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The Gravity of Weight

## Boredom: An Endless Present

An appreciation of boredom in literature, art, science, and life.

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### KEY POINTS

- Boredom is a common enough unpleasant state of mind in which time seems to stand still.
- Some are more prone to boredom than others but having a rich fantasy life may make boredom less likely.
- Boredom may be increasing in recent years with the ubiquitous, overstimulating presence of digital media.



"Ennui," 1893, by French artist Gaston La Touche.

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The International Sanatorium Berghof, high in the Swiss Alps above the flatlands, is a place where people “live horizontally.” The smallest unit of time is the month, and one day is like any other.

Hans Castorp, the protagonist in Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, is visiting his cousin Joachim, who is “dangerously ill” with tuberculosis and will ultimately die there of his disease.

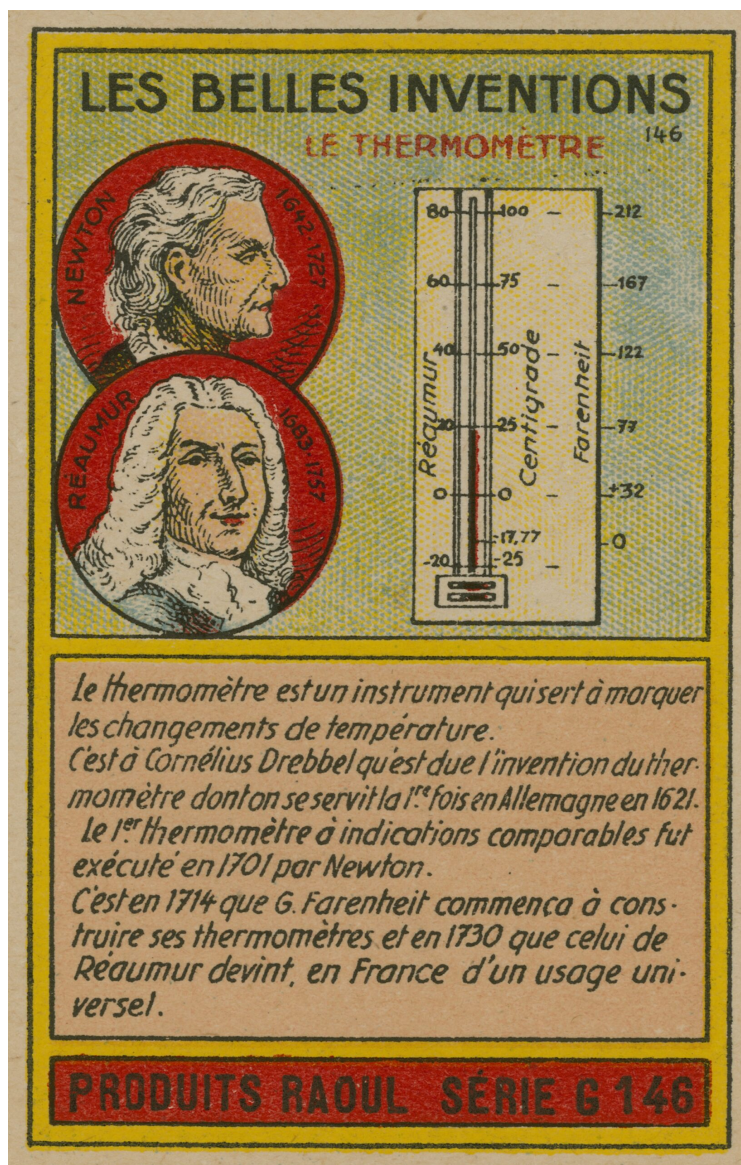
“I truly like measuring my temperature four times a day,” says Joachim, “because it makes you notice what one minute or even seven actually means—especially since the seven days of the week hang so dreadfully heavy on your hands here.”

Hans Castorp planned to visit his cousin for three weeks. He would himself be diagnosed with a mild case of TB and would stay seven years, long since losing track "of where else he might go...no longer even capable of forming the thought of a return to the flatlands" (p. 697).

“What people call boredom is actually an abnormal compression of time caused by monotony,” writes Mann. “There is a monotony of eternalness where the tenses of verbs become confused, and the true tense of all existence is the inelastic present” (p. 102).

“Our attitude toward time is altered...there is no distinction between past, present, and future. There seems to be only an endless present” (Wangh, 1975).

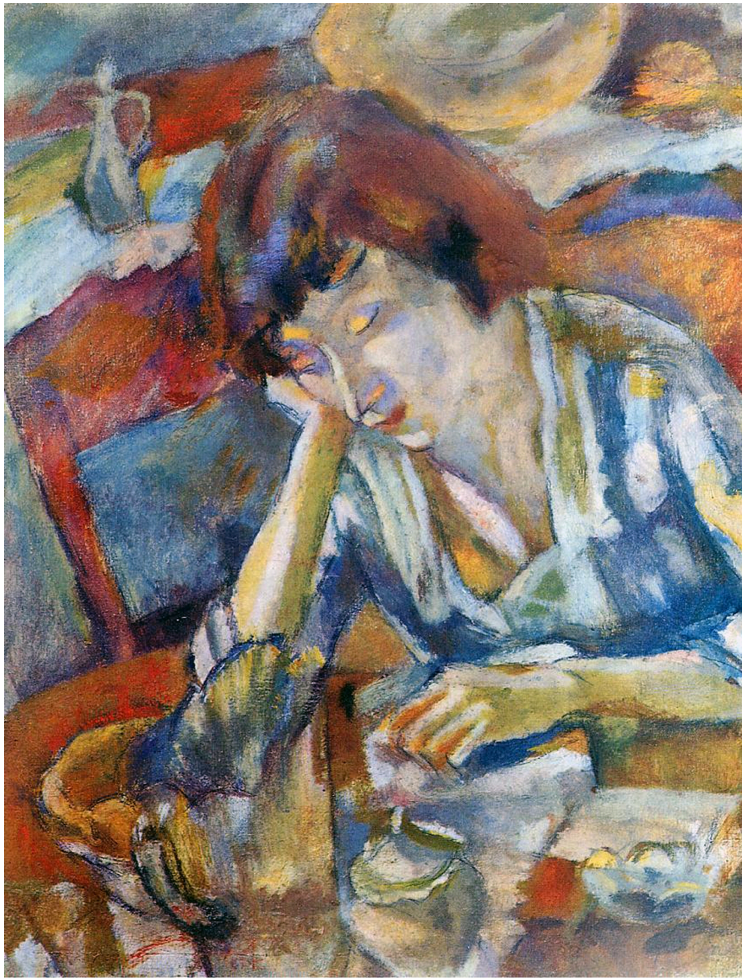
The concept of time seems central to any discussion of boredom, which is an "unpleasant and undesired" state of mind (Levine, 2023). Further, boredom may be specifically human since, to feel bored, we have to have some measure of time (Wangh).



