

Is Modern Man Suffering from a Lack of Passion?

It can be tempting to diagnose modern Western society as being hedonistic and intemperate with passion. Many perpetuate this diagnosis on the basis of such symptoms as the loosening of sexual mores, the prevalence of obesity, and the constant search for new forms of entertainment.

But according to some modern social critics, it was not an abundance of passion they were worried about in modern man, but rather an *absence* of it.

There's, of course, Henry David Thoreau's famous line from 1854's *Walden*: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

Ten years prior, in *Either/Or*, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote, "Let others complain that the age is wicked; my complaint is that it is paltry; for it lacks passion. Men's thoughts are thin and flimsy like lace, they are themselves pitiable like the lacemakers. The thoughts of their hearts are too paltry to be sinful."

The nineteenth-century Russian thinker Alexander Herzen said, "I am truly horrified by modern man. Such absence of feeling, such narrowness of outlook, such lack of passion and information, such feebleness of thought."

In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis described the tendency of modern education to produce "Men Without Chests" who were devoid of those strong feelings and sentiments that moved the great men and women of past ages:

"It is not excess of thought but defect of fertile and generous emotion that marks them out. Their heads are no bigger than the ordinary: it is the atrophy of the chest

beneath that makes them seem so.

And all the time – such is the tragi-comedy of our situation – we continue to clamour for those very qualities we are rendering impossible. You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the statement that what our civilization needs is more ‘drive’, or dynamism, or self-sacrifice, or ‘creativity’. In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”

More recently, Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* described the emotional impotence that afflicts modern man:

“Twentieth-century peoples have erected so many psychological barriers against strong emotion, and have invested those defenses with so much of the energy derived from forbidden impulse, that they can no longer remember what it feels like to be inundated by desire. They tend, rather, to be consumed with rage, which derives from defenses against desire and gives rise in turn to new defenses against rage itself. Outwardly bland, submissive, and sociable, they seethe with an inner anger for which a dense, overpopulated, bureaucratic society can devise few legitimate outlets.”

Catherine of Siena famously said, “If you are what you should be, you will set the whole world ablaze.” In other words, you will be authentically passionate. On the other hand, when people are not living purposeful lives, they can feel the need to distract and anesthetize themselves with pleasures to avoid the existential pain of a lack of fulfillment.

Perhaps the things that many in our society regard as the “bangs” of passion – the overconsumption of food, sex, and entertainment – are actually the “whimpers” of those suffering

from an absence of passion.

Image credit: "Face in the Crowd," by [Evelyn Williams \(1929-2012\)](#)