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

Allison Pease

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*Boredom and Bored Women in the
Early Twentieth Century*

Anglo-American modernist literature is full of bored characters, from the obvious ones such as the unnamed narrator of Charlotte Gilman Perkins's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) or T.S. Eliot's typewriter girl in *The Waste Land* (1922) to less obvious ones such as Nella Larsen's Helga Crane in *Quicksand* (1928), Virginia Woolf's Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out* (1915), or Connie Chatterley in D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1915). Even Molly Bloom talks of her boredom in the "Penelope" chapter of *Ulysses* (1922). Modern boredom is not confined to the Anglo-American tradition, of course. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) is a forerunner to a French literary preoccupation with ennui and boredom that peaks in Jean-Paul Sartre's mid-twentieth-century existentialism, and Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* (1924) features a male character who does nothing for seven years. Henrik Ibsen's famous women, Nora Helmer and Hedda Gabler, are wildly bored, Norwegian Nobel Laureate Knut Hamson's *The Hunger* (1890) waxes lyrical on boredom, and Anton Chekhov's dramatic characters are defined by their boredom. Examples proliferate. In English, boredom may reach its literary apotheosis in the works of Samuel Beckett, whose characters wait, repeat actions and words, do nothing, and experience odd relationships to time. Boredom and the experience of emptiness that signals its curiously negative presence are implicit in modern and modernist writing.

But when we accept that boredom, along with contingent ideas about identity and agency, shapes modernism, we might well ask whose boredom and whose modernism? Here is where the argument of this book begins. More than a confined set of experiences on the pages of literary novels, boredom in the early twentieth century is a cultural phenomenon: a structure of feeling that includes affective, emergent but not wholly realized or defined personal and social relationships, relationships in process. Examining British modernist literature and the many cultural discourses from which the literature evolves and borrows, this chapter – indeed this

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book – argues that representational boredom in the modernist period, defined for the purposes of this study as 1900–1940, is a gendered experience. Representations of boredom as a structure of feeling for British women during this time are an acknowledgment of the profound dissatisfaction of a group of people who found themselves on the wrong side of agency, interest, and meaning as the twentieth century began. By depicting individual women enduring, struggling against, and made subject to boredom, the constellation of modernist novels that do so together manifest the putatively personal, subjective emotion of boredom as a public feeling. Lauren Berlant usefully calls such affective, mediated collectives “intimate publics.” An intimate public is “a space made of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general, what’s salient for its consumers is that it is a place of recognition and reflection. In an intimate public sphere emotional contact, of a sort, is made.”¹ To explore and give shape to the experiences of boredom was to forge a public form of inquiry into women’s lives that simultaneously created political and affective identities for women as suppressed, or would-be, agents.

But not all representations of boredom were the same; indeed there were multiple boredoms. Boredom comes to be read and interpreted by modernists so schismatically as to create a gendered divide. To understand this claim, one must first understand the varied ways in which boredom is recognized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the ways that it has been differently defined for men and for women in the modern period.

THE MEANINGLESSNESS OF BOREDOM

In modern use, boredom is understood as a loss of personal meaning, occasioned either by the withdrawal or absence of the meaningful or by the imposition of the meaningless. Despite related antecedents in the ancient and medieval worlds – *horror loci*, *taedium vitae*, *acedia*, melancholy, ennui, spleen – recent scholarship has explained the English expression of boredom as a particularly modern articulation of experience dating from the late eighteenth century.² Before this, the word “bore” first appeared in English not in reference to the modern understanding of boredom, but dating from about the year 1000 as that which pierces, perforates, makes a hole, or makes something hollow. This primary meaning conveys a violence that will become the palimpsest on which later meanings of boredom rest. The modern conception of “bore” is recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in an exchange of aristocratic letters written in

