

2023

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### Recommended Citation

Burnett, Caleb (2023) "The Historical Roots of Loneliness," *Vulcan Historical Review*. Vol. 27, Article 14.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan/vol27/iss2023/14>

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## THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF LONELINESS

Caleb Burnett

Loneliness is not a static emotional experience, but rather an emotion unique to modernity that arose in response to a heightened sense of isolation created by various historical developments of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These developments changed humanity's relationship with itself and the world. Loneliness is a complex emotion that is felt in many different ways depending on particular situational and environmental factors. However, it can generally be defined as a sense of lack deriving from isolation.<sup>1</sup> For example, loneliness could be experienced due to a lack of friendships, lack of love, or a lack of meaningful relationships.<sup>2</sup> To experience loneliness, being physically alone is not always necessary. The twentieth-century writer Sylvia Plath wrote that she felt most lonely when she was at the library in the presence of others, where she could compare her own feelings of isolation to those socializing around her.<sup>3</sup> Before the nineteenth century, the word "loneliness" or "lonely" was often used interchangeably with "solitude" and was meant to convey the physical state of being alone or removing oneself from society.<sup>4</sup> The idea of *oneliness* was also popular in early modern Europe and argued humans are never truly alone because of their ever-present relationship with God.<sup>5</sup> However, the shift from agrarian societies to urban industrial ones with socially mobile populations in the early nineteenth century resulted in a new conception of loneliness as a distinct experience that was a response to the emerging competitive individualism of modern life.<sup>6</sup> Several scholars have argued that urbanization and solitary living are central to the creation of modern loneliness.<sup>7</sup>

While environmental factors are important, this school of thought downplays the impact of secularization, the rise of modern medicine, and existential philosophy on

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**Twentieth-century Americans saw the loner as maladjusted to the demands of a society that emphasized sociability and the appearance of friendliness.**

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contemporary ideas of loneliness and being alone. These various factors have all contributed to the development of modern loneliness as a distinct emotional state experienced due to a sense of lack and isolation that is separate from older notions of solitude.

Loneliness before the nineteenth century was not thought of as an emotional or psychological experience, but a physical one with both negative and positive connotations. The word is first described in Thomas Blount's 1661 edition of *Glossographia* as "an [*sic*] one; an oneliness or loneliness, a single or singleness."<sup>8</sup> The term *lonely* appears more than the term *loneliness* in printed text before 1800, with "solitude" being the dominant term used to describe being alone.<sup>9</sup> Solitude could be a time of positive reflection and meditation, and often implied a religious context in which one communed with God. In this sense, one was never truly alone, as they were always with the ever-present God.<sup>10</sup> These pre-nineteenth-century ideas of solitude drew on the older Christian tradition of hermeticism, which saw isolation as a spiritual path to salvation. Some Enlightenment intellectuals like Jean-Jaques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft even



Christian hermits like St. Paul of Thebes, depicted here in Giuseppe Di Ribera's 1640 painting, sought out solitude to commune with God through silent contemplation. [Wikimedia Commons](#).

associated solitude with deistic ideas of God-in-nature.<sup>11</sup> Before the nineteenth century, being alone in the form of solitude was not a solely negative experience; in fact, it could be beneficial to the soul under certain circumstances.

This religiously-influenced conception of solitude as an inherently neutral experience that affected the soul depending on how or when it was experienced was also reflected in early-modern medical traditions. The humoral tradition dominated Western medicine from the second to late eighteenth centuries. Humorism believed that good health was brought about through the balance of the body's four humors: blood, choler (yellow bile), phlegm, and black bile.<sup>12</sup> An imbalance of the humors was caused by excess passions

and unnatural habits of the body, which resulted in various ailments, such as depression or obesity. Therefore, solitude had to be kept in balance as well to not impact a person's health.<sup>13</sup> The historian Faye Bound Alberti writes, "Solitude was particularly problematic when it was imposed from the outside rather than sought from within...Too little solitude, like too much exercise, could deplete the spirits; too much made them sluggish and prone to melancholia."<sup>14</sup> Being alone was not an inherently bad thing or a reflection of an individual's social failures, as is often associated with modern ideas of loneliness. Even the eighteenth-century English neoclassical writer and critic of solitude Samuel Johnson believed in a "universal reason for some stated intervals of solitude."<sup>15</sup> He writes, "Knowledge is to be gained by study, and study to be prosecuted only in retirement...since it is necessary that we weaken the temptations of the world, by retiring at certain seasons of it."<sup>16</sup> It was only through extreme acts like misanthropically renouncing society or being unwillingly alone—perhaps through exile or imprisonment—that an issue arose. This is to say that how humans have regarded what is now considered "loneliness" has not been experienced the same way throughout history. How humans have felt about being alone has changed over time due to various historical and intellectual developments.

