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978-1-107-02757-2 - Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom

Allison Pease

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AND THE CULTURE OF BOREDOM

Bored women populate many of the most celebrated works of British modernist literature. Whether in popular offerings such as Robert Hitchens's *The Garden of Allah*, the esteemed middlebrow novels of May Sinclair or H. G. Wells, or the now-canonized works such as Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, women's boredom frequently serves as narrative impetus, antagonist, and climax. In this book, Allison Pease explains how the changing meaning of boredom reshapes our understanding of modernist narrative techniques, feminism's struggle to define women as individuals, and male modernists' preoccupation with female sexuality. To this end, Pease characterizes boredom as an important category of critique against the constraints of women's lives, arguing that such critique surfaces in modernist fiction in an undeniably gendered way. Engaging with a wide variety of well- and lesser-known modernist writers, Pease's study appeals especially to researchers and graduates in modernist studies and British literature.

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Preface

Open a novel written in England between 1900 and 1940, and the odds are you will encounter a bored woman. Modernist literature is replete with women reclining on sofas, muttering to themselves on trains, moping about country villages, rolling dental papers in offices, pouring out tea and stifling yawns while engaging in small talk. The central claim of this book is that, more profoundly than has yet been understood, literary modernism shaped – and was shaped by – a broad-ranging set of ideas about women's boredom. Readers of modernism frequently identify shifting narrative perspectives and incantatory repetition as some of modernism's formal innovations. Likewise, modernism is notorious for its bold engagement with human sexuality. What critical history has overlooked, however, is that these modernist innovations emerge in part out of a need to articulate, understand, and in some cases remedy women's boredom.

In simplest form, boredom is the inability to find interest or meaning. As manifest in British representations and discussions of women in the early twentieth century, boredom can appear as emptiness or deadness, a lack, or simply passive dissatisfaction. From the final decades of the nineteenth century to the first few decades of the twentieth century, "boredom" is used, sometimes interchangeably, with a number of other terms defining psychic, spiritual, moral, and physical states in which the self has difficulty accessing authenticity, productivity, and desire – all qualities attributed to one's success as an individual. Not coincidentally, these terms proliferate at a pivotal moment in British history as Britain, like most Western countries at this time, negotiated women's emergence into the public sphere. Equally, these terms are inextricably linked to the history of the novel in the West, which privileges individuality, agency, action, self-knowledge, and desire¹ – all qualities from which the bored subject finds herself estranged. The representation of bored women in the experimental modernist texts by May Sinclair, Dorothy Richardson, and

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Virginia Woolf is not just a renunciation of the cultural status of women in this period; it is also an attempt to alter the form and narrative techniques of the novel in which individualism, agency, and masculinity are equivalents.

Boredom's constitutive role in modernism is a manifestation of broader social and cultural forces in which British women agitated for recognition as men's legal and social equals. Surprisingly, while suffragists were chanting in the streets, chaining themselves to railings, and staging hunger strikes, popular and professional texts of the period described an epidemic of female boredom. Women's boredom was pathologized in medical literature, decried in political and feminist tracts, lamented in popular journalism, and elaborately theorized in the burgeoning field of psychoanalysis. In the meantime, female modernists searched for ways to narrate women's experiences of themselves as alternately agentic and bored. Feminist modernist texts, whether written by men or women, confront boredom as a problem originating out of the question of what it means to be a self in a culture shaped by masculine-defined individualism. Looking at suffrage, medical, journalistic, labor, and philosophic texts of the early twentieth century makes clear that a significant number of women were grappling with themselves as self-represented subjects who were not able to enter consistently and meaningfully into a broad array of contexts. Their boredom is a reflection at once of the demand that they *be* subjects, self-recognized individuals, while at the same time the discursive template for such new ways of being had yet to be written. What *had* been written was a norm of women's lack of agency that explained her discomfited awareness of such a state as pathological; her boredom was medicalized and treated with more boredom. British suffragists and feminists of the early twentieth century worked to counter such limiting notions of women's potential through their demands that women become individuals, enfranchised citizens, and contributors to the public sphere. With these and other competing claims as backdrop, modernist writers of the female *bildungsroman* confronted boredom as a core constituent of their narratives. Boredom functioned not only as chronological descriptor of women's lived experience in time, but also as the dilemma of accessing a subjectivity that was without previous definition. Their boredom manifests as an irritating awareness of what they lack and an inability to envision a successful resolution to this tense drama of self-consciousness.

