the boundary and become settees, dentists' chairs, thrones, opera stalls, seats of all sorts, those miraculous fungoid growths that cumber the floor of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition, and you will perceive what a lax bundle in fact is this simple straightforward term. In co-operation with an intelligent joiner I would undertake to defeat any definition of chair or chairishness that you gave me. Chairs just as much as individual organisms, just as much as mineral and rock specimens, are unique things – if you know them well enough you will find an individual difference even in a set of machine-made chairs - - and it is only because we do not possess minds of unlimited capacity, because our brain has only a limited number of pigeonholes for our correspondence with an unlimited universe of objective uniques, that we have to delude ourselves into the belief that there is a chairishness in this species common to and distinctive of all chairs.

H.G.Wells, "A Modern Utopia."

In his book *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, Witold Rybczynski explores the idea of comfort – its origins as a concept and what the idea meant both to people of the past and of the present. Rybczynski does not concern himself exclusively with chairs. Indeed, he is nothing if not democratic in his treatment of comfort. Beds, appliances,

major architectural styles . . . even window treatments are included in the author's scope. It cannot be by accident, though, that more pages of his text are devoted to the study of chairs than to any other single topic. Rybczynski discusses the church pews of medieval times, whose straight backs and unyielding wooden seats were intended to keep congregants still and awake for interminable sermons (27). While those pews represented the antithesis of comfort, Rybczynski provides plenty of instances of chairs designed specifically for vegetative pleasure, among them are the chaise longue whose conspicuous luxury graced the Versailles of Louis XIV (83) and the crown prince of American pleasure chairs -- the "La-Z-Boy" recliner (207). Rybczynski's discussion of chairs is nothing if not a comprehensive survey from the Middle Ages on; yet because his focus lies more on the idea of comfort in general than chairs specifically, the reader realizes very quickly that Rybczynski has only skimmed the surface of the topic of chairs.

For instance, what of those chairs whose primary function is something that is quite different from bearing its burden in alert prayerfulness, contented comfort, or sophisticated style? What of the high chair, the dentist's chair, the electric chair? Some chairs define the natures of their users' lives. For example, consider specialized wheel chairs that allow for different levels of mobility. There are wheel chairs for people who are paralyzed or whose bodies have been ravaged by debilitating disease. These chairs allow for mobility, and are equipped with computers for communication. Some have straws with sensors built in so that simply by emitting puffs of air through the lips, its occupant can traverse a city sidewalk, now made friendly to such chairs. Fifty years ago such a thing was impossible. Birthing chairs orient the laboring mother in such a way that her posture works with her body's process to bring forth life. Electric chairs

annihilate. In between these two most extreme chairs there exists a plethora of others. Various restraining chairs have been designed for the purpose of restricting the movements of their sitters—either for punitive purposes or for safety reasons. Barber chairs and dentist chairs were created not for the ease or convenience they offer their users, but for the ease and convenience of another. In an interview for a popular design magazine, Philippe Starck, an icon of the design world, said, “I try to find tools to help friends have a better life, to decide how to exist” (*Metropolitan Home*, 79). This seems on first reading to be a rather ego-inflating statement. After all, what has a toothbrush or a motorcycle, just two of the products Starck has designed, to do with matters of my existence? It makes a difference, however, to know that out of his entire body of work, Starck is best known for his chairs. Chairs, more than any other article of furniture, inform how we orient ourselves to the world. As Starck would put it, they help us decide how to exist.

What about the idea that a single chair can come to stand for one thing in one instance and something quite extraordinarily different in another? For instance, the same chair that serves as the head chair for the dining room table, the seat of honor for a special guest or the family head, when turned around to face the corner becomes the chair of infamy for the naughty child. It is the same physical chair of which we are speaking, but the connotative meaning in each instance could not be more opposed.

Chairs have the potential to define, as much as any other real or symbolic object, an individual’s relationship between himself and the rest of his society. On one hand, kings, presidents, popes, CEO’s and even Santa Claus enjoy seats of honor. Their seats are thrones, like the priceless peacock thrones of the Middle East, inlaid with diamonds,

rubies, and emeralds. Sometimes the thrones are made of gold, padded with rich silks and embroidered tapestry-- the Papal throne is like this. For Catholics, it is a symbol of the Pope's closeness to God. When he sits in this chair, "ex cathedra," his teachings on church dogma are infallible-- this "from a chair." In the middle of the mall in December one can find the majestic throne of Santa Claus covered in red velvet, its frame spray painted a shiny gold, and to the eye of those to whom it matters, this throne is by far more spectacularly rich than any silly throne of Persian royalty or religious faith. Chairs exalt. How many seconds-in-command have secretly ensconced themselves in their bosses' chairs when they were safely out of town or on the golf course, and leaning back precariously on the chair's axis, hoisted their feet up to rest on the surface of the executive desk. To sit for some few moments in a seat of rich leather that has been constructed with a goal towards achieving the highest levels of ergonomic comfort within the paradigm of decency for a CEO – sitting in the chair is actually to become that CEO, at least within the imagination. For that matter, how many homeowners have had to shoo away the family dog when, after having gotten up during a commercial break for a soda, they have returned to their La-Z-Boy only to find Fido resting in their place. The idea, I would venture to guess, is the same. The one with the biggest chair wins.

It makes sense then that the ultimate symbol of power and authority, this hallmark of the stability of the status quo, should be the chair. It makes the statement that its occupant, its rightful owner, is so comfortable with his position that he intends to stay. The chair is for repose, for staying. If I sit, I intend to remain. I visit a friend who says, "Have a seat." Since I have no intention of being here long I say, "Oh no, I can't possibly stay."

It makes sense, too, that the ultimate penalty for infractions against social order should be paid by means of the chair. One breaks the law, and one is sent to court. From the judge's bench, a seat bespeaking wisdom and respect, one is sentenced. The highest penalty for a crime is death. For a long period of time, this penalty was carried out by means of "the chair." At Sing Sing alone, the electric chair was used to execute 614 prisoners who had been convicted of murder or treason (Brian, 217). One must live by the chair or die by it.

