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“On the Edge of an Abyss”: The Writer as Insomniac

By [Greg Johnson \(/people/greg-johnson\)](/people/greg-johnson)

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D. H. Lawrence might have been speaking for the majority of his fellow authors when he wrote, in his poem “Sleep & Waking,” that “nothing in the world is lovelier than sleep, / dark, dreamless sleep, in deep oblivion!” Even more than paranoia, envy, or rampant egotism, a vulnerability to insomnia might well be the trait most commonly shared by serious writers throughout literary history, regardless of their personal temperament, aesthetic program, or country of origin. In fact, this painful and usually chronic malady has plagued writers so frequently, and with such intensity of anguish, that the insomniac state and its attendant longings might justifiably be considered metaphorical of the writer’s rarefied inner world. If insomnia is the very image of his unblinking consciousness, his stubborn refusal to conclude, however briefly, his voracious scrutiny of the world and of his own mental processes, then it is not surprising that sleep— especially “dark, dreamless sleep, in deep oblivion!”— becomes the corresponding image of his most profound and unattainable desires.

Few writers have lived entirely free of insomnia, and it has struck not only those tormented, “neurotic” artists for whom the inability to sleep might seem only one symptom of a more general emotional malaise. Although Franz Kafka suffered greatly from insomnia, so had Charles Dickens before him; Sylvia Plath endured sleepless nights, but so did William Wordsworth and Walt Whitman. Occasionally hailed as a blessing, an ailment which provides quiet time for productive work in addition to a welcome respite from the hurly-burly of the daytime world, it is more often cursed as a hellish torment, a state of being in which the darker side of a writer’s consciousness—all his personal demons of loneliness and self-doubt—completely overwhelms him, leaving him spent and demoralized for the next morning’s work. Surveying the vast literature of insomnia, one encounters a cranky, red-eyed company of wakeful writers, complaining to one another, hoping and praying for sleep, and at times writing eloquently about their suffering as a kind of literary compensation or revenge.

Whatever the artistic benefits of this malady, writers have used all available means to escape it. The insomnia of Dickens and Whitman drove them out of doors for lengthy nocturnal walks. The friend and biographer of the Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, reports that Charlotte and Emily walked in circles around the dining room table until they were tired enough to sleep. (Mrs. Gaskell also relates the poignant detail that



after Emily's death, Charlotte's usual sleeplessness was exacerbated by grief; unable to give up the ritual, she now walked alone around the table hour after hour, night after night.) Thomas de Quincey famously confessed his addiction to opium, which he began using to combat insomnia and other ills, while F. Scott Fitzgerald turned to alcohol and barbiturates, which created a short-term solution but also a long-term problem. Percy Bysshe Shelley, another opium user, wrote of spending "hours on the sofa between sleep & waking, a prey to the most painful irritability of thought."

It would appear that most sleepless authors have resembled William Wordsworth, who seemed to view his own insomnia as an unjust suffering that must simply be endured. His poems on the subject are not among his best work, but they show clearly the variety of emotional postures—humble self-abasement, prayerful longing, stinging rage—assumed by a writer suffering the twilight misery of prolonged sleeplessness.

Like other acute insomniacs, Wordsworth often imaged sleep as a recalcitrant loved one, an incalculably distant object of longing, anger and regret. In one of a group of sonnets entitled "To Sleep," Wordsworth apostrophizes sleep as an unwilling lover: "O gentle Creature! do not use me so, / But once and deeply let me be beguiled." In another sonnet, sleep becomes a version of Wordsworthian nature, a mother and healer: "Sleep! by any stealth: / So do not let me wear tonight away: / Without Thee what is all the morning's wealth? / Come, blessed barrier between day and day, / Dear Mother of fresh thoughts and joyous health!" In yet another he first resorts to desperate flattery, addressing the longed-for sleep as "Dear bosom Child," "Balm," and even "Saint," but abruptly drops this pose and asks angrily: "Shall I alone; / I surely not a man ungently made, / Call thee worst Tyrant by which Flesh is crost?"

The journals of Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy, provide an intimate glimpse of the severe bout of insomnia, lasting throughout the spring and summer of 1802, which inspired these sonnets. Dorothy's worried, sympathetic entries for these months sometimes note that her brother managed to sleep well, but mostly we read of bad nights—indeed, very bad nights. On June 15, for instance, she reports that at 10:10 in the morning William lies wide awake in bed—still trying to fall asleep, still hopeful.