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1766 and 1767 complaining of chamber “bores,” presumably men who talked so tediously as to metaphorically pierce holes in their listeners and render them hollow. How, then, does English come to coin the word “boredom”? Not surprisingly, boredom’s first entry in the *OED* is in the form of a bored woman. In his 1852 novel *Bleak House*, Charles Dickens describes Lady Dedlock – her name also signifying the stasis characteristic of this elusive state – as suffering from a “chronic malady of boredom.” The *OED* defines boredom, unhelpfully, as the state of being bored. To be bored (the term first appeared in the *OED* in 1823) is to be wearied, suffering from ennui, another term adopted into English in the eighteenth century. The self-referentiality of these definitions does little to shed light on the experience of boredom and does much to suggest that boredom itself is elusive, appearing as an emptiness that resists definition. To pursue the word from its original use, one might conclude that to be bored is to be rendered metaphorically, or psychologically, hollow, and that boredom is the resulting experience of emptiness. But what is the discursive understanding of subject formation that renders experience, or indeed the self, either full or hollow? Boredom has no essential character; it functions as a stance toward, or a gauge of, not only what is valued and meaningful, but also one’s access to that meaning and value at any given point in time. Boredom thus emerges as an important register of British women’s experiences as they become increasingly aware of their lack of access to what is valued in their society.

Boredom shares an overlapping history with other, previously mentioned older terms, each with its own historical articulation of emptiness, sadness, and restless irritation.³ Perhaps its most significant precursor is in the early Christian term *acedia*. Known as “the demon of noontide” when it appeared in the fourth century, *acedia* was a sin committed by monks who, in the quiet listlessness of the afternoon, found themselves unable to communicate with God in their prayers. John Cassian (ca. 360–435 C.E.) characterizes *acedia* in his writings by “laziness and inertia, by an unwillingness to pursue spiritual exercises, by a desire to escape present circumstances, by tiredness, hunger, the slowing of time, by a desire to escape oneself through sleep or company.”⁴ Fascinating in this description is the agency ascribed to the individual who refuses to inhabit the given ideological space – in this instance, Christian diligence. Boredom clearly overlaps with, and shares characteristics of, *acedia* in its encounter with emptiness and its apparent refusal of the given world. Both straddle interiority and exteriority and delineate a conflict between the self and the order of things.

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Modern boredom is distinguished from its antecedents by the cultural order into which it is articulated. Through a shift in worldview characterized by the philosophies of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant in the West, the individual, not God, becomes the source of value and meaning, and self-knowledge becomes a register of truth. In what Foucault describes as the “Cartesian moment,” knowledge of the self becomes a form of consciousness: “by putting the self-evidence of the subject’s own existence at the very source of access to being, this knowledge of oneself . . . made the ‘know yourself’ into a fundamental means of access to the truth.”⁵ Boredom serves as a register of the success or failure of this project. If one is bored, one cannot access oneself, and therefore one has no access to truth as understood in modern terms. Counterintuitively, boredom should be understood here as a practice of the self. As literary critic Bryony Randall explains it, boredom is a mode of attention that opens the “self onto itself, demonstrating to the subject its own subjectivity formed through the absolute duration of human consciousness.”⁶ Modern boredom’s emphasis on the individual as producer of his or her own meaning is critical to reading the politics of boredom in modernism. Modern and modernist boredom arise as a way of establishing value, or its lack, and defining a new way of interpreting human experience connected to individual productivity. Adopting the earlier use of the word “bore” to understand the state or condition of being bored (“-dom”), it is useful to understand boredom not simply as an experience of disgusting weariness (tedium), but importantly as a moment in which that which contains one as a discreet entity has been pierced – bored – so that there is no longer an impregnable barrier between what is outside and what is inside. Boredom is a metaphorical permeability, an awareness of, at the same time that one is without, subjectivity.

Boredom can be temporary or lifelong, and it straddles subjective and objective worldviews. As such, boredom is both an emotion – the frustration and emptiness that occurs to and within a subject – and an affect relational and transformative experiences/moods/feelings of stifled meaninglessness that can happen to, or between, subjects and objects.⁷ At root, boredom is a problem of meaning. The bored subject cannot make or does not find his or her situation meaningful. Such boredom is experienced as an irritating emptiness, a desire for something unknown to relieve the claustrophobic, enervating sense of time passing slowly. The experience of boredom is painful and agitating; it is a prolonged sensation of a hollow within or emptiness without. Under the spell of boredom, time feels, as one of the German terms for boredom suggests, like a “long

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while,” *langweile*. Boredom is a “confrontation with time,” says Martin Heidegger, whose ideas on boredom are discussed later in this chapter, in which the feeling of “being left empty” emerges.⁸ This prolonged absence of a sense of self, a tedious inability to take interest or pleasure, suggests an identity crisis in miniature. But it also begs the question: what is the self that is interested? This is the question that becomes of decided importance to Anglophone women in the early twentieth century.