Likewise, chairs and the respect and the authority (and respect *for* authority) that they imply have been used throughout history as a means of subversion. When in Montgomery, Alabama, one tired seamstress refused to give up her seat to another passenger, Rosa Parks set into motion something huge. The fuss was over a "chair," or more specifically, over the right to sit in one. When the era of Freedom Riders and of sit-ins was in full swing, the battles were fought in chairs. Segregated lunch counters had to choose between closing down, desegregating, or serving those people who were fighting to establish civil rights. Those people had decided that it was their turn to sit in the chairs. Some lunch counters responded by removing their stools from the counters: no chairs, no sit-ins.

We speak of "being in the driver's seat" to imply being in control, the "hot seat" to imply being under pressure. We have chairmen of the board, and endowed chairs of universities. There are the judge's bench, the benchwarmers, and those who sit on the edge of their seats. People with no chairs squat; people with no homes are squatters. We pull the chair out from under someone in order to shake things up. We teach our children

to fight for their place in the game “musical chairs.” We were taught as children to offer up our chair to an adult if there were no others available.

No other article in the furniture world lends itself so readily to appropriation by writers and critics than the chair. Many pieces of furniture have tried. If we consider for a moment the role that the dinner table has played in literature we might be tempted to try to make an argument for its importance in the critical scheme. After all, everyone must eat. The table, however, is nothing without chairs. It is merely a great slab of a geometrical plane upon which to heap chunks of meat and platters of potatoes. No, the real drama at the dinner table unfolds in the arrangement of the diners. The head of the table sits at one end, the guest of honor sits at his or her right hand, a conversational complement to this guest sits opposite. Of course, no one wants to be stuck in the middle sandwiched in between the aunt who drinks too much and the uncle with the chronic dyspepsia. The drama of the table lies primarily with the placement of the diners; the drama is a chair issue.

One might also look to the bed as a competitor with the chair for the prize of the most literarily versatile piece of furniture. An obvious choice, to be sure, but the types of power struggles, the interchanges or intimacies that occur on or in the bed are of such a limited variety that in the end, the bed’s dynamics are quickly exhausted. In a bed, one has only to sleep, make love, or die. While all of these processes are more or less essential, there is only so much to be said of them. In the end, beds lack the versatility and possibility that the chair has to offer to critical analysis.

With so much weight resting on the chair, it is no wonder that it makes its way into our literature. Chairs have the unique potential among all of the available pieces of

furniture to become more than the wood and glue of which they are comprised. The chair carries cultural baggage. The throne is royalty; the electric chair is crime and depravity. It has something to say both for the individual writhing in its restraints as well as for the society that demands its use. Most chairs, however, do not find themselves positioned at such polar ends of the spectrum. They rest, more or less inconspicuously, somewhere in the middle. These are the chairs I will be trying out here. Thrones and electric chairs, in my opinion, have been ridden too hard. I have no desire to sit in these. It becomes the purpose of the rest of this essay, then, to look at chairs like the ones in the Whitman poem-- beautiful chairs that suggest something of the metaphysics of the texts in which they are situated.

3.

“The Three Bears”

Once upon a time there were three bears-- a great big papa bear, a middle-sized mama bear, and a wee little baby bear. They lived in a little house in the forest.

And they had three chairs-- a great big chair for the papa bear, a middle-sized chair for the mama bear, and a wee little chair for the baby bear.

“The Three Bears”

Chairs reinforce hierarchies. Even in the most insignificant house in the middle of the uncivilized forest there exists a pecking order that must be maintained. The biggest bear has the biggest chair, gets the biggest bowl of porridge, the firmest bed. To each is assigned an appropriate place. As Goldilocks trespasses into the Bear house she begins a series of boundary-breaking movements that eventually lead her into mortal danger.

Goldilocks saw the three chairs. She sat in the great big chair. It was too hard. The middle-sized chair was too soft. The baby chair was just right-- but it broke when she sat on it.

Goldilocks has no business in the house, and even less business trying out the chairs of its occupants. Indeed, the chairs are as unaccommodating to her as the Bears themselves would have been; that the chair she deems “just right” breaks when she sits on it merely reinforces the notion that she has no business being there. What is more interesting about this passage is one of its variants. In one version, Goldilocks finds the baby chair so comfortable that she sits on it so long that the seat wears out completely.

Regardless of the specifics of the broken chairs, the tale's simplicity and fairy-tale structure help to confirm the hierarchical nature of sitting furniture in our cultural consciousness. Tales like "The Three Bears" help to inculcate the value of knowing one's place, of staying in one's place. If these "values" seem undemocratic, well, that is for a good reason. Consider Versailles of Louis XIV. Rybczynski tells us of the role chairs played within the palace walls.

. . . at Versailles, the kind of chair one was occasionally permitted to sit in denoted rank and social position. In some rooms, nobody but the king was allowed to sit. . . Armchairs were reserved for the Sun King, and no one else was permitted to sit in them. Chairs without arms were reserved for members of the immediate royal entourage. Backless stools could be used by certain members of the nobility, and unpadded folding stools by lesser notables. (82-3)

Chairs were used as much for keeping place as for keeping comfortable. In the story of the three bears, when the chair breaks the hierarchy of the house has been challenged. Oblivious to all of this, Goldilocks continues transgressing the boundaries that she refuses to respect. If the story were true to fairy tale style, Goldilocks' transgression against the rule of staying in her place would have been dealt with severely. At the least the Bear family would have imprisoned her; at worst they would have devoured her when they returned to find her asleep in Baby Bear's bed. As it stands in the version at hand, Goldilocks is merely frightened away, never to wander the depths of the forest again.

When Goldilocks breaks Baby Bear's chair, she effectively robs him of his place to sit. Now he has no chair, and when he comes home from his walk with his parents, he cries when he sees the damage that has been done. Lest we judge Baby Bear's emotional reaction too quickly as a mere symptom of the immaturity that his name suggests, let us consider briefly how disgusting and humiliating, how disfiguring and displacing a broken chair can be.

In front of the *Place des Nations* building in Switzerland stands a giant sculpture of a wooden chair. The chair is unremarkable, except of course for its thirty-nine foot height. The chair appears to be a wooden dining chair. It has two vertical slats on its straight back. What is altogether disarming about the chair is that it is missing three-quarters of one of its legs. There are three intact legs, but the place where the fourth should be ends in a splintered stump. The chair, which stands as if in defiance of its missing part, is a fitting memorial to the victims of land mines, both living and dead, in whose memory it was erected. The effect, even in the photograph, (Google "Broken Chair by Daniel Berset") is sobering. One is taken aback by two extremes: size and dismemberment.