One theme persists throughout the literature of insomnia: the insomniac by definition is alone in his wakeful state, his aberrant consciousness racing wildly and pointlessly within a universe of slumber. As early as 1616, William Drummond of Hawthornden complained to a personified "Sleep, silence child, sweet father of soft rest," that in all the world only he remained awake: "Lo, by thy charming rod all breathing things / Lie slumb'ring, with forgetfulness possessed; / And yet o'er me to spread thy drowsy wings / Thou spares, alas, who cannot be thy guest." In our own century, John Updike's "Tossing and Turning" pictures sleep as "that unreachable star / hung in the night between our eyebrows, whence / dreams and good luck flow," while Sylvia



Plath's "Insomniac" views sleep as a goal so desperately desired that it becomes a kind of death-wish, the only possible cure for the "white disease" of daylight and consciousness.

This particularly intense and unremitting consciousness that characterizes a writer's life is not, of course, solely responsible for the plague of insomnia, since writers naturally suffer, and often write eloquently about, those life experiences which preclude a good night's sleep for virtually anyone. Unrequited love appears most often as the culprit, inspiring frenzied wakefulness and despair. The lovesick Walt Whitman, in sharp contrast to the self-confident braggart of his more familiar poems, describes sleeplessness (in "Hours Continuing Long, Sore and Heavy-hearted") as the result of nearly unbearable emotional pain: "Hours sleepless, deep in the night, when I go forth, speeding swiftly the country roads, or through the city streets, or pacing miles and miles, stifling plaintive cries." And that perennially unrequited lover, W.B. Yeats, writes eloquently about being "driven mad, / Sleep driven from my bed," in a poem he titled simply, if rather vengefully, "On Woman."

Even amid the conventional rhymes and stylized emotions of the English Renaissance love lyric arises the vigorous, wounded voice of Sir Thomas Wyatt, who views his empty bed as a place of torture: "The place of sleep wherein I do but wake, / Besprent with tears, my bed, I thee forsake!" In another poem, his unrequited love and attendant insomnia inspire this tortured outburst: "What meaneth this? When I lie alone / I toss, I turn, I sigh, I groan; / My bed me seems as hard as stone./ What meaneth this?" This poem, unusual for its time, creates an acute psychological portrait of the insomniac's paranoia, his magnified sensitivity to the smallest details of his physical surroundings: "I sigh, I plain continually: / The clothes that on my bed do lie, / Always methink they lie awry./ What meaneth this?"

II

Guilt, grief, an obsession with personal problems—these also find frequent and striking expression. Surely the most famous insomniac passage in literature is Macbeth's haunting farewell to "innocent sleep," which evokes the nightmarish reality of Macbeth's guilt so effectively that Lady Macbeth's daylight pragmatism—so powerful earlier in the play—loses its authority and relevance from that moment forward. Among the finest stanzas in Tennyson's epic of grief, *In Memoriam*, are these lines in which the speaker conveys a blank, despairing awareness of his own continuing life after the death of Arthur Hallam, and bluntly questions the meaning of his existence: "Behold me, for I cannot sleep, / And like a guilty thing I creep / At earliest morning to the door./ He is not here; but far away / The noise of life begins again, / And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain / On the bald street breaks the blank day." More recently, Elizabeth Hardwick's protagonist in the novel *Sleepless Nights*—also



named Elizabeth—refers to the “torment of personal relations” and confesses herself to be obsessed with “those whom I dare not ring up until morning and yet must talk to throughout the night.”

Being a disease of consciousness—or more precisely, of self-consciousness—insomnia perhaps inevitably plagues a disproportionately high number of writers. For insomnia, like other features of a writer’s life, is a species of madness: a state in which the customary evasions of daylight consciousness give way to the demonic specters of self-doubt and self-loathing. Often the inability to sleep arises not from a guilty conscience but from a conviction—perverse but unrelenting—of the utter inadequacy, falsity, and pointlessness of one’s energetic and desperately earnest daytime pursuits. For writers, already plagued by the elusive and slippery nature of language, such doubts are magnified a thousand-fold, and thus an ordinary night is transformed into the dark chamber where his worst anxieties and most lacerating humiliations are endlessly rehearsed.