In the late eighteenth century, Enlightenment ideas challenged traditional understandings about loneliness, as new concepts such as "individualism" and "civil society" altered humans' understandings of themselves and others. With the French philosopher Rene Descartes's famous proclamation, "I think therefore I am," it was now possible to separate the mind and body from one another and to view the mind as being in control of the body. Alberti writes, "It became possible to view the human body as an automaton, and physical movement, including the heartbeat, as reflecting physiological impulse, rather than a spiritual presence."<sup>17</sup>

Concurrently, neoclassicists of the Enlightenment believed that solitude was a negative experience that harmed one's mental health and resulted in the loss of one's capacity to reason.<sup>18</sup> Many of these artists, writers, and intellectuals lived active social lives in coffee houses and social clubs, and their art stressed the elements and virtues they believed all men had in common.<sup>19</sup> Solitude was now critiqued from the standpoint of duty, as men were supposed to be public examples of the good life in the public sphere.<sup>20</sup> Alberti writes, "Performing sociability through public gatherings and collective participation in some kind of shared consensus of value was one of the ways through which civil society was manifested and reinforced."<sup>21</sup> In the words of the English poet Alexander Pope, "Self-love and Social be the Same."<sup>22</sup> However, later Romanticists praised solitude's ability to provide emotional fulfillment and emphasized the necessity of the search for the individual in an increasingly mechanized society.<sup>23</sup> The English Romantic poet William Wordsworth depicted being alone in nature as a time of intellectual and spiritual development. In his 1807 poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," he writes, "I wandered lonely as a cloud/ That floats on high o'er vales and hill,/ When all at once I saw a crowd,/ A host, of golden daffodils;/ Beneath the lake, beneath the trees,/ Fluttering and dancing in the breeze."<sup>24</sup> After further recounting the beauty witnessed on his solitary stroll through nature, he reflects on the experience in the final stanza. He writes, "For oft, when on my couch I lie/ In vacant or in pensive mood,/ They flash upon that inward eye/ Which is the bliss of solitude;/ And then my heart with pleasure fills,/ And dances with the daffodils."<sup>25</sup> To Romanticists like Wordsworth, reflecting on the solitude of nature provided a blissful escape from the stresses and pressures of public life. The new rational individual of the eighteenth century was pressured to both act on their own as an individual and to conform to the common values of civil society.

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**Modern medicine came to pathologize loneliness and view it as a mental affliction to be treated alongside mental conditions like depression and anxiety.**

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The struggle to live as an individual in a modern world that constrained individual self-expression created the sense of isolation necessary for the emergence of loneliness throughout the nineteenth century. By 1800, the term "loneliness" had replaced "solitude," and a cultural emphasis on the power of the individual grew, especially in America.<sup>26</sup> Observers like Alexis De Tocqueville believed that individualistic ideologies left Americans susceptible to loneliness. To Tocqueville, Americans were free agents who were not linked by traditional family and social bonds. He wrote, "Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart."<sup>27</sup>

This emphasis on individuality created a framework wherein people bore more personal responsibility for their failures, especially within an emerging capitalist context. These individualistic ideologies left many people feeling lonely, and they recalled in their diaries and letters a desire for meaningful relationships with other people.<sup>28</sup> Nineteenth-century novels also began to stress the desire for a sense of belonging and emotional satisfaction in their protagonists.<sup>29</sup> While nineteenth-century loneliness was mostly situational, a growing sense of isolation was reflected in both personal and public writings. These writings emphasized the need for the



The 20th-century political philosopher Hannah Arendt theorized that loneliness was a product of modernity and a part of the human condition. Wikimedia Commons.

individual to live a fulfilling life while existing in a world that made them unable to do so.