Another indication of the disgrace of the idea of a broken chair reveals itself in an unlikely place. As shocking as the idea and the image it provokes is, the following definition from the online "Urban Dictionary" seems to drive home the extreme viciousness that breaking a chair can signify: "Broken chair: while *taking* a girl from behind as you are about to orgasm cut out her front hand making her fall into the position of a broken chair" (italicized word is my substitute.) This definition drives home the

offensiveness of a broken chair. Broken chairs are demeaning, humiliating exactly because they suggest displacement, disgrace, and disfigurement.

4.

Lady Audley's Secret

“When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this man your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place.”

Luke 14: 8-9

Chairs support, substantiate the weight that they bear. When one enters the banquet hall of a formal ceremony, one knows immediately where the guests of honor will be sitting. Their chairs are at the front of the room. This is a matter of staging. They are set apart from the other chairs by extensive decoration, more flowers, balloons, finer fabrics. Sometimes the chairs of honor will be set on a raised platform. Sometimes the chairs will be designated by special lighting. In a skit from the *Saturday Night Live* of the mid 1970’s Lily Tomlin is dressed in a frilly little-girl party dress. She is on the middle of the stage sitting in an impossibly large rocking chair. She talks childishly, and her stories are funny. What I remember more than anything, though, is the discrepancy between “little” Lily Tomlin and that huge chair. It is a matter of proportion. Little children have no business in chairs that large; the incongruency is both frightening and hilarious-- the huge chair having the ability to shrink an adult woman into a child. Tomlin’s comic instinct succeeds because she has the ability to imagine how such a prop as a giant rocking chair can make her *appear*. The seat she sits on informs her audience’s perception of her.

In Elizabeth Braddon's gothic novel *Lady Audley's Secret*, three chairs and an interestingly conspicuous absence of a chair work to achieve much this same effect. Chairs suggest identity, both real and invented. When Helen Talboys' husband leaves her and her infant son to seek wealth in the gold mines of Australia, he vows that she will not hear from him again until he has made his fortune. Some three and a half years later, George returns home to surprise his beloved with his success only to find out that she has died in his absence. What George does not know is that Helen only planted evidence of her death in order to make him give up on her. Tired of being poor and having no respectable means of bettering the situation for herself and her child and aged father, Helen constructs a new identity. She becomes the beautiful, innocent, and unmarried Lucy Graham. Abandoning her child, she gains the confidence of the mistress of a school for governesses and through natural intelligence and youthful beauty she wins a strong recommendation with which to commence her life as the governess for a respectable and wealthy surgeon's family. It is by the virtue of this attachment that she catches the eye of a wealthy widower. It is from the surgeon's high-church pew that Michael Audley spies the angelic countenance of Lucy Graham, a.k.a. Helen Talboys, for the first time. It is only a matter of weeks before the confirmed widower offers Helen Talboys turned Lucy Graham her third identity: Mrs. Michael Audley.

The story of *Lady Audley*, indeed her titular "secret," is the story of concealed identity. It is a story framed by chairs. Lucy's apparent charms and angelic innocence are framed well by the church pew in which she makes her public debut.

. . .everybody, high and low, united in declaring that Lucy Graham was

the sweetest girl that ever lived.

Perhaps it was this cry which penetrated into the quiet chambers of Audley court; or perhaps it was the sight of her pretty face, looking over the surgeon's high pew every Sunday morning. However it was, it was certain that Sir Michael Audley suddenly experienced a strong desire to be better acquainted with Mr. Dawson's governess. (6)

The church pew – the respected surgeon's "high church pew" -- lends credence to the angelic appearance of the governess. She is not suspected of being anything other than what she appears to be. The account she gives of her past – that all of her relations are deceased-- is not questioned. No one attempts to go beyond the recommendation of the mistress of the school for governesses (indeed, we find later that even this bit of her past is her own creation). That her inauguration into the life of the community commences while she peers over the pew on Sunday morning offers Lucy the furniture of holiness and virtue as the frame for her new identity. From the pew, Lucy is not only a governess, she is an angel. The fact that this is no common pew, but the "high" pew of the surgeon only further bolsters her reputation, which is built not on the connections of blood lines or family ties, but by the impressions she makes on others. That Lucy Graham is smart enough, pretty enough, and talented enough to carry out the deceit and gain the position of governess for an established family is remarkable. That she is ambitious enough to parlay this into becoming the wife of the most eligible Sir Michael Audley (especially given her uncertainty about the whereabouts of her first husband) borders on recklessness. Lucy Graham is playing a high stakes confidence game in order

to jump rank. Winning the game nets her wealth, prestige, and an easy life. Losing the game would mean that she loses everything.

It is not merely the acting abilities of Lucy Graham that serve the construction of her new identity. Let us look for a moment at the props of Lucy's performance: the surgeon's church pew. It was not an uncommon practice for churches in England to charge rents for the pews. Small country churches were funded by such rents and money collected from these quarterly subscriptions would help support the pastor and his family or be used for the maintenance of the church building. Pew subscriptions varied depending on the desirability of the specific pew. Pews towards the front of the church would rent for considerably more than pews at the back of the church. In many churches, the details of the pews would likewise differ. Expensive pews would have more detailed carvings, softer padding, and richer materials. That the surgeon is a respected member of the community would be reflected in the position and exclusivity of his family's pew. Lucy Graham, in attaching herself to the surgeon's family (even if only as the governess) was locating herself geographically in a desirable pew. By attending services with her employer's family, she positioned herself highly. She became connected quite physically to a position of honor in the community. She achieved a spot in a pew of honor. Of course, given the limited number of available pews within any church, such a position is not often made available. Suddenly the appearance of this young beauty in the "surgeon's high pew" becomes noteworthy. The chair, in this instance, makes the woman. Identity is informed by the chair; the chair in which Lucy sits makes her appear to be something that she is not.

