

Exploring the Poetic Craft of Thom Gunn: Analysis and Interpretation of 'Black Jackets.'

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an in-depth exploration of Thom Gunn's poetry, with a particular focus on his poem "Black Jackets." Known for his extraordinary verbal dexterity and keen intelligence, Gunn's work reflects his deep engagement with both English literature and European thought, notably Sartre. Despite his early association with The Movement, Gunn's poetic journey reveals a distinctive quest for larger meanings and personal expression. "Black Jackets" exemplifies Gunn's thematic concerns and stylistic evolution. The research paper delves into the poem's depiction of camaraderie, masculinity, identity, and the emotional complexities of modern youth, all while integrating existential philosophy influenced by Sartre. It examines how Gunn's choice of free verse and meticulous prosody enhances the thematic depth, making "Black Jackets" a poignant commentary on human determination, the search for meaning, and the intricacies of masculine identity. By situating Gunn's work within the broader context of his career and critical reception, this paper highlights the enduring relevance and complexity of his poetic legacy.

Keywords: Existentialism, Cult, Camaraderie, Movement, Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND: Thomson William Gunn, born in 1929 in Gravesend, published a pamphlet collection with The Fantasy Press while still an undergraduate at Cambridge. Gunn's first book, *Fighting Terms* (1954), established him as one of the most interesting poets of his generation. Over time, it has become evident that he was a young man of extraordinary verbal dexterity and what one might call timely intelligence. The poet was in touch not only with English literature but also with certain threads of European thought, notably with the writings of Sartre. Gunn's use of existential philosophy, particularly Sartre's concepts of free will and choice, has been a focal point for critics like Thom Gunn's biographer, Clive Wilmer. Wilmer argues that Gunn's poetry often explores the tension between predestination and autonomy, a theme evident in "Black Jackets." Critics have also praised Gunn's technical prowess, with his controlled use of rhyme and meter contrasting with the raw, existential content of his poems.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES: This paper examines various critical perspectives on Thom Gunn's body of work, his stylistic evolution, thematic concerns, and his position within the literary landscape. This includes analyses of his early association with The Movement, his engagement with existential philosophy, and critical reception of his poem "Black Jackets." It also examines the poem's influence on subsequent generations of poets and its significance within modern poetry.

1.3 SCOPE: This paper aims to explore various critical perspectives on Thom Gunn's oeuvre, focusing on his stylistic evolution, thematic concerns, and his place within the literary canon. It will delve into his

early association with The Movement, his engagement with existential philosophy, and the critical reception of works such as "Black Jackets," providing a comprehensive analysis of Gunn's impact and significance in modern poetry.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 GUNN'S POETIC LEGACY: Gunn's engagement with European existentialist thought, especially the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, has been extensively explored by critics such as Neil Powell and Clive Wilmer. Powell argues that Gunn's poetry reflects Sartrean themes of free will, existential choice, and authenticity. Wilmer highlights Gunn's ability to integrate philosophical ideas into his poetic narratives, creating layers of meaning that resonate with the reader's own existential inquiries. This philosophical underpinning enriches Gunn's work, as it allows for a profound examination of human freedom and responsibility. Additionally, Gunn's incorporation of existentialist principles extends beyond mere thematic exploration; it influences his formal experimentation and stylistic innovations. His ability to blend existential philosophy with poetic craft not only enhances the depth of his work but also provides readers with a reflective space to confront their own existential dilemmas. Thus, Gunn's poetry serves as a bridge between philosophical theory and personal experience, demonstrating the lasting relevance of existentialist thought in contemporary literature.

2.2 MOVEMENT AND ITS IMPACT: Thom Gunn resists the notion that he is a poet of The Movement, but he appeared in the *New Lines* anthology (edited by Robert Conquest in 1956) which defined the group. Yet critics prefer to insist that the beginning and start of his association with The Movement were from there, as reflected in the strict accentual-syllabic rhymed forms seen in many of the vigorous ironies of his early poems. Early in Gunn's career, G.S. Fraser contrasted Larkin's emotional economy and Gunn's emotional profligacy, how heroisms were out of place for Gunn, despite the sealed-down age—heroic or excessive action, expression through the body, its beauty, and the risks it takes. Gunn either celebrates wholeness and self-sufficiency or laments separation. Isolation becomes a burden, as in Yeats or Hardy. The poems move through drug experiences, through love, comradeship, and community, beyond the singular self. Collections in which most of the poems are in accentual-syllabic forms started outselling his books dominated by unmetred verse.

