The Only Unforgivable Sin: On Boredom & Being Bored

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Published by ELT Press

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ancient Roman world. Chapter six focuses on Paul Oleron, the protagonist of Onion’s “The Beckoning Fair One” (1911), a tale that suggests Oleron’s rented house possesses him psychologically or psychically, for he becomes obsessed with what he envisions to be the presence of a beautiful woman brushing her hair. Eventually, Oleron’s fixation with his “ghostly lover” culminates in insanity and pathological behavior as he murders his actual girlfriend.

Besides bringing these once popular narratives to the forefront of critical inquiry, Tearle threads specific ideas popularized by the Society for Psychical Research into his analysis of texts in a clear and thoughtful manner, illustrating the give and take between the psychic research that influenced the development of the ghost story and the ghost stories that popularized psychic research. Yet Tearle also pays attention to the formal elements of each text and how writers of such tales use literary devices to create suspense and uncertainty. This study offers a strong starting place for anyone interested in researching the development of the ghost story, the popularity of psychic research, or late-Victorian Gothic trends.

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The Only Unforgivable Sin: On Boredom & Being Bored

BOREDOM is something of a quicksilver state of mind: immediately recognizable (alas, what professor is not familiar with its glassy-eyed attendance in the classroom?) and wonderfully democratic in its purview, but deceptively slippery when it comes to dissection and examination. One hears it defined equally well in terms of excess (too much tedium, too much repetition) and lack (too little interest, too little meaning), presence (of distraction, of dissatisfaction) and absence (of desire, of will). Nearly twenty years ago, Patricia Meyer Spacks’s Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind (1995) conveyed readers through boredom’s multiple manifestations in British literature from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Allison Pease’s investigation in Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom is much narrower in scope. It focuses on one prevalent type: the bored woman in early British modernist fiction. As it turns out, she’s everywhere.
Pease’s restriction of her inquiry to this tiny subset of literature is limiting, but justifiable. For while Spacks showed us a boredom that has no respect for persons, Pease quickly points out that women—and especially women in modernist novels—seem to have a special relationship with boredom. As she explains in her preface, “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.” Appearing in print at a time when women were agitating for greater social and political recognition, these yawners and small talkers, Pease claims, are crucial figures not only because they reflect women’s general lack of subjectivity, agency, and desire. More important, bored female characters elicit from authors new “form[s] and narrative techniques” that emerged as writers attempted “to articulate, understand, and in some cases remedy women’s boredom.” Thus, Pease’s central claim is that many modernist literary innovations—including those, like “shifting narrative perspectives and incantatory repetition,” that we most readily associate with early twentieth-century British literature—arise as authors grapple with the recalcitrant figure of the bored woman.

Spacks had noted that in the eighteenth century, women attributed boredom to men, while in the nineteenth, men attributed it to women. Pease begins her book with a lengthy overview of boredom in the twentieth century. For Pease, women’s boredom is intimately connected with the tensions surrounding the suffrage movement; thus “representations of boredom as a structure of feeling for British women during this time are an acknowledgement of the profound dissatisfaction of a group of people who found themselves on the wrong side of agency, interest, and meaning.” Both “an emotion” and “an affect,” boredom highlights those issues of subjectivity and desire that British women, disenfranchised in a number of ways, spoke most vociferously about. Not surprisingly, then, Pease reads boredom in modernist literature as potentially subversive, a kind of “political dissent” when taken up in a gesture of active refusal. It becomes a means of engaging by refusing to be engaged. Of course, not all authors who penned bored women during this period appreciated such a gesture, and Pease devotes the second chapter of Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom to several male authors whose representations of female boredom share a remarkable likeness.
Pease’s chapter on D. H. Lawrence, H. G. Wells, E. M. Forster, Arnold Bennett, and the mostly forgotten popular writer Robert Hichens records two similarities about these otherwise very different authors’ depictions of bored women. First, Pease asserts that in the novels of these men, “women’s boredom is often generalized to a nihilistic worldview”; and second, these authors “reverse nihilistic narratives through ... women’s sexual connection with men.” With the exception of Bennett, who is something of an outlier in Pease’s argument, these male writers all create female characters whose boredom is resolved with sex. What is more interesting, most of these authors (Lawrence is the stand-alone here) offer this resolution in alignment with a decidedly feminist narrative trajectory in which the bored women are moved toward greater freedom and self-realization. Bennett is the only one of the group to reject this strangely enlightened path to exploitation, which makes him a bridge to the female writers whom Pease explores at greater length in the following chapters.