If it is, at least in part, this church pew upon which Michael Audley's first impression of Lucy Graham is formulated, then an equally striking and more opposite opinion of the Lady Audley can be gleaned from a later passage in which two male characters violate Lady Audley's inner sanctum, seat themselves in her private chair, and view a portrait of her in full chairlessness. Lady Audley is absent from Audley court and it is under the auspice of viewing her art collection that her nephew and Lucy's unsuspecting first husband sneak into the Lady's private rooms. Of course, with so much of her past to hide, the Lady's apartments are locked in her absence, and so the passage the men must take to perform this penetration of Lucy's private quarters is suggestive. They must open a secret panel in the floor of the nursery, squeeze through a tight and damp secret tunnel, musty from disuse, and raise up another secret hatch, pushing through a tattered Persian rug into the Lady's private room.

In Lady Audley's inner sanctum, there is a chair among the opened perfume bottles, discarded gowns, scattered jewels. Her dressing chamber is close and messy. And if we can pry Robert Audley's oddly accommodated posterior out of his aunt's chair, we might be able to examine it more closely. This is the chair upon which she sits surrounded by her intimate apparel. She decides while sitting in this chair which necklace will grace her décolletage, which scent to dab behind her ears. We may assume that the chair is upholstered in crushed velvet. Probably if one were to examine it closely one might find a stray hair or two stuck to its back, and underneath the scent of rose water and lavender one might be able to distinguish the more human odor of perspiration. These impressions of the chair upon which first the nephew and then the first husband, George, sit are not explicit in the text, yet these impressions must be close to how the

chair is. The closeness of the space the men have entered, the darkness and richness and sensuality of these rooms demand that the chair be this way. When Robert drags the chair to a new position in front of the portrait of Lady Audley that they have come to see, the wrongness of the presence of these men in the Lady's room becomes even stronger. One wonders at their nerve-- not only to sneak into the Lady's private quarters and touch her things, but at the nerve to rearrange her furniture, to sit in her chair.

The nephew takes his turn first. Remarkably, the viewing of this intimate portrait can only be appreciated by one of the men at a time. The light in the room is poor and they can discern the details of the portrait only by the light of the single candle they have with them. The nephew stares at it for some time before yielding the chair to George. At this time both men know the subject of the portrait only as Lucy Audley, Sir Michael's new bride. The narrator takes great pains to describe the portrait, which is alarming in its contrast to the earlier picture we have of Lucy Graham framed in part by the surgeon's pew. The "portrait stood on an easel covered with a green baise in the centre of the octagonal chamber. It had been a fancy of the artist to paint her standing in this very room, and to make his background a faithful reproduction of the pictured walls," (69.) The contrast between the context of this painting, subliminally sexual and lush, and the context of our initial view of Lucy in the surgeon's pew at once forces us to confront the impact that her surroundings have been a large factor in her audience's estimation of her.

We see a new side of Lady Audley; it is a side one suspects that she has intended for no one to see. There is "a lurid lightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes . . . wicked look . . .It was so like and yet unlike; it was as if you had burned strange-colored fires before my lady's face . . . mediaeval

monstrosities . . . a beautiful fiend. . . crimson dress. . . hung about her in folds that looked like flames . . . her fair head. . . a raging furnace . . .” (70-1). The passage continues, and here we have only some of the details. We see Lady Audley as a woman of fire and passion. She is shown standing. She is powerful and worldly and fiendish. It is seated before this aspect of Lucy that the contrast between this aspect of her, the aspect she keeps hidden, and the view of her in the church ensconced in the high pew, is the greatest. Sitting in the surgeon’s pew, Lucy Graham is the exalted angel; standing as the subject of this portrait, she is a powerful, worldly woman, nearer to whore or demon than to saint or angel. Here we see her without the prop of the church pew. The effect of the contrast between her two postures and attitudes is shocking. Here she is without chair, standing without support. That this posture and attitude is at least in part the fancy of the artist is suggestive. What is it that this artist has seen in Lady Audley that the rest of society has missed? This is the Lady Audley that is to remain forever locked inside and unseen.

Helen Talboys / Lucy Graham / Lady Audley has one final identity / posture to take at the end of the novel when the revelation of the truth about her hidden identity surfaces. Lady Audley is pronounced evil by a physician and sent (to spare the already wounded pride of Sir Audley further harm) to a French mad house to live out her days in obscure confinement. When Lady Audley, who is to now be known as Madame Taylor, (390) looks over the furniture of her new and permanent rooms, she collapses into a shabby armchair and covers her face with her hands. This chair is to be the final throne for Lucy. It is here, framed not by the crimson dress or the high church pew, but by the ghostly shabbiness of her confinement that our final estimation of her is formed. From

angelic, to demonic, to broken-down, chairs have helped to frame the movement of Braddon's plot. For Braddon, part of the technical construction of identity for her main character is achieved through chairs: the type of chair, the ownership of chair, the position of chair – these are inextricably linked to the identity of Braddon's titular character. Technically, the effect of Braddon's chairs is a unifying element for the evolution of Helen Talboys. The subtlety of this technique makes it all the more effective.

The intended use, the actual use, the placement in a room, the degree of adornment of the chair itself-- these are the details that help to make a scene rich and to influence nuances of meaning. Braddon's chairs tell us something of a character's identity. They imply things about the people who use them (or refuse them, in the case of the portrait). The chair has possibilities in fiction beyond informing a character's identity; chairs can also be used to structure rooms, people and the relationships between people. They can be used to structure entire societies.

5.

Invisible Man

musical chairs

--*noun*.

1. a game in which players march to music around two rows of chairs placed back to back, there being one chair less than the number of players, the object being to find a chair when the music stops abruptly. The player failing to do so is removed from the game, together with one chair, at each interval.

2. *informal*. a situation or series of events in which jobs, decisions, prospects, etc., are changed with confusing rapidity. *Dictionary.com*

One of the most prolific and iconic product designers at work today is Philippe Starck. In an interview for *Metropolitan Home* magazine, October 2006, a series of photographs displays some of the diverse objects he has designed. There is a juicing apparatus that looks like a tiny alien spider. There is a pink dining room with gauzy sheers and a black chandelier, a sleek silver motorcycle, a toothbrush. It seems that Starck has had his hand in the design of both the mundane objects of daily living and the exotic elements. When asked by his interviewer what else he had left to do in his design career, Starck replied, “ I’ll try to make something more interesting. I’d be ashamed to make something useless. I try to find tools to help friends have a better life, to decide how to exist” (79). I like that last part: “I try to find tools to help friends. . . decide how to exist.” Appropriately enough, Philippe Starck is, perhaps, known for his chairs more than for any of his other designs. While it would be hyperbolic to say that chairs define existence, I think that it true enough to say that chairs *help* define existence.