As manifest in British depictions of women in the early twentieth century, boredom can appear as emptiness or deadness, a lack, or passive dissatisfaction. There is a mechanical, repetitive aspect to their boredom that might be characterized as soulless. In the very opening lines of Woolf’s *Night and Day* (1920), for instance, the protagonist Katherine Hilberry is shown pouring out tea, using “one-fifth” of her mind and automatically going through the motions “for the sixth hundredth time . . . without bringing into play any of her unoccupied faculties.”⁹ The opening scene of May Sinclair’s *The Three Sisters* (1915) is a long, drawn-out depiction of the boredom the three sisters endure every evening as they wait for their father, a vicar, to come and say ten o’clock prayers. The three sisters are introduced as “sitting there in the dining-room behind the yellow blind, doing nothing. In the supine, motionless attitudes they seemed to be waiting for something to happen.” They brood, watch “vaguely,” and let out “weary moan[s]” until the Vicar arrives. As the brief last paragraph of the chapter explains, “That was all they were waiting for. It was all that could happen. It happened every night at ten o’clock.”¹⁰ Unable to give shape to their own lives, these women find themselves dependent on external factors most frequently linked to male authority to shape it for them. This inability to exert agency in their lives leads to a series of narrative pauses and moments of torpor figured in the terms of boredom.

Modernist literature rarely uses the word “boredom” as its own descriptor. Rather, individual authors develop unique rhetorics of boredom. Authors employ repeated phrases; ellipses and em dashes signifying time passing wordlessly; associative words such as “stillness,” “dull,” “weary,” “nothing,” “emptiness,” or “tired”; physical descriptions of characters as supine, still, or staring into the middle distance; and irony to suggest a split between the possible and the real. Representations of boredom differ, but modernist representations of bored women by May Sinclair, Virginia Woolf, and Dorothy Richardson share a common characteristic of bringing the reader into the experience of boredom through narrative elisions and fissures that reproduce their characters’ perceptions of their

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own blocked agency, interest, and meaning making for the reader. This accounts for some of the challenges of reading their texts.

From the final decades of the nineteenth century to the first few decades of the twentieth century, boredom was used, sometimes interchangeably, with a number of other terms defining psychic, spiritual, moral, and physical states in which one has difficulty accessing authenticity, productivity, and desire. To the medical professions, including the burgeoning field of psychoanalysis, boredom might be a symptom of, or concomitant with, neurasthenia, hysteria, melancholia, depression, or “nerves” – all medical terms of wide-ranging definition that included low-affect states in which one was unable to participate with pleasure. For politicians, economists, and evolutionists, boredom was frequently conflated with dangerously degenerative idleness. For philosophers and sociologists, boredom was associated with ennui, nihilism, anomie, disenchantment, or alienation. Important to this study, each of these terms reflects a particularly modern, post-Enlightenment articulation of the self as the authentic and productive author of his or her desire, and hence an individual self, experienced as such.

Where modernist women’s boredom conflicts with the dominant concept of boredom as the inability to produce one’s desire is in the difference between male-identified subjective individualism and woman’s inherited role as the second sex, the helpmate, and object of male-authored desire. How can a woman be both the authentic and productive author of her desire and a helpmate? Luce Irigaray argues that the lack of instinctual aim or desire is definitive of women under patriarchy. Woman finds “no possible way to represent or tell *the story of the economy of her libido* . . . the libido is masculine, or at any rate neuter.”¹¹ Woman is “a void, a lack of all representation, re-presentation, and even strictly speaking of all mimesis of her desire for origin. That desire will henceforth pass through the discourse-desire-law of man’s desire.”¹² In Irigaray’s logic, woman is always bored, or melancholic, as manifest in the absence of libidinal activity, her lack of effort to master the external world, her inability to love herself or other women, and the inhibition of all activity displayed in her pure passivity. Woman remains outside of a signifying economy and cannot coin signifiers, but she is (a) subject to its norms.¹³ This study asks why so many women are *represented* as bored in modernist literature. Although broadly generalized, Irigaray’s theory delineates how exclusion from social power can lead to the withdrawal into boredom. “How can one take part in social life,” Irigaray asks, “when one has no available currency, when one possesses nothing of one’s own to put in relation to the properties of the other, or others?”¹⁴

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In Britain in the early twentieth century, woman's agon with boredom is a struggle to subvert the given world *and* to achieve subjecthood at the same time. As women's agitation for their place in public life gains momentum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, boredom comes to the fore as both symptom and diagnosis of women's diminished and circumscribed experience. Women are bored, and in the modernist period, this boredom is presented for the first time as a public problem.