New understandings of loneliness as an experience caused by a lack of meaningfulness in some aspect of one's life emerged in Western thought alongside new ways of living. Industrialization and mass migration brought about these new lifestyles. In the early 1800s, around half of the U.S. population moved across state lines. By the end of the century, over fifty percent of Americans lived in towns and cities.<sup>30</sup> Instead of working within settled communities their entire lives, people abandoned their family farms in search of factory jobs in cities.<sup>31</sup> Industrialization uprooted

traditional ways of life and reoriented humans' relationships to their labor. People were now competing and performing alienating labor in this new urban environment, while traditional community life began to disappear.<sup>32</sup> Political theorist Hannah Arendt identified this uprootedness, caused by industrialization, as the origin of modern loneliness. The traditional community structures from which humans derived meaning were now replaced with labor.<sup>33</sup> Marx wrote during this period about how no man "seen in his isolation produces values," as "products become values only in their social relationship."<sup>34</sup> Marx recognized the incompatibility of classical political thought with modern industrial life, which reduced transcendent "ideas" down to functional "values." Values were social commodities that only derived importance through their connection to society and commerce. Anything of value was the product of society and the relationship between its members.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, traditional ideas about being alone such as oneliness or solitude were no longer valuable to modern society. The development of the soul or strengthening of one's relationship with God through solitude could not be easily transmuted into an entity of exchange. Arendt writes, "At no time prior to the incipient Industrial Revolution was it held that values, and not things, are the result of man's productive capacity, or was everything that exists related to society and not to man 'seen in his isolation.'"<sup>36</sup> Everything in the modern world now derived existence from society and ascribed all things, whether that be material objects or ideas themselves, value. Value was now the main unit by which to measure human thought and action.<sup>37</sup> As a result, being in solitude was no longer a meaningful act, as it produced no value. The collapse of traditional forms of community and ways of thinking, brought about by industrialization and urbanization, gave individuals no ability to manifest themselves in any meaningful way outside of their labor. However, this labor was ultimately

alienating factory labor which produced a paradox whereby people were told by society to live as free individuals, yet were constrained by the very values and practices of society when attempting to live as one. As Arendt states, “Man is utterly thrown back on himself. On the biological and on himself...In the process of labor, a curious loneliness arises.”<sup>38</sup>

The Industrial Revolution also brought about the rise of mass solitary living, which bred the conditions of isolation and aloneness necessary for loneliness to occur. Living alone has historically been reserved for a small percentage of the population. Solitary living has also been specific to certain situations, such as the migration west on the American frontier, which left many men living alone in communities with heavily disproportionate sex ratios.<sup>39</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, there was a notable rise in solitary households, that continued to rise throughout it, especially after 1960.<sup>40</sup> Larger percentages of people across age groups are now living alone at unprecedented rates, with over five million American solitary dwellers aged between eighteen and thirty-four.<sup>41</sup> The historian Keith Snell has argued that this unprecedented rise in solitary living stems from a variety of different factors that have affected historical family structures. Further, he has argued that the rise of solitary living is not the origin of loneliness per se, but one factor that has resulted in greater amounts of aloneness, which is known to contribute to experiencing loneliness.<sup>42</sup> This mass urbanism, brought about by industrialization, as a cause of loneliness seems contradictory at first, as urban environments push people closer to one another and should thus prevent loneliness. However, as the writer Olivia Liang points out, environmental space is not the same as emotional space.<sup>43</sup> Loneliness is not necessarily experienced due to a lack of social interactions, but a lack of meaningful relationships. Historians Luke Fernandez and Susan J. Matt write, “As Americans became city dwellers, they met more

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**At the core of modern loneliness are fundamental questions about the political, economic, and social structures that shape Western society.**

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people, and some might have expected that they would encounter less isolation than they had on farms and in small towns. But these hopes were not always borne out.”<sup>44</sup> Urban environments created expectations among many to have larger social circles than had been the norm in the nineteenth century’s smaller communities. Some doctors even worried that this increased sense of stress and overstimulation from large amounts of interaction could lead to nervousness and adverse health effects among city dwellers. While doctors and academics worried about too much interaction, others did take action to address their loneliness.