In his introduction to the 1990 edition of his novel, *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison explains some of his intentions in writing the novel. He says that, in part, he wanted to write a novel that would be a “dramatic study in comparative humanity.” He wanted to “avoid writing what might turn out to be nothing more than another novel of racial protest” (xviii). His protagonist’s central conflict is reconciling the image he has of himself with the image others have of him. Ellison writes, “By way of imposing meaning upon our disparate American experience the novelist seeks to create forms in which acts, scenes and characters speak for more than their immediate selves” (xx).

In this sense, both Ellison and Starck share a fundamental interest in existence. Ellison realizes the potential for his audience to see something of their own lives both collectively as a nation or world audience, and as individuals. What the novel says about its subject has the potential to reveal truth to the reader, to help him understand his relationship to the world. Starck’s chairs do this as well. When I enter a bar or a hotel lobby, there are the chairs defining the manner in which I will sit: my posture, how I manage my legs when I am seated, how closely situated I am to the chair-- the person-- near to me. It is significant that Ellison’s novel about existence should be so full of chairs. The Battle Royal and the Golden Day scenes in particular demonstrate the connections Ellison makes between furniture and social contracts.

In the Battle Royal scene, the narrator has pleased his teachers with his graduation speech about humility. He has been invited to give the speech at a gathering of the town’s leading white citizens. The expectations our narrator has for his performance are bolstered by the formality of the event’s venue. His speech and reception of the award of a scholarship is to be held in the ballroom of a hotel.

It was in the main ballroom of the leading hotel. When I got there I discovered that it was on the occasion of a smoker, and I was told that since I was to be there anyway I might as well take part in the battle royal to be fought by some of my schoolmates as part of the entertainment. The battle royal came first. (17)

The quiet dignity with which the narrator must have imagined the evening's proceedings is now beginning to give way to something much different. This shift marks the beginning of the first round of the novel's cyclic pattern of raising and then crushing the narrator's expectations. "All of the town's big shots were there in their tuxedos, wolfing down the buffet foods. Drinking beer and whiskey and smoking black cigars." Ellison shows us the fracture between what the narrator expected and the reality of the scene. The men – leading citizens-- dressed in tuxedos, are "wolfing" food, drinking and smoking. We are being treated here to a view of the animalistic side of these "leading men." How the narrator, how we, might have expected them to act is somewhat different from how we are seeing them act.

The furniture and its arrangement are ominous. "It was a large room with a high ceiling. Chairs were arranged in neat rows around three sides of a portable boxing ring. The fourth side was clear, revealing a gleaming space of polished floor" (17). The psychological, social, and racial implications of the boxing ring in the 1930's and 1940's make this image as charged as any in the novel. The ring evokes the cultural memory of Jack Johnson beating a white heavyweight for the title and the scandal of him--a black man-- consorting with white women. This boxing ring recalls the phrase "the Great

White Hope.” The narrator expects a podium and sees instead a boxing ring. The contrast between intellect and brawn, between glory and humiliation is staggering.

This is how Ellison approaches his use of furniture throughout the rest of this scene. There is the object itself --its mention is a subtle thing -- the casual itemizing of the contents of a room; then there is the thing’s emotional weight, inspired by its social and psychological baggage. “Chairs were arranged in neat rows” (17). The lines are straight; the spaces between them are equal. There is an expectation of behavior implied by their arrangement and form. They will hold spectators who will be seated upright and formally -- the straight backs of the chairs tell us this. The spectators will be watching the performance that will take place directly in front of them -- the boxing match, the battle royal. That the chairs and the ring are portable indicate the transitory nature of the event that is to take place.

Ellison creates a scene, arranges his furniture, and then explodes it. What the narrator expects to happen, even at times what the reader expects to happen, does not. This dislocation becomes central to the metaphysics of the novel. There is a huge gap between what the setting implies and what the setting delivers; this gap is the thematic space in which the narrator resides. What he expects to happen does not, and his image of himself in relation to the world is challenged.

The narrator is herded into the service elevator with a group of “toughs” from his school. He is issued a pair of boxing shorts and is prodded into the ballroom. “A clarinet was vibrating sensuously . . . our upper bodies touching and shining with anticipatory sweat; while up in front the big shots were becoming increasingly excited over something we still could not see” (18). The odors of tobacco and whiskey mingle with the cigar

smoke and sensuous music. The narrator is thrust to the front of the room and comes face to face with a “magnificent blonde -- stark naked.” The narrator catalogs her parts in terms of an inanimate object: “the hair . . .like a kewpie doll, the face . . .like an abstract mask, the eyes . . .hollow . . .” She is a grouping of parts. She is a statue. Together with the tattoo of the American flag and with “the smoke of a hundred cigars clinging to her like the thinnest veils,” she becomes the Statue of Liberty, “calling to me from the angry surface of some gray and threatening sea” (19).

The boys faint and whine, plead to be allowed to go home, and the dancer remains stoic, “a detached expression on her face,” even as the intoxicated city leaders move beyond consuming her with their eyes and begin touching her with “beefy fingers” that “sink into her flesh” (20). She is the object for which every man in the room longs -- naked promise. Yet only some may hope to have her, and only a brazen few reach out to take possession of her. “They caught her just as she reached the door, raised her from the floor, and tossed her as college boys are tossed at a hazing,” and later, “It was mad. Chairs went crashing, drinks were spilt, as they ran laughing and howling after her” (20).

The boxing match that takes place next continues the violence sparked by the presence of the blonde woman. The boys are forced into the ring and blindfolded. They are shoved at one another and threatened. As payment for providing this entertainment, they are thrown onto an electrified rug to scoop up loose change and dollar bills. The men have purchased flesh after all. Bruised and bleeding, his face swollen, the narrator gives his speech to the room full of men. He is given his scholarship.