In the novels by Arnold Bennett, May Sinclair, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf explored in this book, such boredom features in the narrative, but there is no satisfying resolution to the problem. The

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question of what a female self can be – and whether it can be – within the modern conception of the individual is at the heart of their explorations. For Bennett, the female self is an alien in male territory, subject not just to traditions that exclude her, but to biological necessities that preclude her full participation in a life of desire and possibility. For Sinclair and Richardson, the female self can exist, but must be a closely guarded secret. Their celebrations of the female subject in transcendent communion with self and nature offer no real solution to the problem of how women can exist as individuals in relation to others. Sinclair's heroines publicly deny themselves toward the end of their respective novels, and Richardson's Miriam Henderson denies the social system and conventional behavior as false consciousness for a woman who would be a self. They thus form innovative romantic templates for selfhood that have no application in either the real world or the classic *bildungsroman* as a form that propagates reconciliation between the subject and the social world. Woolf demonstrates the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to her female protagonist's achieved individualism and selfhood and kills Rachel Vinrace off in a move that upends individualism as a determining construct of epistemology or the novel. Like Richardson and Sinclair, Woolf determines a solution to the problem of women's publicly perceived emptiness, their boredom, by pointing to a fullness that exists in a state of indifference to the political: being at large.

By contrast, male authors of the female *bildungsroman* – Robert Hichens, E. M. Forster, H. G. Wells, and D. H. Lawrence – all forge political solutions to women's boredom through depicting their intense, sexual love with men. These texts imply that fulfilled sexual desire has the power to transform the female from a state of lack into “an effulgence of unseen glory”² in which she is able to “see the whole of everything at once,”³ including the “deep delight”⁴ of her body. A woman learns “that if she gave herself to the man, it was real. But if she kept herself for herself, it was nothing.”⁵ Their solution simply reinscribes women into their former roles with a difference. Placing these distinct approaches to women's boredom side by side, and allowing for the differences between art and politics, it is difficult to deny the predominantly gendered approach to the problem and the limited, or perhaps failed, solutions represented in these modernist texts.

Given boredom's passivity and indifference, the claim of this book that representations of boredom in early-twentieth-century novels form a part of early-twentieth-century feminism's protest against the patriarchal order may seem counterintuitive. Isn't protest by its nature an active,

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direct statement against something? Not according to suffragist Teresa Billington-Grieg, who argued in 1908, “It is a mistake to assume all rebels know when and how to rebel, or why they should rebel. Rebellion is often a spasmodic and bitter outbreak under the spur of half-realised needs and pains.”⁶ To protest, one must have a sense of equality in order to believe one’s complaints will be recognized. But the fact is, men in Great Britain did not recognize women in the early twentieth century: women had restricted legal rights, were less educated than men, and worked in limited fields in small numbers. Modern women were not like women of previous eras in which their secondary status was presumed natural and fitting. Rather, modern women were painfully aware of themselves as transitional figures, legally and socially classed as subordinate to men but educated enough to recognize the possibilities that were denied them. Boredom as a practice of self-reflection that delivers one over to a something that refuses itself – creating desire with no object – is not just an internalized replication of the social real, but its result. The representation of boredom in modernist literature displays the conflict women experienced between their desires and the few outlets for such desires in early-twentieth-century British culture. Although feminist modernist novels feature a woman’s quest for self-realization, or self-production, these novels more frequently employ a rhetoric of boredom to demonstrate their female protagonist’s failure. As such, modernist boredom should be understood not as evidence of the tediousness of the characters presented or as minor disturbances in their lives, but rather as a gauge of the feminist struggle in the early twentieth century. Literary representations of boredom demonstrate the tremendous difficulty women experienced in realizing and pursuing their desires, and thus in realizing themselves as anything other than bored.

Chapter 1 of this book situates boredom within a number of modern discourses: labor, leisure, suffrage, feminism, psychoanalysis, medicine, education, individualism, and evolutionary eugenics. In the early twentieth century, boredom was articulated multiply and understood along surprisingly gendered lines. Educated men had access to a culture and a set of practices that allowed them to produce themselves as nihilists, pronouncing God dead and the world empty of meaning. Women, without a shared culture of selfhood, were bored, without viable selves to access truth or meaning. Bored women were put under the care of medical professionals who diagnosed them as neurasthenic, pathologically unfit to pursue their own interests in the world, and prescribed bed rest – more boredom – as a cure. Female discontent was given neither philosophical

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nor political legitimacy, but rather was pathologized and relegated to the body. Where male ennui is of the cultivated soul, ennoblingly individualized, women's boredom is of the singular, pathologized body. Yet where boredom can be represented as failure, it can also function as protest and protection, an inhabiting of indifference that is a form of cultural resistance. Chapter 1 explores the complex and multiple positions of boredom in the early twentieth century in order to begin to question why and how male and female modernists represent women's experience of boredom differently.