Citizens of cities including New York, Detroit, and Chicago formed Lonely Clubs or Lonely Bureaus, which were meant to bring people together and form friendships.<sup>45</sup> The existence of these groups indicates that mass loneliness not only existed in twentieth-century cities, but had also come to be viewed as something that could be aggressively fought and overcome. The formation of these clubs also suggests that traditional treatments such as religion and resignation were no longer considered adequate. As the founder of New York’s Less Lonely League stated, “I thought that through a church I might meet [...] people. I attended one in Central Park, west, but [...] no friends were to be made there. I attended another church in Lenox avenue [...] Now I don’t attend any church.”<sup>46</sup> Because of the loneliness, despondency, and isolation felt by many in the modern city environment, many people continued



The American artist Edward Hopper often depicted scenes of urban isolation and loneliness experienced by many in the modern city environment, as in his 1942 masterpiece work *Nighthawks*. Wikimedia Commons.

to form these clubs and write their local papers about their want for connection.<sup>47</sup> To many in the early twentieth century, loneliness was considered a serious problem, but one that could be overcome.

Rising rates of secularization and waning religious certainty, which began in the nineteenth century, are important factors that contributed to the formation of modern loneliness. Religion and religious faith have always served as a remedy for loneliness and still do for many. The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud wrote of how “devout, intrinsic religion” provided a type of buffer from loneliness. It both shielded off fears of social isolation through religious gatherings, while also quelling feelings of inner isolation, as the ever-present God ensured the believer was never truly alone.<sup>48</sup> Nations across Western Europe and North America have undergone a gradual process of secularization since the nineteenth century, wherein those nations’ traditions, values, and beliefs have changed as a result.<sup>49</sup> Sociologists like Emile Durkheim and Max Weber have theorized that industrialization was the primary force behind this secularization, as modern bureaucracies assumed responsibility for many of the

societal tasks that churches and parishes had previously performed. With these responsibilities now in the hands of the state, religious institutions faded in significance over time.<sup>50</sup> Advances in modern medicine in the nineteenth century, which were influenced by increasing secularization, also changed scientific understandings of human anatomy. Alberti writes, “Western medicine found new ways of classifying mental and physical health and developed a series of specialisms around emotional and psychological wellbeing on the one hand, and physical organs, systems, and parts on the other.”<sup>51</sup> Modern medical approaches that emphasized the study of biology and psychology viewed solitude as having a negative effect on the body, as opposed to the previous humoral tradition that interpreted solitude as partially beneficial to the human soul.<sup>52</sup>

While traditional religious prescriptions for loneliness were on the decline, new forms of Protestantism, such as the New Thought movement, preached that individuals could change their situations through positive thinking. Fernandez and Matt write, “By mid-century, books like the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* were [...] best sellers, spreading the message that people could change their conditions through a positive outlook.”<sup>53</sup> Whereas an eighteenth-century farmer could alleviate his loneliness through his certainty in God’s divine plan, loneliness by the twentieth century was now a social phenomenon that was no longer mitigated simply through a relationship with God. Instead, the mindset one approached the emotional experience with, as well as the presence of secular peer groups that shared a sense of belonging, grew in importance at this time, as a way of treating feelings of loneliness.<sup>54</sup>

Loneliness by the mid-twentieth century began to be interpreted in several different ways, with some writers viewing it as an intrinsic part of the human condition itself.

By this time, there was a growing belief in an inherent conflict of the self versus the world, and the individual versus society, which is still influential in Western political, economic, and intellectual discussions today.<sup>55</sup> Existentialism identified the helplessness of the individual who had become estranged from the human soul as a result of scientific and technological advancements, as well as the American belief in progress.<sup>56</sup> Existential loneliness was seen as an intrinsic part of the human experience that represented the individual's struggle to come to terms with the paradox of being a unique self striving for meaning in life, while also existing as a social being dependent on others to become fully human. Martin Heidegger, inspired by Søren Kierkegaard, viewed loneliness as the individual's struggle toward true self-knowledge and freedom.<sup>57</sup> As Sartre writes, "Hell is other people," and learning to live with oneself was the only way to truly affirm one's being and authenticity.<sup>58</sup>