The paradox of the writer’s temperament—his masochistic love of punishment and his rather elitist self-regard, his sense of a rarefied destiny—finds its purest expression in sleepless solitude. For the insomniac state might also be considered a metaphor for isolation, that fearsome but exhilarating element in which the writer lives. As our greatest poet of loneliness, Emily Dickinson, often observed, such solitude represents both freedom and captivity, the most intense form of living and yet, at the same time, a virtual death-in-life. Though Dickinson spent most of her life inside her bedroom, often meditating upon reality as viewed from her bed itself, she knew that “Of Consciousness, her awful Mate / The Soul cannot be rid.”

A number of Dickinson’s poems suggest an important reason for the writer’s addiction to sleepless nights. Whether viewing herself as a nobody or as an empress, this poet finds in sleeplessness a form of control over her surrounding reality. Many poems serve as tiny cautionary tales, picturing sleep as a dangerous activity which relinquishes one’s fragile hold upon the world. “I held a Jewel in my fingers,” she writes in one early poem, but the speaker wakes to find that “The Gem was gone— / And now, an Amethyst remembrance / Is all I own—.” In another poem, meditating upon a gift “given to me by the Gods”—Dickinson is referring, of course, to her poetic genius—she says that she did not dare to sleep, “For fear it would be gone.” In one late poem the anxiety is more patent, suggesting that “those averse to sleep” are actually afraid of the swirling chaos of the unconscious mind: “Abhorrent is the Rest / In undulating Rooms / Whose Amplitude no end invades— / Whose Axis never comes.”

We know that as a young woman Dickinson sought her father’s permission to stay up very late, in order to work at her poems; and that a preference for nocturnal writing persisted throughout her life. “I would not stop for night,” one poem claims proudly. Dickinson biographer Richard B. Sewall has even suggested that the poem beginning,



“A Spider sewed at Night / Without a Light / Upon an Arc of White,” is a portrait of the poet at work, and that it might explain why, in some of Dickinson’s manuscripts, lines of poetry run right off the page. The detail suggests a certain desperation, a stubborn refusal to relinquish consciousness, that seems implicit in many writers’ remarks about their inability to sleep.

Is it possible that insomniac writers, however they may complain of their affliction, are actually fearful of sleep, no more willing than Dickinson to relinquish the controlling and organizing power of consciousness? Is their insomnia, in short, a self-willed ailment, an unconscious struggle against the forces of darkness and chaos? The writer, after all, battles these forces daily, by means of language and his own wit; it is certainly conceivable that writers, more than most people, should resist their nightly plunge into the undulating netherworld that Dickinson found so “abhorrent.”

Scientific research into the causes of insomnia would seem to support such a conclusion. According to a recent study by Dr. Henry Kellerman of New York’s Postgraduate Center for Mental Health, the insomniac may fit the typical image of an anxious, vulnerable person, but is also likely to possess a “rigid and hidden agenda,” one that keeps the insomniac “isolated and separate,” nourishing “a highly critical attitude toward the world.” The insomniac’s inability to control that world, according to Dr. Kellerman, gives rise to what he calls “the main emotion of insomnia,” which is “the insomniac’s underlying *anger* at the imperfections in the world.” Thus it would appear that the motive for sleeplessness is one with the motive for metaphor: the artist’s desire to create an alternate, more desirable reality, a “hidden agenda” which keeps the writer stubbornly and angrily wakeful despite his ostensible longing for an ordinary night’s sleep.

III

If insomnia results from the artist’s angry rejection of a world inadequately defined and inscribed, it is not surprising that particularly intense bouts of sleeplessness should accompany periods of creative fallow and the debilitating fear that one no longer *can* write—the fear that, as in Dickinson’s early poem, the gem is lost forever. In a 1908 letter to John Galsworthy, Joseph Conrad describes his agonizing attempt to begin the novel *Under Western Eyes*: “I haven’t slept for three nights and have written not a page for a week. And it is late too. So I will go to bed and be there staring at nothing—a greatly refreshing occupation.” Even a writer as prolific and apparently self-assured as Edith Wharton became insomniac during that same year, when her work on *The Custom of the Country* had come to a standstill. Yet the quintessential case of the insomniac’s anguish surely belongs to Franz Kafka, who would rise in frustration long before dawn to exercise or try to write. In December 1912 Kafka noted, with his usual tortured specificity: “The need for sleep rolls around in my head, tensions in the upper part of my skull on both sides.” Taken as a whole,



his writings suggest that insomnia, as an image of unremitting consciousness, may be the most characteristic malaise of the modern writer, especially in his fear of a world increasingly marked by violence, chaos, and death. “Perhaps my insomnia only conceals a great fear of death,” he told his friend Gustav Janouch. “Perhaps I am afraid that the soul—which in sleep leaves me—will never return.”