The metaphysics of being, the problems inherent in being black and American -- in believing in the American dream while living an American nightmare -- are expressed

in *Invisible Man* through the metaphysics of furniture. The narrator *expects* to be an important speaker; he becomes slapstick entertainment. Chairs lined up in neat rows along three sides of a boxing ring in the main ballroom of a leading hotel suggest civility, manners, and formality; they become obstacles. When the chairs crash, the structural basis of order is lost.

In *Home*, Rybczynski contends that the reason some societies have chosen to use chairs while others have remained “squatting” is that “like other artificial activities . . . instrumental music, or painting, (furniture) introduces art into living” (80). For his purposes, Rybczynski is right. Chairs are, oftentimes, art. I think Ellison’s novel shows us, however, another reason for the existence of furniture, particularly chairs. Chairs structure our environment and regulate our interactions with one another. When people rearrange their chairs, their furniture, they necessarily rearrange the ways in which the people who enter into the social contract of occupying the same space interact.

But these are not the only chairs to crash in Ellison’s novel, or else I have made too much out of a simple noun and verb combination. We look now at the riot that takes place in the Golden Day scene of *Invisible Man*. Both the “smoker” that takes place at the hotel and the “therapy sessions” that take place within the Golden Day saloon allow the participants sanctioned access to typically illicit activities: excessive drinking, solicitation of sex, and gambling. The men in both venues seek distraction in activities deemed illicit in their daily lives. While outwardly the two groups of men appear to have nothing in common, the truth is that they are very much alike. The narrator tells us of the WWI vets who patronize the Golden Day. “Many of the men had been doctors, lawyers, teachers, Civil Service workers; there were several cooks, a preacher, a

politician, and an artist” (74). These were men who had achieved the same sort of professional rank as their smoker-attending white counterparts. The difference is that while these accomplishments made one group of men leaders, it made the other group unable to live in mainstream society. I will return to this idea later.

Another important comparison between the two scenes is the tenuous balance that exists between the maintenance of order and the rise of chaos and the specific catalyst that gives chaos free reign. In the Battle Royal scene Ellison expresses this balance through the arrangement of the furnishings, specifically the chairs. The implied violence of the boxing ring, the excitement provided by the stripper, the gorging of the men on food and drink are all mediated by the arrangement of furnishings. When the men destroy the order imposed by the chairs, they destroy the last semblance of civility and manners. When it is all over, these leading citizens will go back to their respectable lives as if none of this has happened.

In the Golden Day scene, the same revolution occurs. The inmates of the veterans’ home visit the Golden Day every Tuesday. This Tuesday, however, the presence of the narrator and of the wealthy white Mr. Norton upset the balance between order and chaos. Norton is to the inmates inside the Golden Day what the blonde woman is to the men at the smoker. The blonde and Norton are symbols of what each group desires the most. Both the blonde and Norton remain in near catatonic states throughout their scenes, allowing them to be acted upon with little resistance. They become symbolic of what is desired rather than embodiments of what is desirable. The men at the smoker are driven by their desire to own and consume everything -- flesh being the only thing forbidden them. The inmates of the mad house desire the respectability and dignity

that Norton represents and for which they have worked. The ex-doctor explains to Norton why he no longer practices medicine, “Ten men in masks drove me out from the city at midnight and beat me with whips for saving a human life. And I was forced to the utmost degradation because I possessed skilled hands and the belief that my knowledge could bring me dignity” (93). The presence of Norton serves as a reminder to the men inside the Golden Day of the one appetite they can never satiate. They revolt. Like the blonde woman from the previous chapter, Norton is in danger.

When the men’s behavior grows wild, the bartender calls for the orderly.

“WHAT’S GOING ON DOWN THERE?” a voice shouted from the balcony. Everyone turned. I saw a huge black giant of a man, dressed only in white shorts, swaying on the stairs. It was Supercargo, the attendant. I hardly recognized him without his hard-starched white uniform. Usually he walked around threatening the men with a strait jacket which he always carried over his arm, and usually they were quiet and submissive in his presence. But now they seemed not to recognize him and began shouting curses (82).

“Supercargo” is the title of a position on board a ship. It is the supercargo’s job to manage the ship’s cargo while at sea and in port. That Supercargo is an *orderly* is a double reference to function within the text. Supercargo is the structure that maintains order for the inmates. He has the same function as the chairs in the Battle Royal scene; in this sense, Supercargo becomes metonymous for “chairishness.” The revolt of the inmates at the Golden Day must first begin with the tearing down of the old order. Supercargo, like the chairs in the hotel, must be torn down.

When the vets see Supercargo at the landing, standing there drunk and nearly naked, they decide as a group to overthrow him. “ ‘I want order down there,’ Supercargo boomed, ‘and if there’s white folks down there, I wan’s *double* order.’

Suddenly there was an angry roar from the men back near the bar and I saw them rush the stairs.

‘Get him!’

‘Let’s give him some order!’” (82-3).

Supercargo fights from the top of the stairs, kicking the vets and sending them flying as they attempt to fell him. They finally succeed in grabbing him by his ankles and pulling him down the flight of stairs. At the bottom the vets kick him and jump on him. They beat him over the head with bottles of liquor, and when he goes unconscious they revive him with ice water and kick him until he goes out again.

For the veterans, part of the entertainment, part of their release comes from tearing Supercargo apart. The bloodlust of the veterans in the Golden Day scene is no less intense than the violence of the influential white men in the hotel ballroom. At one point during the Battle Royal scene, the narrator is trying desperately to keep from being thrown onto an electrified rug. As he clings to the legs of one of the guest’s chairs, the idea of “accidentally” toppling the “Big Shot” onto the rug pops into his mind. He begins trying to upset the balance of the chair by rocking its legs. The “Big Shot” immediately senses the purpose of the action, and he responds by kicking the narrator across the rug. The narrator’s idea, to gain power by toppling the chair, is the same as the veterans’ idea of gaining power. The difference is that when the veterans grab the legs of Supercargo, he comes crashing down. “With Supercargo lying helpless upon the bar, the men whirled

about like maniacs” (85). What the men at the hotel, what the narrator on the floor clinging to the legs of the chair, what the veterans breaking apart Supercargo realize, is that in order to rewrite the rules that dictate their action, they must first invalidate the contracts that bind them. For the wealthy men it is the implied rules of the setting -- the careful ordering of chairs. For the narrator during his first rebellious thoughts, it is the tipping of the white man’s chair. For the veterans at the Golden Day it is the destruction of Supercargo.