However, the existentialist perspective did not become the dominant way of thinking about and treating loneliness in a post-war America that embraced technology, individualism, and consumerism. Fernandez and Matt write, "Beginning in the twentieth century, Americans heard again and again that their isolation and social and business failures were due not to forces larger than themselves...but to their own failure to develop a likable self."<sup>59</sup> The term *loner* developed in the 1940s to mark those who sought out solitude as abnormal, compared to well-adjusted people who were supposed to be sociable and seek out friends. Twentieth-century Americans saw the *loner* as maladjusted to the demands of a society that emphasized sociability and the appearance of friendliness.<sup>60</sup> New technologies such as radios, televisions, and telephones were intentionally marketed as solutions to loneliness as well. These products placed an even bigger stigma on loners, as these technologies made facilitating interactions easier than

ever before. There was no longer an excuse to not interact with people. Though consumption was marketed as a cure for loneliness, in reality, it only exacerbated loneliness, as people retreated further into their private homes with private pools and private cars.<sup>61</sup> David Riesman's 1950 sociological study *The Lonely Crowd* critiqued middle-class American culture as group-oriented, sensitive to the opinions of others, and unable to identify internal value.<sup>62</sup> Post-war individualism sought a cure for loneliness through consumption and suburban life, yet this lifestyle made it harder to form communities and only intensified people's loneliness.

Still searching for a cure to this new social malady, many turned to psychology, medicine, and self-help, as a new industry of loneliness emerged in the 1970s. Philip Slater's 1970 book *The Pursuit of Loneliness* blamed Americans' individualistic character as the cause of mass loneliness and suggested that Americans would be happier if they let go of their individualistic tendencies and consumption habits.<sup>63</sup> This perspective blamed the lonely person as the cause of their own suffering and only reinforced the concept that loneliness was linked to personal shortcomings. Loneliness by the 1970s was seen as a socially negative condition that was the consequence of an individual's failure to live a socially acceptable, extroverted lifestyle. An interest in loneliness among academics as a troubling psychological condition emerged during this period, as psychologists Letitia Ann Peplau and Daniel Perlman organized a 1979 NIH-funded conference on loneliness at UCLA. Peplau and Perlman created a loneliness scale, thus making the emotion a measurable and quantifiable psychological condition.<sup>64</sup> Other academic fields have similarly begun studying loneliness, with most healthcare professionals holding a psychodynamic view of loneliness as pathological, usually resulting from problems in interpersonal relationships or infant and childhood



attachments.<sup>65</sup> Much of social science literature since the 1970s has viewed loneliness as an abnormal and destructive emotion, with neuroscientists John and Stephanie Cacioppo identifying loneliness as a social contagion that could be cured through medicine.<sup>66</sup> Modern medicine, then, came to pathologize loneliness and view it as a mental affliction that could be treated alongside mental conditions like depression and anxiety.<sup>67</sup>

These contemporary ideas of loneliness work under the assumption that loneliness is a static emotional experience. The historical record shows this to be false, as Western ideas about being alone have changed dramatically since the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment allowed humans to view themselves as rationally-thinking individuals capable of making decisions for themselves. Just as this new way of understanding existence came into being, nineteenth-century industrialization radically altered how humans lived and worked in new large-scale urban environments. The consciousness of the individual's inability to manifest himself fully in this new modern environment created feelings of isolation and separateness that are now referred to as "loneliness." Most seek to fill this void with something to make loneliness tolerable. Still, secularization has rendered traditional solutions like religion ineffective, and successful alternatives have yet to emerge. Cures for loneliness have been influenced by different ideas and trends over the last two hundred years, such as new technologies, modern medicine, existentialist philosophy, and consumerism.

Loneliness and its cures have also taken on unique characteristics in the twenty-first century, due to the influence of technology and social media. The post-1970s pathologization of loneliness still informs contemporary understandings of loneliness.<sup>68</sup> There has been much concern among governments and the media about a "loneliness

epidemic," as rates of loneliness across the West have reached record highs.<sup>69</sup> The ideological and historical roots of this modern emotion are important to consider as policymakers in the U.S. and U.K. move to fight this supposed epidemic. At the core of modern loneliness are fundamental questions about the political, economic, and social structures that shape Western society. Treating loneliness is not just a medical matter, but a political one.

## ENDNOTES

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