


BORED TO DEATH: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION INTO BOREDOM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE SELECT POEMS OF STEEVE WHEELER AND JANE MARLA ROBBINS

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Abstract

More than a health crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic turned out to be a major disruptive factor influencing the psychological well-being of the survivors. The Covid lockdown, thus provided the recent global brush with boredom, with boredom assuming different faces and persona. The stay-at-home orders had not accounted for this complimentary disease of a phenomenon initially. The confinement for uncertain periods of time proved to be mentally extolling as much as it was anything else. This essay tries to look into the psychological and physiological manifestations of Covid induced boredom as reflected in the select poems of Steeve Wheeler's *Ellipsis* and Jane Marla Robbins' *Poems of Covid-19: Stuck in Lockdown: The First Three Months*.

Keywords: *Covid-19, lockdown, boredom, pandemic, Jane Marla Robbins, Steeve Wheeler*

Date of receipt of the text by the editor: June 30, 2023;
date of acceptance for publication: November 6, 2023.

Boredom as a concept became popular since the eighteenth century. In *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (1995), Patricia Mayer Spacks traces the history of the concept. Boredom has been associated with human conditions of loneliness, depression, and other mental states. Concepts like leisure and the pursuit of happiness were also associated with boredom. A lack of pleasure or happiness was often considered a state of boredom.

But towards the nineteenth century, boredom was dissociated with individual or subjective experience and was ascribed to external factors. People attributed it to classes other than one's own. It was even argued to be a grand plan of the capitalist regime. The technological advancements were identified to create discontent and displacement resulting in boredom among people. While men attributed it to women, women attributed it to men.

Serious attempts to study boredom came through people like Otto Fenichel, who studied the psychology of boredom. According to him, boredom is "the displeasurable experience of a lack of impulse" (Fenichel 1987: 292). It is also associated with a sense of discontentment and dissatisfaction (Svendsen 2005; Toohey 2011). Boredom has also been attributed to one's inability to find meaning in things around one (Svendsen 2005; Tilburg, Igou 2012). On the other hand, it has also been noted as a state where one is unable to engage one's attention properly (Eastwood, Frischen, Fenske, Smilek 2012). The brighter side of boredom have also been noted and is observed to have a positive impact on cognition and self (Finkielstein 2023).

During the Covid lockdown people at large were reported to be bored sitting at home. With the population being excessively immersed in existential crises along with thoughts about surviving the economic downhills, not being secure enough to worry not about existence and about surviving the long periods of confinement, there was a common cry among them that they were bored. A lot has been studied about boredom as experienced during the covid pandemic, from boredom being

aggravated to boredom being induced, multiple studies have tried to explore the various aspects of it.

Lin, LePine, Krause, Westgate (2023) ascribes boredom to reduced social interaction, which is considered to be a meaningful process in daily life (lack of which is often associated with a meaningless life and considered to cause boredom). Martarelli, Wolff & Bieleke (2021) finds that the decision to adhere to confinement measures also leads to boredom citing the relation between value and effort. Dang & Lench (2022) has observed how boredom varies among individuals depending on their ability to entertain themselves and maintain interest and stay engaged.

However, creativity had little effect on alleviating boredom (Liang, Zhao, Zhou, Yu, Li & Chen, 2020) and neither did boredom enhance creativity (Velasco 2023). Moreover, Nash, Lyon (2023) observes how disrupted routines also induce boredom. Covid lockdown was particularly testing on those who were prone to boredom (Yan, Gan, Ding, Wu, Duan 2021) and studies also find that boredom prone individuals were more likely to engage in violations of covid regulations (Boylan, Seli, Scholer, Danckert 2021; Brosowsky, Tilburg, Scholer, Boylan, Seli, Danckert 2021; Drody, Hicks, Danckert 2022). This essay tries to analyse in detail the specific nature of boredom experienced during the covid lockdown and as represented in the poems.

Martarelli & Wolff (2020: 5) contends that, "Boredom might be exacerbated when an activity/situation is perceived as meaningless", making adherence to covid regulations all the more difficult. Haladyn (2021) observes about covid lockdown that, people find life meaningless when unable to follow their routines and also adds that this meaninglessness corresponds with boredom or what people identify as having experienced during covid times.

He begins his article *Depressed or bored? How COVID-boredom intensifies the fear of missing out* by saying:

“We begin 2021 still in the midst of a pandemic: still social distancing, still self-isolating, still wearing masks, still feeling as if life is on pause. These restrictions, as necessary as they are, mean that most of us are living in a limited environment with limited activities to occupy ourselves, to satisfy our need for meaningful experiences.” (Haladyn 2021).