In the 1950s, his work came to be misleadingly associated with The Movement, a group of British poets in the 1950s who favoured clarity, rationality, and formal structure in opposition to the romanticism and obscurity of earlier poets. Robert Conquest's anthology *New Lines* (1956) included Gunn and highlighted these characteristics. Critics like Ian Hamilton and Andrew Duncan have discussed how Gunn's work, particularly in *Fighting Terms* (1954) and *The Sense of Movement* (1957), aligns with and diverges from Movement principles. Hamilton noted Gunn's technical precision and his capacity to blend traditional forms with contemporary themes. He was neither an ironist in the spirit of Amis nor a bleak realist in the spirit of Larkin. His craving for larger meanings and his growing desire to present experience in a personal and straightforward fashion led him to a spirit of quest. His verse has strong personal themes, and especially in the earliest work, the reader tends to look at the poet rather than through him at the experience. Even in his free verse, Gunn is immensely self-conscious, a performer in the plot some of the time, always a conscious virtuoso in his prosody. Yet from an almost allegorical form of early presentation, he has moved through a more symbolic to an almost imagistic idiom at times—still ruthlessly deliberate, but occasionally allowing himself to cross a deep chasm on a flimsy board of words. When he takes such risks, he can at times reach his finest effects. Critics have tended to see his later work as 'a falling off.' It

is, in fact, a change, a series of new beginnings. Tired of the efficiency of his earlier style, he has apparently decided that the best way to advance is the risky way of leaving the predictable path, armed still with his great skills, and exploring the terrain that challenges him on either side of certainty.

After *Fighting Terms*, his collections include *The Sense of Movement* (1957), *My Sad Captains* (1961), *Touch* (1967), *Poems 1950-1966* and *Selected Poems* by Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes. "Black Jackets" has been analysed as a cult poem that encapsulates many of Gunn's central themes. Jahan Ramazani and Peter Porter have commented on the poem's vivid portrayal of gang culture and existential struggle. Ramazani interprets the poem as a reflection on identity and camaraderie, emphasizing the protagonist's simultaneous isolation and dedication to his group. Porter highlights the poem's lucid style and rhythmic precision, noting how these elements enhance its thematic impact. Critics like Tony Sharpe and Stephen Burt have noted Gunn's thematic evolution from the structured, often ironic early work to more personal and experimental later poetry. Sharpe emphasizes Gunn's recurring motifs of isolation, identity, and the physicality of human experience. Burt, on the other hand, discusses Gunn's transition towards free verse and a more confessional tone, as seen in collections like *Touch* (1967).

3. ANALYSIS OF THE POEM 'BLACK JACKETS':

Thom Gunn's "Black Jackets" is a poignant exploration of masculinity, identity, and the emotional complexities of modern youth. Through its vivid imagery and thoughtful engagement with existential themes, the poem offers a nuanced commentary on the nature of personal and societal masks. The titular "Black Jackets" in the poem serve as a multifaceted symbol. On one level, they represent a uniform of rebellion and toughness, often associated with youthful defiance. The black jacket is a common symbol of a countercultural stance, evoking images of the disaffected youth and their resistance to mainstream values. This sartorial choice signals a deliberate attempt to project an image of strength and resilience. Gunn's exploration of the dualities within personal identity—public versus private, rebellion versus conformity—resonates deeply with readers, making "Black Jackets" a profound commentary on the human condition and the quest for authenticity in a conformist world.

3.1 SYMBOLISM IN THE POEM: On a deeper level, however, the black jackets symbolize the emotional armour that individuals wear to protect themselves from vulnerability. The uniformity of the jackets suggests a collective identity among young men who adopt similar outer personas to shield their inner insecurities. This duality—public facade versus private reality—underscores the central theme of the poem: the contrast between external appearances and internal experiences.

3.2 UNDERSTANDING THE POEM: "Black Jackets" is one of the iconic poems of Thom Gunn. The poem deals with the activities of a gang leader or a revolutionary who belonged to the group *The Knights*. At the very outset of the poem, we find the protagonist sitting in a leisurely manner. There is a short silence or pause in the music when the record or tape ends, and the raw and harsh music comes to a halt. In the description of his physical appearance, there is a note of romanticism. He is well-dressed—he wore cycle boots and a jacket which quite suited a holiday mood. He was hanging around leisurely as weekend romantics might indulge on Sundays. He stretched out for his beer, and in the process, the leather jacket around his neck softly creased. There were others too along with him in coal-black sleeve jackets which looked like the insignia of his profession. Here, Black jackets might be the insignia of their gang or group. From this, it can be assumed that the place might be a tavern, an ale house, or a typical English bar. The leather jackets seemed to the protagonist as if they grew on the shoulders. There were glimpses of light in the bar amidst the encircling gloom of darkness. The amusing note in Gunn's poetry can be seen here. He