To a surprising degree, the relegation of female meaning to the body is confirmed in early-twentieth-century novels about women's boredom written by men. As Chapter 2 shows, male authors of female boredom reiterate a remarkably uniform narrative arc to resituate women in their bodies. In the novels of Robert Hichens, Arnold Bennett, E. M. Forster, H. G. Wells, and D. H. Lawrence – authors known for their cultural authority rather than narrative innovation – boredom is often concomitant with an overall mood of nihilism, a worldview privileged over boredom in its totalizing, seemingly universal quality. With the exception of Arnold Bennett's work, these male-authored narratives seek to overcome the nihilistic worldview and resolve the problem of their female protagonists' boredom by having these characters relinquish their independence, and often their feminist ideals, in order to experience sexual fulfillment with men. In these popular and critically acclaimed narratives, the world is replenished with meaning not simply in romantic terms, but specifically in sexual terms that reflect a post-Darwinian, sexological view that women's biology determines their lives. The sexual frankness of early-twentieth-century literature by men positions women's sexual realization as self-realization and her boredom as a denial of her fundamental, biological purpose.

The tendency to particularize and trivialize female complaint and female boredom in the twentieth century may be one reason for the inexplicably slight critical attention given to Britain's most prestigious female novelist between 1910 and 1920: May Sinclair. Chapter 3 explains how Sinclair uses women's boredom to counter narratives defining women's purpose as biological. An avid early reader of psychoanalysis, Sinclair features boredom as a problem resulting from women's conditioning in psychological repression. In the cause of feminism, she represents female boredom not as a personal deficiency, but as a socially systematic form of violence against women who were unable to access their own desires as a result of their conditioning. At the same time that she presents

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boredom as an almost unavoidable fact in women's lives, she also suggests that women who are strong enough to resist internalizing the repressive forces surrounding them can consciously choose to sublimate their own drives and energies. This willful sublimation is rewarded with moments of ecstatic vision coupled with intense self-connection. The ability to sublimate, Sinclair suggests, requires the strength to assert one's individuality, one's unique vision, and to reject the social institutions such as family or religion, which impinge on that individuality, while not abandoning the responsibilities that these social institutions impose.

Chapter 4 further demonstrates how early modernist texts by women subverted culturally dominant narratives, by showing how Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915–1938), consistently critiqued as itself boring, forges new narrative techniques out of female boredom. *Pilgrimage* rejects formal and social conventionality, figured in the novels as boredom, through the documentation of its protagonist's technê of selfhood. Continuous and instantaneous perception is for Miriam, as subject, a practice of freedom, an assertion of self and strength against given reality, and specifically women's reality, as boredom. Where May Sinclair's novels posit the female as individual only apart from social conventions, *Pilgrimage*'s Miriam Henderson experiences individuality as an end in itself, and thus the novels participate in feminist and suffragist projects of the early decades of the twentieth century to secure selfhood for women. In the quest for selfhood, Richardson exposes the promise and potential of the bourgeois narrative of labor as identity-confirming, but she also demonstrates boredom and lack of meaning that can accompany work.

Addressing the question of whether women can be individuals within a patriarchal system in which individuality is equated with masculinity, Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, questions the premises of liberal individualism and feminism's reliance on it. Published in 1915 after the first of Sinclair's three novels on the subject and at the same time as Richardson's first volume of *Pilgrimage*, *The Voyage Out* depicts Rachel Vinrace's failure to become an individual. Woolf uses the diffuse mood of boredom throughout her novel as a vehicle by which to express doubt about her young heroine's ability to access any meaning or individual purpose, and through this to question individualism as defining the social system and one's apprehension of experience. In distinction from other feminist modernists, Woolf presents boredom as the unraveling of meaning as known by the subject, and, as such, as that which puts a Cartesian, subject-centered apprehension of experience into question.

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Boredom is frequently seen as a minor, insignificant emotion, as fleeting as it is opaque. But research for this book suggests otherwise. For women in Britain in the early twentieth century, boredom was equal parts plague and protest, vehicle of self-discovery and impediment to the same. For literary modernism, the focus on boredom as a problem for and of women creates new quest plots focused on self-relating while helping to shape modernism's formal obscurity, its haunting repetitions, its obsessive fascination with time, and its celebration of sexuality as a maker of meaning and a wellspring of vitality. Boredom, as an experience that is at once abject and critical, provokes reconsideration of modernist impulses.