Haladyn’s allegation about lockdown life being less than meaningful is a serious allegation which requires study. Was life really under pause? What made people bored during lockdown? The present research article considers select poems from Steeve Wheeler’s anthology, *Ellipsis* and Jane Marla Robbins’ *Poems of COVID-19: Stuck in lockdown: The first three months* to inquire in detail, about the (physical and psychological) impact of boredom on people during the lockdown times.

Life under lockdown was never easy. Ever since lockdown orders came into force, people had to shift their entire lives indoors. Work, school, socializing, and entertainment had to be restructured to fit indoors and some found the change appealing while others found it difficult to adjust to the spatial restructuring. Routines changed, lifestyles differed and perceptions were affected.

The closing off of public spaces, and restrictions on face-to-face interaction were intense for many. At home, people tried to entertain themselves in many ways. Yet they found themselves less than satisfied in this life indoors. The many forms of activities didn’t suffice to keep them engaged or entertained. The speaker in Wheeler’s *Kix* is also frustrated and shifts between various activities. Nothing interests him enough to hold his attention for a substantial amount of time. The speaker seems to be frustrated as his words and emotions are spilt out in a rush. There is a sense of cascading urgency in his words. The urgency seems to be associated with impatience and desperation. As the speaker in *Kix* relates, nothing proved to be that ultimate save. The question that remains is what it was that he was escaping from as he continuously shifts from one activity to the next unable to immerse himself in any.

“Box set binging over on Netflix
TV snacking with a chocolate fix
.....
Playing classic tracks by Stevie Nix
.....
Pick up guitar, work out those killer licks
Conjuring up some clever magic tricks
Make a blazing fire by rubbing sticks.” (Wheeler 2020a: 91).

The speaker from *Lockdown Blues* also wonders what to do:

“I’m caught in a limbo
with much to decide
Do I write me poem
or take a walk outside?” (Wheeler 2020b: 11).

Nothing holds their interest and they are continuously searching after something else. The inability to accept the change in routine corresponds with the inability to be stimulated by activities other than those that constituted one’s daily routine. It is not that the speakers lacked activities, or diversions to be engrossed in, but that they were unable to find the same kind of excitement that the activities they engaged in prior to the lockdown provided them with. Martarelli & Wolff (2020) states,

“... a person that is adhering to the pandemic containment measures, might get bored because the available behavioral options become less attractive as a function of exposure, while attention for more rewarding alternatives increases as a function of time” (p. 2).

They were not “bored” because they didn’t find any activity. The available options simply did not excite them. Does the outside reality affect their ability to be otherwise engaged and derive pleasure from the same? The final question is, “...what else can you do for kicks?” (Wheeler 2020a: 91), the speaker asks. The motive here is not to be engaged, but rather to feel that one is engaged, the ultimate aim being the “kix”. In

Kix, the speaker is elaborate about his search as he searches for something that could provide him with “kix”.

The speaker begins describing his lockdown experience: “Locked down, no nights out, no kix” (Wheeler 2020a: 91). Ever since the lockdown, the speaker has not experienced “kix”, which implies that “kix” was something that life prior to the lockdown provided him with. This begs the question, what “kix” is besides being a wordplay on the term “kicks”. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term as “a stimulating or pleasurable effect or experience” (Merriam-Webster nd.). The keyword being, “stimulation”, “kick” entails a sense of life. Stimulation to the senses is an indicator of life, the feeling of being alive. It is this feeling that the speaker is chasing after and it is what is missing in all the activities he engages himself in.

He chases after his activities solely to find kicks. Unfortunately, no activity has been able to provide him with it. A sense of desperation and urgency is found in the way he goes through his actions. The end rhyme emanates this pace of activity, “kix”, “Netflix”, “fix” and so on. As much as he is desperate, he is trying to keep a tab on his actions. From observing the clock to counting the camera clicks, he monitors his actions and measures them out against various scales:

“.....
as my melting clock counts off its tix
Count calories on a box of Weetabix
Drinking slowly through a pack of six
Posting a selfie, counting the clix.” (Wheeler 2020a: 91).

The speaker tries to keep a tab on time and the ways he is trying to pass it. He counts the calories he intakes from his chocolate, numbers the cans of beer he has finished, and even counts the pictures he has taken. By keeping a measure of things, he is trying to control the way he spends his time. This indicates his desire to feel in control. This tendency to measure out and to monitor, has further implications in the speaker’s search for kicks. This simple act of measuring out things is not simple

as it seems. In the speaker's need to measure out his actions is his intense desire to control his activities. Be it drinking beer or taking a selfie, keeping a tab on how much and for how long provides a sense of order and control. Why does control matter? Did he behave the same prior to the lockdown is an interesting question which but cannot be answered from the given hints about his lockdown life.

The activities are not entirely different from what he did in his pre-lockdown life. Except for the element of access to public places and socializing for real, the activities are what existed before the lockdown. Yet he does not feel as if he is alive. Why does a sense of control matter when the entire world was in chaos?