calls those lights ‘anonymous,’ and their source is not known to him. It is just like the light which helps sailors and navigators at sea who are lost in pitch darkness. The protagonist’s leisurely way of relaxing—stretching himself—reminds the poet of a cat’s clumsy movements. He relished the bitter taste of beer on his tongue, and he, being one of the group members for his fellow companions, listened to a jest which was narrated, but it seemed as if he was the only one who wore the black jacket. Though the others wore it too, they didn’t seem to have much devotion and dedication to it. It was sheer complicity and nothing more. He swore devotion as an associate. Complicity is the state of being an accomplice. He recollected those days when he was newly initiated. One of those rituals was tattooing where they had to tattoo the group member’s name, The Knights, on the left and the slogan ‘Born to Lose’ on the right.

3.3 INFLUENCE ON CONTEMPORARY YOUTH: Thom Gunn's influence extends beyond his thematic and philosophical contributions to poetry; he also played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural perception of youth through his distinctive portrayal of young characters. Gunn's work, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, introduced a suave and sophisticated image of youth that resonated with contemporary readers. His poems often depict young individuals with a sense of style and self-assuredness, blending existential introspection with a modern, urbane sensibility. This portrayal reflects Gunn's keen observation of the shifting cultural landscape and his ability to capture the essence of youthful rebellion and sophistication. By integrating elements of contemporary fashion, urban life, and a nuanced understanding of personal identity, Gunn contributed to a broader cultural narrative that redefined youthful exuberance and sophistication. His influence is evident in how subsequent generations of poets and writers have engaged with themes of youth and identity, often drawing on Gunn's sophisticated and reflective approach to articulate their own visions of modern youth.

3.4 THEMATIC IMPLICATIONS: The poem examines the outward expressions of masculinity through the imagery of "black jackets," which symbolize a tough, rebellious exterior. These jackets represent a facade that masks deeper emotions and vulnerabilities. The contrast between this tough exterior and the potential softness underneath highlights the tension in traditional masculine identities. The poem also touches on the emotional suppression associated with traditional masculinity. The "black jackets" might symbolize a reluctance to express deeper feelings, as men often feel pressured to conform to societal expectations of stoicism and emotional control. Gunn critiques the stereotypical image of masculinity by presenting characters who embody the "angry young man" archetype. The poem questions the authenticity and the cost of adhering to such stereotypes, suggesting that these roles might be restrictive and ultimately unfulfilling. The “angry young man” in Gunn’s poem can be seen as a figure of rebellion and defiance. This character is marked by a sense of dissatisfaction with societal norms and expectations. The anger is not just a personal trait but a response to larger societal pressures and injustices. The poem explores the alienation that comes with the image of the angry young man. This figure often feels disconnected from mainstream society and struggles with a sense of identity. Gunn portrays this anger as a reaction to feeling marginalized or misunderstood. Gunn’s treatment of the angry young man is layered with irony. While this character might initially seem one-dimensional, the poem reveals a more nuanced and complex portrayal. The anger and defiance are not mere superficial traits but are deeply intertwined with the character’s struggles and inner conflicts. In contemporary discussions about gender, there is an ongoing re-examination of traditional masculinity. The poem’s exploration of the tough exterior represented by the "black jackets" and the internal conflict behind it resonates with modern conversations about breaking free from restrictive gender norms. Today, there's increased awareness about the impact of traditional masculine roles on mental health and emotional expression. The poem’s themes of emotional suppression

and the contrast between outer toughness and inner vulnerability are particularly relevant as modern masculinity increasingly embraces emotional openness. Discussions about mental health and emotional well-being for men are more prominent, and Gunn's depiction of the struggle to reconcile these aspects of identity is still pertinent.