The chapters on Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, and Virginia Woolf (Pease devotes a chapter to each female author) allow Pease to demonstrate at greater length that pairing women with heterosexual partners as her male authors do does little to allay their boredom and, in fact, may actually compound the loss of subjectivity and agency that sparked their disinterest in the first place. Instead, female writers of bored women, Pease claims, tend to question the very possibility of individuality and find no easy resolution to the weariness that plagues the women in their novels. Sinclair offers her bored characters the ability to choose, but their choice is between boredom and the conscious sublimation of their desires, which results in a “quasi-mystical ecstatic” state dependent upon an emptying of self. Richardson’s thirteen-volume stream-of-consciousness Pilgrimage, called by one critic “the longest bore on earth,” forces the reader to struggle against boredom by creating her own sense of meaning in tandem with the novel’s main character. And in Woolf’s The Voyage Out, Rachel Vinrace’s inability to overcome boredom by finding meaning suggests to Pease a “feminist critique of the impediments before women’s experience of individualism.” Each of these texts demonstrates that while boredom is “not solely a female phenomenon in British modernism,” women’s boredom was “the impetus, antagonist, and climax” of many modernist texts.

The questions that Pease’s analysis raises are good ones, and they take us into texts (such as Hichens’s The Garden of Allah and Sinclair’s Mary Olivier) that we do not often visit in considerations of gender.
and modernism. Pease’s commitment to the production of more and better discussions of gender and sexuality in modernist literature is deliberate and everywhere apparent. It is this self-conscious dedication, however, that makes some of her methodological choices seem rather unaccountable. For example, she is well aware of the potential objections twenty-first-century readers might raise against an organizational scheme (her analytical corralling of male authors to one side and female authors to another) more typical, perhaps, of feminist literary criticism of the 1980s and 1990s. She asserts that her study “did not set out to schematize male and female writers—a practice that seems foolhardy at best and simplistic at worst—but the narrative and technical similarities along gendered lines was [sic] so striking that I had to consider the differences between narrative styles and plots and think through the potential reasons for them.” One unfortunate result of this binary structuring is, in fact, a simplification of argument that ends Pease’s analyses of individual texts—which at times are insightful and original—in rather predictable places. That is, all of the male-authored versions of female boredom reflect the belief that women can be cured of their boredom with sex; all of the female-authored versions portray boredom as a function of patriarchal oppression that stifles women’s experience of individuality and subjectivity. To be sure, there is plenty of room for variation within these two sex-divided camps; and yet, by committing herself to a model of analysis that polarizes male and female writers on the basis of their maleness or femaleness alone, Pease misses the opportunity to consider how individual writers complicate the representation of boredom in productive ways.

Despite (or perhaps because of) Pease’s assertion that she is “pick[ing] up on the work of 1980s modernist feminist criticism in order to point out what seems to have been overlooked” by recent scholars, her gender politics feels somewhat reductive; this feeling is augmented by a general lack of critical engagement that translates into slight chapters that one wishes had been developed with more textual evidence. Readers will notice that Pease rarely cites other literary critics in her analyses. Consequently, we do not get a sense of the scholarly conversation surrounding her texts, something that is particularly detrimental with regard to lesser-known novels such as The Three Sisters or The Garden of Allah, whose critical context will be unfamiliar to most readers. Nor do we get an overabundance of primary evidence supporting Pease’s claims. In her chapter on male writers, especially, we race from example to example with as little as one page devoted to Lady Chatterley’s...
Lover or A Room with a View. Most disappointingly, however, Pease fails to provide readers with enough textual evidence to confirm that there is a link between the literary innovations of modernist authors and female boredom. Pease’s main claim, we recall, is largely formalist, aimed at demonstrating both a correlative and a causal relationship between literary form and the bored woman in modernist novels. Yet this aspect of her argument recedes far into the background of more general feminist claims about agency and subjectivity. Readers may leave the book convinced that women’s boredom was complicit with patriarchal oppression in early twentieth-century Britain but not that boredom has a special relationship with modernist literary innovation. More extensive analysis will be necessary to establish this claim.

In short, Pease’s shifting of our attention to the bored woman at the turn of the century allows us to recognize the fact that most often when critics reflect on fin-de-siècle boredom, it is the image of the bored male that looms large. By bringing his female counterpart to the forefront to explore the gendered implications of her position in British literature, Pease opens a number of productive avenues of exploration for readers. It is one of the virtues of Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom that the book leaves room for many more scholars to join the conversation that Pease has here begun.

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Modernism & Magic

HAS TOO MUCH EMPHASIS been placed on epistemological skepticism in the analysis of early twentieth-century literature and film? Have scholars of the period assumed too readily that high modernist formal experiment reflected a crisis in representation, a widespread loss of faith in language and its ability to communicate fully and without loss? These questions lurk quietly in the background of Leigh Wilson’s fascinating new monograph on modernism, magic, and the occult and give importance to what might otherwise be considered a rather eccentric study of modernist aesthetics. It is Wilson’s belief that the tendency of many of us to regard modernist mimetic practice as steeped in an awareness of the limitations of referentiality, to be poststructuralist