

# A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion

By Fay Bound Alberti

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The twenty-first century has given rise to concerns of loneliness becoming an epidemic, yet surprisingly, its history has not been closely examined. ‘Studies suggest somewhere between 30 and 50 per cent of those surveyed in Britain and North America feel lonely. In fact, Britain has been termed the “loneliness capital of Europe”’ (2). Fay Bound Alberti’s *A Biography of Loneliness* comes to examine the history of this rising issue.

In *A Biography of Loneliness*, Alberti states that the recent developments in modern life have heightened the need for an examination of loneliness. Although loneliness manifested itself as both a concept and an acknowledged experience in the nineteenth century, Alberti argues in her book that loneliness is a child of present-day secularism, the capitalist system and neoliberalism. It is largely because ‘Neoliberalism encourages privatization,

deregulation, and competition, in all areas, including health and care’ (230). Alberti’s argument throughout the book is that the language of loneliness emanates from modern developments in the scientific, industrial and philosophical domains and as a result of society’s increased focus on the individual over the collective. In *A Biography of Loneliness*, Alberti asks the very intriguing question of how loneliness transformed into a modern epidemic through the passage of time, providing a careful examination of the term ‘loneliness’ as an emotional condition that is historically situated. She defines loneliness as ‘a conscious, cognitive feeling of estrangement or social separation from meaningful others; an emotional lack that concerns a person’s place in the world’ (5). The term also encompasses a group of emotions and not a single state or emotion: ‘I describe loneliness as an emotion ‘cluster’, a blend of

different emotions that might range from anger, resentment, and sorrow to jealousy, shame, and self-pity' (6).

Methodologically, *A Biography of Loneliness* offers new ways of understanding the multi-faceted conceptualisation of loneliness. Tracing the concept of loneliness from its eighteenth-century manifestations up to the present, Alberti utilises various representations of such 'emotional cluster[s]' in literary works, in diaries and correspondence of famous individuals, and in philosophical works and biographies. Her book provides a novel examination of social media, aging, bereavement, refugees and homelessness. In Alberti's view, these issues inevitably lead to a sense of loneliness, and her examination of them reveals that loneliness is an embedded emotional state in modern life. Moreover, her findings illustrate that it has varied interpretations based on social background, experience, gender, class and ethnicity.

*A Biography of Loneliness* constitutes nine chapters. The first chapter sets out a convincing argument that contextualises the concept of loneliness within its historical background. Chapter two discusses the difficult life that Sylvia Plath led and how loneliness framed her life from childhood to adulthood up to the point that it became a 'disease of the blood' (40). Abandonment by her father, mother, friends and partner manifested itself as a pervasive theme in Plath's letters and journals. Alberti not only negotiates these social aspects that affected Plath's life but also explores Plath's mental illness, which, she argues, resulted in a particular state of loneliness. Alberti is convinced that Plath had chronic loneliness from her early life,

and this manifested in her work as a craving for community and emotional connection. This chapter naturally leads Alberti, in chapter three, to discuss the significance of others during the course of romantic love, without whom life appears to become impossible.

In this chapter, Alberti discusses the significance of others to the sense of loneliness. Without the company of others, an individual is destined to think of himself/herself as incomplete, and this emotional state could create an inescapable sense of loneliness during the lack of others. In other words, '[w]ithout that significant other, the threat of lack suggests, we will be forever "separated, having one side only"' (82). To support her claim, Alberti applies the idea of the soulmate to the *Twilight* series and to *Wuthering Heights*, two literary examples in which the idea of a lover or a soulmate is the main focus. In *Wuthering Heights*, with the loss of Catherine, Heathcliff found it pointless to survive. Alberti also suggests that *Wuthering Heights* and the *Twilight* books not only identify female expectations in relationships but also the importance of the 'other'. They illustrate how the loss of that 'other' causes an individual to feel separated and to suffer from loneliness. If someone finds his/her soulmate and they live a happy life together, when one dies and leaves the other, the widow(er) is destined to loneliness, as Alberti explores in the fourth chapter. Here, she examines loneliness and the widowed by analysing two case studies: the diaries of Thomas Turner and Queen Victoria's biography. According to Alberti, Turner's experience of loneliness is slightly different from the modern conception of loneliness as

melancholic alienation. His experience is framed within the belief of God's existence, politeness, civic identity and diary keeping: 'Turner was supported in his grief by a conviction that God's will is always right' (234). Meanwhile, Queen Victoria's widowhood comprises a remarkable story that vastly differs from that of Turner, as her continuing grief over her husband's passing informed the extensive expression of loss and loneliness: 'Unlike Turner's, Queen Victoria's writing is filled with references to the specific loneliness of a widow, and the creation of a space that nothing and nobody (not even a sense of God) could fill' (100). Alberti rightly suggests that the widowed experience of loneliness depends on varied aspects of lived experience, ranging from family, networks and friendships to whether there was love between the spouses. She then turns to the question of what happens if the widow(er) seeks new relationships and communication through social media. Indeed, the influence of social media on loneliness, not only on those widowed but also on the new millennial generation, is remarkable, as presented in chapter five. Social media constitutes an online community that breeds connectedness and, like a real-life community, it has the capacity to furnish individuals with information and support. However, physical experience and touch are often lacking. Thus this lack of physical contact leads to heightened loneliness among social media users, especially young adults, as making relationships and networking in real life becomes more difficult.

The following chapters continue Alberti's investigation of loneliness by examining some groups that are at risk of marginalisation

in society, including elderly people, the homeless and refugees. Chapter six covers the subject of older people who suffer from physical and mental loneliness, arguing that there is a disconnect between what older people look for – support and companionship – and what they receive in reality. Digital technologies such as social media, Alberti concludes, do not in fact mitigate the sense of loneliness among the elderly compared with the younger generation. Chapter seven explores what loneliness means to individuals who do not have a place or home to belong to, namely, the homeless, and refugees. While homeless individuals are generally ignored by people and, consequently, suffer from loneliness, for refugees, loneliness is not only a mental state but also a physical condition: 'It produces a series of visceral and embodied reactions that might range from fear and resentment to anger and sadness' (177).

The final two chapters present more critical information about loneliness. Chapter eight discusses the body and embodied loneliness in the context of the material world, as Alberti suggests that the body produces feelings and emotions which can be communicated through body language. If loneliness is a physical experience, then sensory feelings and engagement become important. She concludes that bereavement and aging could limit one's social life and lessen the degree of companionship. Chapter nine introduces a positive view on how loneliness is connected to creativity in the writing of William Wordsworth and Virginia Woolf. Alberti suggests that such writers expressed a desire for loneliness in their works, as loneliness helps them in the creative

process. For a romantic poet such as Wordsworth loneliness could offer him 'isolation, a divine communion with nature' (207), but for the novelist Woolf 'the internal need to be alone to create' (213) is important, 'not to write necessarily, but to think about writing, especially when a new project was taking shape' (214).

Alberti's book argues that loneliness is an urgent matter: those who are lonely have a 30% higher chance of dying early than those who are not lonely. Her study interacts with *A History of Solitude* by David Vincent, published in 2020, as Vincent's similar approach covers a wide history of primary materials, incorporating poetry and internet manifestations of solitude. *A Biography of Loneliness* appeals to the general reader as well as the specialist in its provision of a new approach to history and to the nature of loneliness as an 'emotional cluster'. It is an important contribution to the history of emotion and is essential reading to those who are interested in literary and cultural understanding and representation of emotions.

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