3.5 STYLISTIC ELEMENTS OF THE POEM: Gunn's work is known for its emotional intensity and authenticity. His direct and often raw portrayal of personal experiences, including his reflections on sexuality and modern youth, has encouraged a more candid and introspective approach in modern poetry. The poem is written in a lucid style. The diction is simple rather than complex, high-sounding phrases and epithets. The poem follows the rhyme scheme /abab cdcd efef ghgh/. In this poem, one sees the devotion, determination, and dedication of an accomplice who is ready to go to any extreme, even at the risk of his own life, to attain what he has sworn to himself. Gunn's distinctive narrative voice and perspective, often characterized by a blend of detachment and empathy, have influenced the ways in which contemporary poets approach voice and subjectivity. His work demonstrates how a unique voice can effectively convey complex personal and social themes. Usually, one finds such people strong-willed, and they are never affected by emotional and familial issues concerning human ties, bondage, and emotional sentiments. It might be some personal grudge or antagonism towards some higher power or authority which might have rendered them helpless. Though the readers are not informed about this, the actions of the protagonist and The Knights gang reveal that they are far away from any emotional connections to the world in which they live. Their lives are too aimless to indulge in philosophical and spiritual musings. Their actions indicate a state of being determined and stubbornly insistent on their actions. Gunn uses vivid imagery and symbolism to convey the themes of masculinity and rebellion. The "black jackets" serve as a powerful symbol for both the armour people wear to shield themselves and the uniformity of a particular masculine identity. The "Black Jackets" in the poem symbolize more than just a fashion choice; they represent a cultural and personal identity. In modern times, fashion and style continue to be powerful symbols of personal and social identity. The poem's exploration of how clothing and appearance relate to self-perception and societal roles can be seen in current trends and the way individuals express themselves through fashion.

3.6 INFLUENCE OF SARTRE: The poem also unfolds the existential philosophy of Sartre. Free will and choice are unique to man alone. Free will enables him to make a choice. Gunn might have also been inspired by Sartre's play *The Flies*, where the character Orestes says, "Fame by Freedom." A similar catchy caption is stated by Gunn towards the end of the poem: "Born to Lose." Man might have failures in life, but it is wrong to say that he is born to lose. This is just one side of the coin. The other side is to win. Man might lose a thousand battles, but he is capable, and he is endowed with the God-given potentialities to win a battle as well. Just as the boys in Gunn's poem "On the Move," the protagonist is involved in his action, though he is uncertain whether his choice might be right or wrong.

4. CRITICAL RECEPTION:

While some critics, like James Fenton, have suggested a decline in Gunn's later work, others see it as a series of new beginnings. Helen Vendler and Marjorie Perloff have defended Gunn's later poetry, arguing that his shift towards free verse and personal themes represents a bold and necessary evolution. They contend that Gunn's willingness to take risks and explore new poetic terrains reflects his ongoing quest for authenticity and meaning. Also, it is important to note the influence on Thom Gunn on contemporary poetry. Thom Gunn's influence on modern poetry is both profound and multifaceted. His work stands as

a bridge between traditional poetic forms and contemporary experimentation, reflecting a unique synthesis of classical technique and modern sensibility. Gunn's use of free verse and varied prosody broke from the rigid structures of earlier poetry, allowing for greater flexibility and personal expression. His formal experimentation, including his manipulation of meter and rhyme, has inspired poets to explore new possibilities within the realm of free verse and beyond.

The critical landscape surrounding Thom Gunn's work reveals a poet who deftly navigates between tradition and innovation, personal expression, and philosophical inquiry. "Black Jackets" stands as a testament to Gunn's ability to encapsulate complex existential themes within precise and evocative verse. This review of literature situates the poem within Gunn's broader oeuvre, highlighting its significance and enduring relevance in contemporary literary studies. "Black Jackets" has received considerable acclaim from critics and scholars for its thematic depth and stylistic innovation. It is often highlighted as a key example of Gunn's contribution to modern poetry. The poem's impact is evident in its influence on subsequent generations of poets. Its exploration of masculinity, identity, and existential themes has resonated with many and contributed to its standing as a significant work.

5. CONCLUSION:

Thom Gunn's poetry embodies a dynamic interplay between technical mastery and existential inquiry, revealing a profound engagement with both traditional poetic forms and contemporary philosophical ideas. His ability to weave Sartrean themes of free will and choice into his narratives while maintaining a controlled use of rhyme and meter highlights his unique position within the literary landscape. Through critical analyses of works like "Black Jackets," it becomes evident that Gunn's exploration of identity, isolation, and human experience resonates deeply with readers and critics alike. His thematic evolution from structured irony to more personal and experimental forms marks a courageous departure from predictability, demonstrating his relentless pursuit of authenticity. Ultimately, Gunn's body of work continues to challenge and inspire, affirming his lasting impact on modern poetry. Furthermore, Gunn's examination of masculinity and emotional vulnerability in "Black Jackets" offers crucial insights into contemporary discussions about gender and identity. By interrogating the masks that men wear and the emotional costs of societal expectations, Gunn's poetry provides a timeless reflection on the complexities of modern male experience. His nuanced portrayal of the angry young man archetype speaks to ongoing debates about the pressures of conformity and the search for genuine self-expression. As societal norms evolve, Gunn's work remains a relevant and poignant exploration of the human condition, underscoring the enduring relevance of his poetic vision in addressing the evolving landscape of gender and identity.

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