Such modern anxieties are brilliantly mythologized in the haunting third chapter of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which the village of Macondo suffers an attack of communal insomnia. (This chapter truly deserves that overused designation, “Kafkaesque.”) While the townspeople are elated at first, seeing the extra time as an opportunity for greater productivity, soon enough they discover that they are “living in a reality that was slipping away, momentarily captured by words.” To keep themselves from forgetting basic facts, they erect one sign bearing the name of the village, and another which reads simply, “GOD EXISTS.” Yet these written words are relics of an old reality, and the more adventurous villagers move into another realm, succumbing to “the spell of an imaginary reality, one invented by themselves, which was less practical for them but more comforting.” Only when a visitor arrives in town, bearing a special potion, does the town again become a “world where men could still sleep and remember.”

In a modern era when artistic endeavor has been viewed as synonymous with the isolated suffering of a Kafka, writers have discussed and complained of insomnia almost as if it were a badge of honor, a sign of their authenticity as writers. For two of our finest modern novelists, Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, sleeplessness became both a tormenting symptom in their lives and a persistent metaphor in their works. Exacerbated in both cases by alcohol and depression, the desperate nocturnal wakefulness of these writers became a frightful emblem not only for their own flagging productivity and creative powers but also for the burden of solitude and meaningless suffering that had descended upon post-war civilization.

For Hemingway, not surprisingly, sleeplessness is analogous to a wild animal or a beautiful woman—something either to be conquered or endured with manly stoicism, so that the insomniac’s noble acceptance of suffering becomes a form of “heroic” behavior. According to his recent biographer, Kenneth S. Lynn, Hemingway sometimes bragged that his chronic insomnia was the result of horrific battlefield memories; but evidence shows that he suffered the malady even in childhood. A 1927 short story, “Now I Lay Me,” convincingly relates his alter-ego Nick Adams’ lifelong insomnia to a fearful distrust of himself and the world. The story takes place in soldiers’ quarters near the battle lines, where Nick lies sleepless late at night. Tormented by the incessant chewing of silk-worms in the brush outside (the worms suggesting both death and a mindless, ongoing nature), Nick confesses that “I myself did not want to sleep because I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I ever shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my



body.” Nick tries to occupy his mind with memories of boyhood fishing expeditions, but he also recalls his childhood fear of the self-oblivion accompanying sleep: “I assume . . . that I slept without knowing it—but I never slept knowing it.” Pushing these memories aside, Nick then converses with a genial Italian barracks-mate, who urges him to get married so that he can stop worrying and get some sleep at night. A foil character intended to highlight Nick’s wartime despair, the Italian soon goes back to sleep and leaves Nick to an even profounder loneliness: “I stopped listening to him snore and listened to the silk-worms eating. They ate steadily, making a dropping in the leaves.”

What appears to have been Hemingway’s own severest bout with insomnia attended the chilly critical reception given to *Green Hills of Africa* in 1935. He wrote to Fitzgerald, with whom he often swapped stories of insomnia and other ills, “No matter what time I go to sleep [I] wake and hear the clock strike either one or two then lie wide awake and hear three, four and five. But since I have stopped giving a goddamn about anything in the past it doesn’t bother [me] much and I just lie there and keep perfectly still.”

This uncharacteristic passivity, masquerading as manly cynicism, suggests the severity of his distress, and he was soon writing to his mother-in-law that he’d begun rising from bed, unable to sleep, as early as 2:00 a.m. He’d “never had the real old melancholia before,” he wrote, and the seriousness of his condition now inspired an emotion not often associated with Hemingway—human compassion. “I know what people go through,” he added. “It makes me more tolerant of what happened to my father.” But his depression and insomnia only worsened. On February 13 he wrote to John Dos Passos: “I felt that gigantic bloody emptiness and nothingness . . . and was all for death.”