When Supercargo falls the narrator knows that he must get Norton out of the Golden Day before the angry vets turn their attention towards him. On the way out, Norton is slapped and shoved down a flight of stairs. The narrator manages to escape the saloon with Norton in tow, badly shocked and bleeding.

The next time we see Norton, he is restored to his full grandeur. The narrator has brought the director of the school to Norton’s room. Bledsoe knocks on the door and smiles and they go inside. “It was a large light room. Mr. Norton sat in a huge wing chair with his jacket off. Above a spacious fireplace an oil portrait of the Founder looked down at me remotely” (103). After the chaos and danger of the Golden Day, to find Norton in a “huge wing chair” is right. He has sought refuge in a throne of sorts; he is safe once again in the socially contracted world in which he reigns.

Things are right with Norton now, but the narrator will have to pay for taking Norton to the Golden Day. During the services that evening in the chapel we see the “honored guests moved silently upon the platform, herded toward their high, carved chairs by Dr. Bledsoe” (114). At the end of the same service, when our protagonist comes to realize that he will not be allowed to stay at the school, he endures the final

hymn of the service sitting “stiff and erect, supported by the hard bench, relying upon it as upon a form of hope” (134). The revolution at the Golden Day has gone full circle. The pillars of the school have been restored, the inmates who led the insurrection will get transferred or punished, a new orderly will be found to take the place of Supercargo, and the narrator is expelled.

Chairs will continue to make appearances in *Invisible Man*. On the bus ride to New York the protagonist must sit next to one of the veterans who is being transferred for his part in the violence at the Golden Day. Even though the bus is otherwise empty, he must sit here because it is the section reserved for Negroes (151). We read this section and in between the lines we read the story of Rosa Parks, and of the Freedom Riders. While waiting for a job interview, the narrator sits for hours in a teakwood chair with a green silk cushion, and although he is uncomfortable, he continues sitting so as to look professional (180). This might be the chair in any of the waiting rooms in which we spend interminable lengths of time. The implication of this chair is clear. This is the chair for the person whose time is not relevant. It is in this chair that one must wait for the person whose time is relevant. When the narrator accidentally comes into a union meeting at the Liberty Paint Factory, he witnesses a sort of struggle between the men and the chairman who repeatedly refers to himself as “the chair” (220). Later the narrator witnesses an eviction of an elderly black couple from their home. The woman, who has refused to leave her home, is being carried out on an old chair. The chair with the woman in it is placed on the sidewalk with the rest of her belongings. We read of this old black woman being carried around on a chair, and it brings to mind the portable thrones of great leaders: Egyptian kings on gilded platforms being carried on the backs of slaves,

the Pope traveling between Basilicas on the *sedia gestatoria* (267). The image of this elderly black woman in an old chair is startling in this context.

My point here is not to prove a quantitative value of “chair” in terms of Ellison’s novel, but rather to explore the saga of chairs and “chairishness” that work to concretize complex human and social relationships. Chairs become more than simple symbols of order and place. As readers we become aware of them on the periphery of the story. They are anchors for the reader as much as they are for the characters in the novel, in terms of structure as well as theme. They are used to restrain motion, define action, show disregard for norms of behavior when they come crashing down as a result of character misconduct, or to reinforce the status quo. In short, chairs in *Invisible Man* have very little to do with providing simple comfort. They are vehicles and anchors within the text. Chairs resonate with one another and with the history of chairs as a whole. They are indicators of power, vulnerability, mobility, stasis, despair, and hope. They insist on civilized behavior, and when they crash they belie the assumption that man is civilized. Man does not so much rest in his chair; man uses his chair as a weapon or as a defense. That the protagonist of the novel has retreated and is telling his story from a basement *squat* is fitting. He has temporarily retired from the world of social order and chairs. It is as a *squatter* that he has told his story-- as a squatter he seems to have developed a grasp of the metaphysics of chairs.

6.

“The Human Chair”

Q. How does less expensive furniture differ from the top end?

A. The wood isn't one piece, and it's not always the best quality. You often feel the wood in the platform and the arms . . . Here, feel the arm of this sofa. See? It moves. It's alive. It has life, a mind of its own. . . . Beautiful, don't you think?

Steven Jonas, master upholsterer

In 1925 a Japanese writer and critic, Edogawa Rampo, wrote a short story called "The Human Chair." It is a framed story with the body taking the form of a letter. The narrator of this letter is a poor, extraordinarily ugly cabinetmaker living in a small village outside Tokyo. The combination of these characteristics makes him reviled by all who see him. His saving grace is his furniture making skill – his professed specialty is "making assorted types of chairs." The narrator of the letter tells us that his chair-making skills were so refined, so impeccable, that

I gained the reputation of being able to satisfy any kind of order, no matter how complicated. For this reason, in woodworking circles I came to enjoy the special privilege of accepting only orders for luxury chairs, with complicated requests for unique carvings, new designs for the back-rest and arm-supports, fancy padding for the cushions and seat. (5-6)

What is so fascinating in the letter writer's story is the disparity between the narrator's life and the lives of those for whom his chairs are built. While the craftsman may dedicate weeks of his life to the task of building a single, spectacular chair, while his fingers may revel in the feel of the expensive fabrics and trace the grains of the rare

woods, these chairs will never be his. He will never attain the wealth or status necessary to own such a chair. While the narrator takes great pride in his craft, he is all too aware of the gap that exists between craftsman and connoisseur.

As soon as a chair was completed, it was my usual custom to sit on it to see how it felt, and despite the dismal life of one of my humble profession, at moments I experienced an indescribable thrill. . . . I used to imagine the types of people who would eventually curl up in the chair, certainly people of nobility, living in palatial residences, with exquisite, priceless paintings hanging on the walls. . . (6)

While the craftsman would enjoy imagining himself in these circumstances, he would always come back to the realization that none of this was for him. “I found myself a miserable creature, a helpless crawling worm!” (7).