THE HOLLOW WOMEN

Underpinning Enlightenment philosophy is the notion of the modern subject as an individual who experiences the world first through sensations, out of which he later composes ideas and judgments. Humans give shape to reality by perceiving it; truth is an individual matter. Boredom is a concomitant phenomenon with this subjectivist view of the world, as boredom is the problem of meaning making. As Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen argues, "To be able to be bored, the subject must be able to perceive himself as an individual that can enter into various meaning contexts, and this subject demands meaning of the world and himself."¹⁵

Building on Enlightenment ideas, women's rights advocates in the early twentieth century worked within the discourse of individualism to argue that women needed to realize themselves *as* individuals, and that only full legal status as such could guarantee their agency. Women's boredom in the early twentieth century, however, cannot be explained simply as a failure of meaning making, but rather as a failure to become an individual. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault distinguishes the individual from the subject as a product of the modern shift in which the subject's access to the truth is defined within knowledge. He argues that access to the truth is contingent on cultural conditions: "to have access to the truth we must have studied, have an education, and operate within a certain scientific consensus" and these, along with other moral conditions, "do not concern the subject in his being; they only concern the individual in his concrete existence."¹⁶ One cannot know oneself in the realm of the universal; one becomes an individual through socially privileged experiences and networks that define these kinds of self-relations as truthful. For most women, long excluded from these practices, individualism was simply not attainable. In fact, women's secondary status creates a complex, and classically modernist, version of the struggle for selfhood that is frequently expressed through boredom. The bored woman in modernist literature fails to make meaning because her status as an individual

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is tenuous at best. Further, and complexly, boredom serves as a form of resistance to the ideological constructions of the individual.

Complicating the politics of individualism, British feminists in the early decades of the twentieth century worked to eradicate the illusion that female boredom was a singular, subjective experience, and instead strove to demonstrate the ways in which women's lack of equality and their conditioning into passivity lead to an emptiness of experience for women as a group. At the same time they were identifying women's lack of individuality, they were creating it. As Sowon S. Park has argued, "feminist politics transformed the institutionalization and production of women's writing through newly created suffrage and popular presses," which in turn enabled "the power of the written word to formulate, disseminate, and consolidate ideas of selfhood."¹⁷ Feminists diagnosed female boredom as one of the maladies of modern patriarchal culture. They thus articulated boredom as both subjective and objective: a public, structural element that conditioned a set of private emotional experiences. In her widely read "feminist bible" *Women and Labour* (1911), novelist and political activist Olive Schreiner wrote that because of patriarchal expectations in industrial society, women – and by this she meant middle- and upper-class women – had been reduced to a state of "morbid inactivity."¹⁸ Authors representing boredom in literature and feminist tracts participated in protesting the conditions under which women struggled to find meaning and/or themselves. As Berlant argues, "One of the main jobs of the minoritized arts that circulate through mass culture is to tell identifying consumers that 'you are not alone (in your struggles, desires, pleasures)': this is something we know but never tire of hearing confirmed, because aloneness is one of the affective experiences of being collectively, structurally unprivileged."¹⁹

Boredom and, as this study shows, the representation of boredom can function as political dissent. In *Melancholy and Society*, German sociologist Wolf Lepenies describes boredom as a structural response on the part of social groups whose lack of public significance inhibits their action, leaving them bored. Lepenies's work grows out of Emile Durkheim and Robert Merton's use of the term *anomie* to describe the absence or diminution of values, norms, or standards, and the feeling of alienation or purposelessness that accompanies such moments of social instability. Lepenies argues that as institutions stabilize actions, "they prescribe preferences toward which human action can orient itself."²⁰ In the early twentieth century, middle- and upper-class women's feminism was a response to the institutional discrimination of patriarchy that inhibited

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women's actions and limited their social usefulness to their sexual functions. The individual self was represented as a universal value, but it was clear to feminists that such selfhood was accessible only to some. Mina Loy's 1914 "Feminist Manifesto," for instance, points out the precise schism that denied women agency and promoted their boredom: "The value of man is assessed entirely according to his use or interest to the community, the value of woman, depends entirely on *chance*, her success or insuccess in manoeuvring a man into taking the life-long responsibility of her."²¹ Whether reading feminist manifestos, suffrage pamphlets, little magazines, or popular or genteel novels, modern women consumed narratives about themselves that allowed them to self-identify affectively as blocked, bored, dulled, and empty.

