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Modern Life (Part 1): Loneliness, Writing, and Frankenstein

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, January 3rd, 2018

“Writing, at its best, is a lonely life. Organizations for writers palliate the writer’s loneliness but I doubt if they improve his writing. He grows in public stature as he sheds his loneliness and often his work deteriorates. For he does his work alone and if he is a good enough writer he must face eternity, or the lack of it, each day.”

These words, from Ernest Hemingway’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1954, sum up the predicament of being a writer. At best, loneliness isn’t an enjoyable feeling—it’s a burden that can only be cast off in the company of others. But when you cast it off, you’re no longer invested in your writing the way you once were.

Does loneliness make for better writing? If it does, then good writing and works of genius would be in abundance today in America. Turns out loneliness is at an all-time high. When it comes to quantifying loneliness, researchers are more interested in its [public health consequences](#) than anything else:

- One-third of people between the ages 45 and 63 are single
- 1 out of 5 Americans “suffer from continuous loneliness”
- Loneliness makes people feel cold and contributes to an increase in blood pressure and cholesterol levels
- Over time, chronic loneliness causes the immune system to function poorly and leads to increased incidence of cardiovascular disease

Furthermore, a raft of studies between 1980 and 2014 showed that loneliness and isolation lead to higher mortality rates. The psychological community is so concerned about the growing prevalence of loneliness in American society that the American Psychological Association deemed it a “public health threat” in 2017.

If the life of a writer is any indication of the deadliness of loneliness, we only have to look to Hemingway. He blew his brains out in an Idaho cabin in 1961. Loneliness and depression are intertwined like codependent step-siblings who take each other’s food.

But there’s something different about loneliness today. We may be more lonely, but we’re also more connected to people with whom we can share our thoughts. As I sit here writing this for you, I think about how easy it would be for you to comment on it and strike up a digital conversation with me after you’ve finished reading it. Then, we could connect via social media. But would I be any less lonely?

“The greater the proportion of online interactions, the lonelier you are,” says [John Cacioppo](#), director of the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago. He’s “the world’s leading expert on loneliness,” according to the Atlantic. In various studies, he’s found that digital interaction is no substitute for the real thing.

The opportunity for digital interaction is ubiquitous. Before social media and the internet, if you were a writer, you had to make a real effort to get out into the world and shake your loneliness. But at the bar or the party, you might get this guilty twinge, the little voice in your head saying, “*Why aren’t you writing? You’re wasting your time.*” Yet, at the party at least you weren’t lonely.

Now, when you’re somewhere, anywhere, feeling the crush of an ocean of loneliness, you can pick up your smartphone and see what people are doing on Facebook. This might lead you to reach out to someone. Maybe you meet up in person. Or you end up feeling lonelier as you scroll through your “news feed.” The latter happens more often.

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The predicament here is that technology helped you waste your time, but it didn’t help you release the burden of loneliness. Social media, the cheap substitute for a real, in-person connection, creates a distraction that subtracts from your writing time. Today’s writer may not produce a work of genius because she’s too distracted.

We’re bombarded with distractions more than ever. The internet beams a whole new layer (a social layer) into our living rooms to an extent that preceding technologies—phones, TV—did not.

It’s interesting to see how people on the internet interact with some of the problems the internet helps create. It’s as if humanity is a single person who slunk into a room with a mirror. Because being alone in a room in a mirror causes anxiety and depression, the person writes down all the self-help material they can think of, constantly shifting the advice to meet each new day. Witness all the online how-tos, the hacks that center on how to change your life.

If you want, there’s info on [how to make friends in a new city](#), something you would’ve had to figure out for yourself in any other age. The writer (unidentified) presents a very modern, and very telling, scenario:

It’s 6 p.m. on a Friday night. You trudge through the door feeling defeated. You just put in a monster week at the new startup you’re working for and you’re feeling absolutely exhausted... Bored, you begin to scroll through your social feeds, only to find a bunch of your old friends in your old city doing fun Friday night things. A wave of sadness comes over you as you think to yourself... “I sure am glad that I took this new job, but wow do I miss my friends.”

You wouldn’t have had the option to sink into a nostalgic, isolated malaise without the window of social media showing you what your old friends are doing. You could argue that a post on how to make friends in a new city wouldn’t need to exist without social media. Your social media feed anchors you in the old world where you used to live. It feeds you a lack of mindfulness of your immediate environs. Without social media, you’d have to fulfill your impulse for human

interaction somewhere outside of your apartment. Maybe, if you don't feel like going out, you end up turning your loneliness and sense of defeat into a poem, a song or the beginnings of a story.

But social media is there to half-heartedly fill the void, stifling artistic catharsis. It is as if, standing alone in the room, instead of choosing to create an image of our loneliness, we've chosen to create a monster—a Frankenstein in the mirror.

Apparently, [big tech is awakening to the horror of its own invention](#). Journalist Julia Carrie Wong writes, “Victor Frankenstein recognized that his creation was a ‘miserable monster’ on the very same ‘dreary night of November’ that he created it. It appears to have taken a full decade and a different dreary November night to awaken the new class of tech agonistes to the horror of their inventions.”

The “different dreary night in November” is the night Donald Trump got elected. Former Facebook product manager Antonio Garcia-Martinez says Trump's election was “a big slap in the face” for the people at Facebook, because Facebook inadvertently helped get Trump elected. To Facebook employees, “Trump is the incarnation of Satan.” Former Facebook president [Sean Parker](#) says that Facebook's founders knew they were creating something that exploits a “vulnerability in human psychology.” In short, a monster.

Is it any coincidence that *Frankenstein* is a [book about loneliness](#)? “Books about loneliness often involve monsters, the only one of their kind, hideous and unlovable,” says Olivia Laing, author of *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*. She goes on, “Who is sadder or more alone than Frankenstein's Creature, unloved even by the man who made him?”

The former president of Facebook, Sean Parker, knows we created a monster. He says, “God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains.”

We're alone in a room, looking in the mirror, and out of that loneliness our latest creation isn't *Frankenstein*, it's social networking, exemplified by Facebook, the monstrous book of our lives that is a stunted way of expressing our emotions. But out of this will come the writers who choose to look in the mirror and see what's really there (Dave Eggers, author of *The Circle*, immediately comes to mind). Watch for them, because their work will be the defining work of our time.

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