Perhaps the beginning lines hold some clue. "Locked down, no nights out, no kix" (Wheeler 2020a: 91) he says. Lockdowns entail restrictions on social gatherings. But life under lockdown has circumvented past socializing and keeping the social glue on via the various social media sites and video calling apps. The list of activities he followed also shows how there wasn't a dearth of fun which he used to have prior to lockdown except for the factor of real physical interaction. If the activities are more or less the same, then why does he complain? Amidst the countless activities he engages himself in he finds pleasure in none. In fact, the last activity he comments upon seems rather macabre. He makes nooses out of Lego bricks. Yet he asks what else is there which will provide him with the much craved-for "kix".

In *Lockdown Blues* as well the speaker echoes similar concerns. The speaker narrates how she finds interest in nothing. He mulls over watching Netflix, reading books, listening to music, taking walks and even taking a toilet break. "I am caught in a limbo / with much to decide" (Wheeler 2020b: 11). Uncertainty looms large for the speaker. But in the final stanza, she reveals that:

"It's perfectly obvious
what I'm doing right now

staying home to make furrows
with a hand held plough.” (Wheeler 2020b: 11).

Why does the speaker prefer this image and its equivalent activity over the rest of the activities she narrates? The metaphor relates to the act of writing. The speaker does not find binge-watching or practising music entertaining. But rather finds interest in putting down his thoughts on paper. He chooses to write about his experience rather than while away his time doing any other activity.

Writing, again is a way of articulating oneself, giving vent to one's thoughts and emotions. Here again, the speaker's act of writing itself is not surprising or noteworthy, but the decision is. The fact that she declares it aloud is what makes the act different. The last stanza brings an organic and round conclusion to the beginning dilemma. The speaker began in uncertainty but ends in certainty. The journey from uncertainty to certainty is that of seeking agency as well. She emphasizes the act of writing with the plough imagery. The image of a strong persona and strong hands wielding the plough could again be contrasted with the image of a body in limbo. The speaker finally assumes control. The uncertainty was not an uncertainty regarding the choices. She brings certainty to her existence with her decision to validate her experience by writing them out. Many poets have confessed how writing out their lockdown experiences helped them overcome the lockdown blues. Similar to the speaker in *Kix*, here the speaker is trying to gain some sense of his life under lockdown. Writing about it provides him with a sense of control.

In both these poems, the speakers crave certain control over their lives under lockdown. By trying to involve better in even the simplest of things the speakers try to manifest control. They try to imprint a part of themselves on these activities as if trying to leave a mark to show their role in these actions. Why does control matter?

Lockdown meant someone else had control over one's life. Restrictions on movements, gatherings; guidelines on public behaviour;

strict regulations on wearing masks, social distancing and even mandatory vaccines involved assenting to a second person. The reins of one's life were no longer in one's hands. Amidst the uncertainty and fear the pandemic infected the world with, the sense of losing control of one's life was a nightmare, which, as the poems reveal, the speakers associate with death itself. They associate loss of control of one's life with the end of a way of life.

“Should I stay in my house
or take leave of this place?
Will my choice be a triumph
or end in disgrace?” (Wheeler 2020b: 11).

In *Lockdown Blues*, the speaker is tempted to leave her house in stark violation of the stay-at-home orders. She is tempted by the feeling of “triumph” it will accord her. She also fears that such a decision would bring her disgrace and draws a contrast between both feelings. No middle ground is identified. Flouting rules is victory. but questions arise as – what kind of victory and over whom or what; and disgrace of what kind. The penalties for violating lockdown restrictions are far outweighed by the penalty of contracting the virus itself and thereby winning a short ticket to death possibly. Hence the disgrace in question is of death itself. She fears for her life. But the Mephistophilis of victory is but the sense of control that the Faustus in the speaker craves intensely. The triumph is the victory over the rules that control the speaker's and many others' lives in the form of pandemic guidelines.

Life under lockdown where one does not call the shots anymore is tantamount to death for many. The speaker here is ready to sacrifice her life if only she could reclaim that lost sense of agency. Life under lockdown has become unbearable for the same reason. In the poem *Some Restaurants and Gyms are Open!* by Jane Marla Robbins, “covid-boredom” is associated with death. The speaker in the poem finds it stupid that her neighbour is risking covid by going to the gyms despite the instructions to remain at home during the lockdown. The neighbour on

the other hand states that she prefers death over boredom, “«I’d rather die of Covid, / than of boredom,» she brags.” (Robbins 2020: 47). The feeling of being confined is equated with death. Boredom is loathed over death. Life under lockdown has become a living death for many.