The first decades of the twentieth century represent a significant period in the history of British feminism precisely because of the broad-scale, collective nature of agitation for legal and social reforms. Activists built on the momentum of significant legal and educational changes in the nineteenth century during which girls began to be educated en masse for the first time in British history. In the 1850s, colleges for women began to train them for careers as governesses. Following their success, public boarding schools for girls were opened in the 1860s and 1870s. The Endowed Schools Act of 1869 and the Elementary Education Act of 1870 ensured that girls of the working classes would receive at least a basic education. In 1869, the first women's college was opened at Cambridge University, and a few others at Oxford University and the University of London opened thereafter. Royal Holloway College of the University of London was the first British university to award degrees to women in 1881. Oxford followed much later in 1920, and Cambridge stalled until 1947. Female literacy increased from about 50 percent in 1843 to almost 93 percent in 1891.²² This shift altered the cultural landscape irrevocably, but it is important to keep in mind that even though women as a group were being educated for the first time, the number of highly educated women was still relatively small. Vicinus reports that in 1897, the total number of women attending the nine colleges open to women in Britain was 784. Career opportunities outside of teaching were few. Thus, as a group, British women's intellectual capacities were cultivated more than ever before in history, but they were still expected to become mothers and wives and to be fulfilled as such.

The boredom of the intelligent, educated female who becomes wife and mother is a recurrent trope in popular literature of the early twentieth century. In Ada Leverson's trilogy *The Little Ottleys* (1908–1916), the

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protagonist, Edith Ottley, is introduced at the opening of *Love's Shadow* (1908) as play-acting remorse and patience while her petulant husband berates her for a series of slights, mostly imagined. After marveling that “with all the fuss about modern culture and higher education these days, girls are not even taught to spell!” he leaves and Edith wanders about their flat staring gravely into mirrors and murmuring to herself, “Yes, I am beginning to look bored!”²³ Wifehood and motherhood are not enough for Edith Ottley. The second volume, *Tenterhooks* (1912), notes of Edith, “The children were a deep and intense preoccupation. To say she adored them is insufficient ... for both she had the strongest feeling a mother could have. And yet the fact remained that they did not nearly fill her life. With Edith’s intellect and temperament they could only fill a part.”²⁴ Education assisted women to reflect skeptically on their lives like men, and in doing so it also allowed them to recognize the ways in which their lives were empty and limited compared to men’s. Boredom – as either a sign of the lack of access to meaning-making or as a protest against the already made world – resulted.

In addition to educational gains, women made legal gains in the nineteenth century, which laid the groundwork for the push toward suffrage and improved work laws. The 1870 and 1882 Married Women’s Property Acts recognized married women as legal entities with rights to their earnings, inheritances, and properties. The 1882 law was the first in British history to recognize women as individuals in their own right. Despite this, early-twentieth-century popular literature still represents marriage as an infringement on a woman’s sense of selfhood. In a story of a working-class woman’s boredom, Victoria Cross’s 1907 best seller, *Life’s Shop Window*, made into a popular 1914 movie, Lydia, a house servant, marries a farmhand to escape the “dullness” of her existence, only to realize: “This absolute, legal right of another person to herself, at any hour, time or season, whatever her own will at the moment might be, came before her suddenly with a sort of staggering self-assertion.”²⁵ Lydia abandons her first marriage and child in a protest against a life of “ceaseless, never-varying manual toil” and the “wild-brain hunger” that accompanies it.²⁶ After she leaves her first marriage because she is bored and bold enough to flaunt conventions she has long questioned, she comes to realize that her financial dependence on her next lover keeps her in a subordinate position: “Man’s attitude to the animals is one of cruel oppression, because they are helpless and dependent, and whenever a woman drifts into the position of an animal, namely of helpless dependence on a man, she too has to bear his brutality.”²⁷ With such blunt observations about the problems