

Post-War Generation: Parasites . . . Parasites on Past?

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When Ernest Hemingway knew the great bullfighting festival of Pamplona, it was perhaps not too different from the dozens of other festivals scattered across Spain during the sun-soaked tourist season.

Certainly it was nothing like the commercialized fiesta which thousands of students, primarily from the Ivy League, descend upon today.

In an article in the February *Esquire*, Helen Lawrenson describes these students and their rather pathetic search through the souvenir shops of Pamplona for the greatness that Hemingway wrote of in *The Sun Also Rises*.

The fact that wallets stamped in gold with a bullfighter are on sale at the very gates of the ring apparently does not disillusion the students who, typically, fly to Paris on KLM jets, drift down to the Riviera for a week or two, and then rent an Isetta, dress in fashionably sweaty sweatshirts, and "make" the Pamplona festival.

But to the group of true pilgrims the motor scooters, pony tails, and girls who speak in hushed tones of "how they did it in the book" must be bitterly disappointing. In search of meaning and a significant place where they might find purpose in life, many of them naturally drift to the place where Hemingway wrote that he discovered the truths of honor and manhood, bravery and death.

For these students, the pilgrimage is probably a half-realized but necessary search for the meaning which they find lacking in their own generation but sense in Hemingway's.

The world in which the international artistic set of 1920 to 1935 lived was almost totally unique. Today's Left Bank is not at all the same thing, and yet in its turn it will be recalled as lost and irreplaceable. The point is that most generations have their spiritual center, a place where they can grow strong and learn the ways of greatness, and this is not the same center as that of any other generation, and it cannot be duplicated.

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Paris was the center of Hemingway's generation, and so was Greenwich Village, and so — in a symbolic way — was the bullfighting ring of Pamplona.

Where is the spiritual center of the current generation? Why do so many of its members find themselves becoming parasites upon the long-dead generation of Hemingway?

There is no single rallying point, just as there is no unified school of thought or common bond of experience. If many of the other generations can be characterized by having gone through some experience together, then perhaps this generation can be said to be characterized by having gone through almost nothing at all.

The decade has been confusing and directionless, and its members have not been able to ring the clear bell of meaning to draw the dissenters together. A partial reason for this is the material abundance and relative lack of strong political feeling which was typical of the society into which this generation grew. Another might be the emphasis on the concrete, the measurably attainable.

Many of today's students discover early that the most fashionable contemporary writers regard the world with a cynicism which Salinger termed the hatred of "phoniness." To this generation, a dry boredom with a rejection of life has become an unavoidable cultural diet.

To the restless, dissatisfied group within the great mass of American students, this diet must be seldom satisfying and often repugnant. Yet these members of our generation have been surrounded with it almost from the time of their first maturity, and they often see it reflected in the attitudes of their teachers and contemporaries. What course of action is left to them, beyond a mindless obeisance to the mass will?

Too often there is none, because it has become almost unfashionable to display very much enthusiasm for anything. The crude enthusiast is often advised to "play it cool." And it is little wonder that the most alive and alert members of this generation have often been forced to search through other generations for the purpose which is not present in their own. It is almost inevitable that many of them have taken as their model the Hemingway group of the 'twenties.'

The fact that it is nearly impossible to get at the heart of his generation through the layers of legend has proven no deterrent, and so we have the summer exodus to Pamplona to see the festival Hemingway wrote of.