For Fitzgerald, suffering his own creative and personal decline, insomnia had been the first signal of a general breakdown. His 1934 essay, “Sleeping & Waking,” suggested that all his misfortunes had begun two years earlier, with the author’s nocturnal battle with a pesky mosquito in a New York hotel room. After that he became “sleep-conscious” and transformed his preparation for bed—a night-cap, some light reading, the bedside table arranged just so—into the kind of superstitious ritual familiar to most insomniacs. But these jocular anecdotes give way to an affecting portrait of the insomniac’s dire anguish: “The horror has come now like a storm—what if this night prefigured the night after death— what if all thereafter was an eternal quivering on the edge of an abyss, with everything base and vicious in oneself urging one forward and the baseness and viciousness of the world just ahead. No choice, no road, no hope—only the endless repetition of the sordid and the semi-tragic.”



Describing this dark period in his “Crack-Up” essays of 1936, Fitzgerald formulated the famous and now definitive description of insomnia and its attendant depression: “at three o’clock in the morning a forgotten package has the same tragic importance as a death sentence, and the cure doesn’t work—and in a real dark night of the soul it is always three o’clock in the morning, day after day.” Although these essays describe Fitzgerald coming to terms with his breakdown and entering a period of “vacuous quiet,” his insomnia continued. By the late 1930’s, according to biographer Matthew S. Bruccoli, the novelist required a dangerous quantity of barbiturates to obtain even a few hours of uneasy sleep.

IV

And what of those authors who speak of the benefits of insomnia?—who find the solitude bracing rather than terrifying, who discover in the exhausted consciousness a field of visionary excitement rather than a scene of debilitating nightmares? A random survey suggests that woman writers in general are more likely to turn sleepless hours into creative profit. In her diary entry for Aug. 17, 1934, Virginia Woolf wrote ecstatically, “Yes. I think owing to the sudden rush of 2 wakeful nights . . . I see the end of *Here & Now*” (the novel she would later title *The Years*) Sylvia Plath described the delicious privacy of working at her poems around four a.m., to the accompaniment of the milkman’s clinking bottles.

In a 1971 interview, Joyce Carol Oates remarked: “I have terrible nights of insomnia, when my mind is galloping along and I feel a strange eerie nervousness, absolutely inexplicable. What a nuisance! Or, maybe it isn’t a nuisance? An ideal insomnia allows for a lot of reading. When the house is dark and quiet and the entire world turned off for the night, it’s a marvelous feeling to be there, alone, with a book, or a blank piece of paper . . . Such moments of solitude redeem all the rushing hours, the daylight confusion of people and duties.” More recently, she has written of “the secret pride of the insomniac who, for all his anguish, for all his very real discomfort, knows himself set apart from all others. . . . Unable to sleep, one suddenly grasps the profound meaning of *being awake*: a revelation that shades subtly into horror, or into instruction.”

However piteously some writers may complain of their vulnerability to insomnia, and however inadequately we may understand the psychological wellsprings underlying the inability—or the refusal—to sleep, it is likely that most authors consider their sleepless hours not entirely wasted. No matter how unpleasant, these hours surely have meaning, and perform their role in an ongoing pattern of experience, of “instruction.” (For if sleep, on the other hand, is sometimes imaged as a “lovely” oblivion, it is oblivion nonetheless— that is, a species of death.)



Perhaps Whitman's "The Sleepers" may be considered emblematic of this kind of experiential compensation. A poem in which the aggrieved speaker wanders among unconscious soldiers in a makeshift Civil War nursing camp, "The Sleepers" dramatically opposes "the shut eyes of sleepers" against the ongoing emotional experience of the poet, who continues "Pausing, gazing, bending, and stopping." His wakeful curiosity and compassion, in fact, alone stand between these young soldiers and their cruel, seemingly pointless suffering.

As a closing speculation, we might wonder how many insomniac writers would trade their malady for that suffered by Henry David Thoreau. It's not surprising that this famous dissenter should have resisted the pattern of the hyper-conscious literary artist; in fact, Thoreau suffered from an opposite but surely no less distressing ailment, the hereditary condition known as narcolepsy. Simply put, Thoreau could not keep himself awake. According to his most recent biographer, Robert D. Richardson, Thoreau sometimes felt "that it was a daily triumph just to stay awake until nightfall."

The idea of narcolepsy sends a thrill of horror down a writer's spine in a way that even the most anguished description of wakefulness could never do. For all the literary, philosophical, and medical investigation into insomnia, it may be that this most common of literary ailments reduces to a single idea: most writers can't bear the thought of missing something. Like children at bedtime, they find that even the most pointless activity—whining and complaining, walking in circles, or staring at the ceiling—is preferable to relinquishing the world.

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