In *Kix* the speaker even makes nooses out of Lego bricks because nothing proves to provide him with “kix”, or in other words, nothing makes him feel alive. He asks, why not nooses? Losing control of one’s life gradually raises questions about one’s agency and subsequently about one’s identity. The sense of identity accorded by the mere realization that one is a separate body from that of one’s mother and that one can control it has provided human beings with a fundamental sense of identity. It is this sense of control that provides human beings that sense of life or “kix” as the poem relates. It is this same sense of control they have been missing since lockdown. Life under lockdown proved that one can achieve almost everything one enjoyed before the covid pandemic albeit under some altered form. The activities available were but dictated by external realities and weren’t primarily their choice. The tendency to associate lockdown life with death erupts from a feeling of being caged against one’s wishes.

It is for this same reason that the speaker in *Kix* could not find “kix” in any of the activities that he engaged in, nothing provided him with that sense of control. In *Lockdown Blues* as well the speaker would rather write it out as long as she can dictate her own story. Despite the technological advancements and governmental interventions which helped bring a sense of normalcy to the lockdown life people associated it with what Agamben would consider as “bare life” (“zoe”). The pre-covid scenario qualifies as “bios” characterised by freedom, choice, and power while the lockdown is accused of reducing life to mere existence. As Wheeler says, it simply did not possess that “kick” and the poems champion death over lockdown life.

The speakers’ insistence on agency and freedom suggests how these factors are considered to be associated with a qualified form of life. For

the same reason lockdown life is equated with death. As the poems suggest, mere survival is not considered to be life. In other words, life needs that sense of “kix”, the poems argue.

Covid Boredom

The problem is not that there is a dearth of activity or too much of it. It has to be something else. Lockdown meant that one was restricted to one’s house, not by choice. It was the state power that determined the boundaries. It is rather here that the epicentre of covid boredom lies. One was confined by orders and not by choice. The lack of agency meant one was invalidated. This is what was experienced as boredom.

The subtle loss of agency combined with the uncertainty regarding resumption constitutes covid boredom. The speakers in the poems are not complaining about the lack of activities to entertain themselves but rather preoccupied with the thought of resuming the old ways, the old routine and ultimately, the lost agency. They expect the world to simply return these lost freedoms. According to Fenichel, the external world plays a significant role in the experience of boredom. Boredom as he elaborates occurs when “...something expected does not occur” (Fenichel, 1987: 301).

The simple but lethal act of risking one’s life to go to the gym has further implications. The speaker defies lockdown regulations not to simply work out but to exercise agency. Danckert (2022) concurs in his observation that boredom threatens one’s sense of agency and provokes self-destructive behaviour. The feeling of making one’s own choice about one’s movements and actions gives a sense of life. It is this sense that the speaker in *Kix* seeks, the sense of being in control of one’s life.

The speaker in *Lockdown Blues* chose to write about the lockdown life. It is a way of controlling his life, a way of controlling the reality which seems chaotic and beyond his control. Putting down his thoughts

on paper he is able to gain a sense of control. As it is not passion or pleasure or sheer job pressure that inspires him to write.

Conclusion

What constitutes Covid boredom, as such a thing exists now as the poems and the public responses vouchsafe? Covid boredom is starkly different from the boredom associated with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is not inactivity or the restlessness experienced by people. It is not a lack of activity either. Amidst an abundance of activities and an otherwise moderate semblance of pre-covid life, the speakers in the poems are restless and crave something more. They express their desire to have control over their lives.

Along with the general chaos and uncertainty around the covid pandemic, the governmental inability to provide neither assurance nor a convincing justification for the prevailing circumstances added to the impression that lockdowns were forced upon the public. This made people feel that being under lockdown was not a choice and neither a voluntary decision. This accentuated the sense of loss of freedom and agency. It is this lack of freedom or agency coupled with the fear of missing out that is described as boredom during covid. They feel that, confined during lockdown, they aren't able to enjoy life as such. The people were unable to reconcile with the lockdown life and its requirements under these circumstances and felt that they were missing out on life. The intense desire to take control of their lives is but the other side of the gripe over being bored.

The idiom "bored to death" is actualized in one's intense desire to overcome the lockdown paralysis of one's life or what one considers as paralysis. The choice was either to risk one's life by declining to abide by the lockdown or to remain at home and "bore" oneself to death unable to reconcile with the reality of the pandemic. Being unable to thrive under the circumstances available, along with the desire to exercise the

freedoms that were suspended, one actually bores oneself to death. As the speaker in *Some Restaurants and Gyms are Open!* comments upon her neighbour's decision to go to the gym risking the virus, one just might meet death.

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How to cite this paper:

Anupama K.T., Chitra Thri vikraman Nair (2023). Bored to Death: A Critical Exploration into Boredom during the Covid-19 Pandemic in the Select Poems of Steeve Wheeler and Jane Marla Robbins. *Zoon Politikon* No. 14, <https://doi.org/10.4467/2543408XZOP.23.008.18662>