The invention of the thermometer. In Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, patients take their temperature four times a day for seven minutes each time.

Source: French School, 19th century. Private Collection. Copyright Look and Learn/Bridgeman Images. Used with permission.

There are many words for boredom, including *tedium* and the French word *ennui*. The German word for boredom, *langeweile*, literally means *a long while*, "in which time loses its measure" (Wangh).



"Hermine," wife of the Bulgarian artist Jules Pascin, 1919.  
Private Collection.

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Nobel Prize-winning Russian dissident and poet Joseph Brodsky, in a commencement address at Dartmouth College, described boredom as "your window on time's infinity... boredom speaks the language of time, and it teaches you the most valuable lesson of your life: the lesson of your utter insignificance" (1989).

For Brodsky, boredom is "a complex phenomenon" and deserving of scrutiny because "it represents pure, undiluted time in all its repetitive, redundant, monotonous splendor." Passion, though, can be a remedy against boredom, he says.

Branded a "social parasite" by the Soviets, Brodsky may have experienced hours of boredom when he worked menial jobs and when he was confined unjustly to a mental institution and later, a Siberian labor camp (The Attic).

Other than a distorted sense of time, boredom includes a state of dissatisfaction and a sense of longing but an inability to define what is longed for. It involves a seeming passive inability to act, a sense of emptiness, and an "expectant attitude" that the external world will supply some satisfaction (Greenson, 1953). It also reflects a sense

of constraint—someone bored feels they must do what they don't want to do or cannot do what they want (Eastwood et al., 2012).

Some people are more prone to boredom than others. Those with a vivid fantasy life and a creative imagination may be less likely to experience boredom (Wangh).

For most people, though, boredom is a commonly experienced transient state (Eastwood et al.), often related to repetitive, unengaging activities (An et al., 2023).

Some researchers emphasize that boredom is understood "in the colloquial sense," but it is much more difficult to define operationally, and there is still "active debate" about the nature of boredom and whether there are any signature markers (Raffaelli et al., 2018).



Portrait of Jaime Sabartes, 1901, by Picasso. Pushkin Museum, Moscow.

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Different schools of thought emphasize different aspects: *Psychoanalysts* consider boredom a defense against a conflict between a wish and a threat (Wangh); *existentialists* focus on boredom resulting from emptiness and feelings of

meaninglessness; *arousal theorists* emphasize boredom as a mismatch between a need for arousal and what the environment provides; and *cognitive psychologists* focus on boredom's relationship between an environment that is not stimulating and a person's impaired ability to concentrate and pay attention (Raffaelli et al.; Eastwood et al.).



"Is It Time?" by English artist John Henry Henshall, 1884.  
Private Collection.

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Tasks that are both too easy and too difficult may create boredom (Raffaelli et al).

Further, there is controversy about whether boredom is a high or low arousal state, i.e., whether there is *agitated boredom* and *apathetic boredom* (Danckert and Elpidorou).

We don't know why people become bored, though boredom may encourage people to seek out new goals or opportunities. In that sense, boredom may have an adaptive, motivating, and regulating function (Bench and Lench, 2013; Danckert and Elpidorou, 2023).

Just as pain is a signal that alerts us to physical danger, boredom can be seen as alerting us that an experience is not worthwhile (Levine) or even potentially dangerous (Zakay, 2014).

Boredom, for example, has been associated with maladaptive behavior such as promiscuity, drug abuse, and gambling (Zakay; Bench and Lench). Some suggest that boredom can have deleterious effects on health, as in the expression "bored to death" (Britton and Shipley, 2010).

Boredom has increased in our digital age where entertainment is always available. We are in an “era of constant digital engagement.” These media sources, which provide chronic exposure to rewarding stimuli, coupled with our “insatiable” desire for stimulation, may reduce our sensitivity to these stimuli, divide our attention, and reduce any sense of meaning as we are bombarded with a “fragmented variety” of information to process (Tam and Inzlicht, 2024). People may even engage in *second screening*, i.e., using a digital device like an iPhone while watching TV (Tam and Inzlicht).

One of the major issues in studying boredom is that it is an “inherently internal experience” and it is difficult to determine experimentally when boredom begins and ends. Studies utilizing EEGs and fMRIs may provide greater insight (Raffaelli et al).



"Ennui," 1914, by English artist Walter Richard Sickert. Tate Britain. A married couple bored with each other.

Source: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

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