It is only after completing a particularly extravagant chair that the narrator conceives of the idea that will take him away from his sordid life in the village and situate him in the midst of the opulence of which he has dreamed. The chair he has built is enormous. Its intended purpose is to sit in a lobby of a Western-style hotel in a Japanese city not far from his village. The chair-maker deconstructs the chair and reengineers the inner supports and padding; he builds into it a place to hold small quantities of food and other necessary items. He then conceals himself within. He becomes part of the chair. The narrator’s initial motivation in hiding within the chair was to gain access to the riches of the people who had access to it. He soon becomes tired of stealing. What he finally realizes is that it is human contact that he has longed for. Outside the chair, the narrator is heinously ugly. People will not look at him. The chair

he creates, however, is so beautiful and comforting that it draws people. “For those who are as ugly and as shunned as myself, it was surely wiser to enjoy life inside a chair. For in this strange, dark world I could hear and touch all desirable creatures” (14).

Of course, the chair warps the narrator both physically and mentally. His muscles lose flexibility from days of being folded and confined in the cramped space. After a time the narrator is able only to crawl when he leaves his hiding place. His contact with the people who sit in the chair becomes a source of perverse pleasure to him that is made all the more horrifying by the fact that his “victims” are unaware of his presence. The women whom he would never have dreamed of approaching in the real world now become connected to him, his skin “virtually touching [theirs] through a thin layer of leather” (13). By the end of the story there is nothing left of the narrator that resembles the consummate craftsman he once was.

“The Human Chair” plays out in a horrific manner a part of what *Lady Audley’s Secret* portrays realistically. Helen Talboys, after being abandoned by her first husband and left in poverty to care for her infant son and aged father, detests the life that is assigned to her. She can never remarry because there is no proof that her husband is dead. She has no job prospects that would support her family. Like the chair maker, her world is ugly and lonely. Like the chair maker, she decides to reinvent herself in order to enter a world to which access would otherwise have been denied. Helen Talboys’ successive transformations to Lucy Graham and then to Lady Audley and finally to Madam Taylor are complicated social maneuvers. They are nothing like the chair maker’s simple transformation. Yet both stories recognize the power of chairs to gain access to social spheres that would otherwise have been impenetrable.

What is more, the chairs in these texts are used to subvert social structures. The chairs all have places where they belong. The grand leather chair made by the craftsman in Rampo's story belongs in an opulent hotel lobby. The church pew in *Lady Audley's Secret* belongs in the respectable and honest church and is the domain of the surgeon's upright family. The worn-out armchair at the end of the novel belongs in a house for fallen or "crazy" women. To belong in a chair, in any chair, seems to imply belonging to the place to which the chair belongs. In different ways, Helen Talboys and the chair-maker manage to gain access to higher social strata by manipulating their relationships to furniture. While the chair maker becomes physically and mentally twisted by his efforts, Helen Talboys becomes equally disfigured; she is remanded to a crazy house for women and a final identity is imposed on her --Madam Taylor.

So if in the cases of *Lady Audley's Secret* and "The Human Chair," we can read chairs as a literary trope for exploring the twisting effects of closed social structures on certain classes of people (especially the individuals within these classes who attempt to jump rank), then we see in *Invisible Man* a broadening of the trope of the chair. It is no longer only the lower classes that are deformed by the regulatory structures that the chairs represent. The rich white men in the Battle Royal scene become animals as the alcohol, the food, the dancing woman, and the young black men mix together. The tight order of their lives represented in the straight rows of chairs breaks apart.

What we say about our chairs seems to indicate something of what we feel about our place in the world. It is rare to find one who, once he has found a comfortable place to sit, will willingly get up and risk losing that seat. On the other hand, there are always

people eyeing the better seats, waiting for a turn to sit in a chair with thicker padding, a deeper seat base, or better back support.

When we consider Goldilocks and Helen Talboys, Ellison's narrator and Rampo's chair-maker, we can consider what each of these characters has to tell us about chairs. There is a danger to be had in being too comfortable for too long, for allowing our weight as human beings to be sustained for long periods of time by chairs. This is not to say that every chair suggests something grim. Not every rocker or throne written into the pages of literature or gracing the stage of live sketch comedy screams out about social injustice or absurd ideals. In closing I refer again to that barometer of American culture. In a recent *Saturday Night Live* skit, Fred Armasand and Maya Rudolph play a couple of ultra-chic, post postmodern apartment owners named Noonie and Noonie. They wear white pantsuits and speak with dubious Dutch accents. In this skit a young couple has moved into the apartment next door and have come to meet their new neighbors. Noonie invites them in and directs them to have a seat. The woman is shown to the "battered toast" chair. The chair is an actual mound of buttered toast; the idea is that if the sitter is hungry she has merely to consume a part of her chair.

There is always the potential, as Whitman's "Red Squaw" reminds us, for chairs to be objects of utility and comfort. The chair by the hearth that the homestead lady offers to a stranger speaks to the beauty that furniture can add to life. When we own a chair we have some gesture of hospitality to offer the world. These chairs are ideal for sitting in for a morning and an afternoon and then moving on again. They are the chairs that are best used for gathering around tables or hearths and sharing memories, or drawing up to the kitchen counter and making memories.

In the end is the realization that chairs are nothing more than what a culture has decided to make of them. Chairs are only so many slats of wood, squirts of glue, yards of fabric, springs, levers, straps. As Wells pointed out, the variations of chair and “chairishness” are infinite. Despite the broadness of the category, or perhaps, because of it, chairs have become a defining fixture of our cultural structure. All of the ideas we hold about chairs have become so firmly attached to the objects that the connotations are almost as tangible as the chairs themselves: the Barcolounger is synonymous for middle class contentment, the rocking chair is synonymous for retirement. It is true that the executive chair at the head of the table in the boardroom is reserved for the chairman of the board. It is also true that an equally exclusive chair, made out of brightly colored synthetic fabrics graces the bedroom of the chairman’s teenaged daughter. Made in the shape of a giant high-heeled shoe, the chairman would be as out of his element in this chair as the teenaged daughter would be in her father’s.

Whether we choose to beat each other over the head with our chairs, or invite one another to sit in them, our chairs reflect the beliefs we hold about ourselves as individuals and as a society.

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