



Find the picture that follows logically...



Click here to take the FREE IQ TEST Tickle

NYTimes.com > Books

# Thom Gunn, 74, Poet Who Left Tradition for the Counterculture, Dies

By WOLFGANG SAXON  
Published: April 28, 2004

Thom Gunn, a transplanted British poet identified with the San Francisco scene and the California liberated style, died on Sunday night at his home in San Francisco, his adopted hometown. He was 74.

His death was announced by his companion of 52 years, Mike Kitay.

Acclaimed as one of the most promising young poets of postwar Britain, Mr. Gunn found his own voice after he migrated to California in the 1950's and established himself in San Francisco, his home for the rest of his life. There, he wedded traditional form to unorthodox themes like LSD, panhandling and homosexuality. He experimented with free verse and syllabic stanzas. In doing so he evolved from British tradition and European existentialism to embrace the relaxed ways of the California counterculture.

Advertisement

VONAGE  
The Broadband Phone Company

Keep your phone number wherever you go, nationwide.

see for yourself ▶

Born and educated in England, he was grouped as a young man at Cambridge in the 1950's with a generation of writers, notably Philip Larkin, known as the Movement. Their verse was celebrated for its dry, skeptical rejection of what they saw as rhymed grandiosity.

He later studied at Stanford with the poetic rationalist Yvor Winters. By the time his best-known early collection, "My Sad Captain," appeared in 1961, Mr. Gunn had settled in America.

His work was honored on both sides of the Atlantic. He won a Guggenheim fellowship in 1971 and was chosen as a MacArthur fellow in 1993.

"The Man With Night Sweats" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 1992) was his characteristically unsentimental vision of the AIDS epidemic in San Francisco, and a stark tribute to the friends he lost to it. The poem began:

I wake up cold, I who  
 Prospered through dreams of heat  
 Wake to their residue,  
 Sweat, and a clinging sheet.  
 My flesh was its own shield:  
 Where it was gashed, it healed.  
 I grew as I explored  
 The body I could trust  
 Even while I adored  
 The risk that made robust,  
 A world of wonders in  
 Each challenge to the skin.

For that work he was given the Forward Prize for Best Poet of the Year and the Lenore Marshall/Nation Poetry Prize.

He received the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Men's Poetry in 1995 and the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest award for his collected poems. That volume, "Collected Poems" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), represented a harvest of 40 years of his work. Like "The Man With Night Sweats," it remains in print.

The poet Richard Tillinghast, reviewing the collection for The New York Times Book Review, wrote:

"Among other things, this lucid, very readable book may partly be approached as a personal history of the gay scene in San Francisco, from its early beginnings to the counterculture to its Castro Street flowering, and finally to the age of AIDS.

"Characteristically Mr. Gunn brings to demotic experience the classical clarity of his finely honed meter and incisive rhymes."

Thomson William Gunn was born in Gravesend, Kent, to journalist parents who divorced when he was 9. He moved about with his father, Herbert Smith Gunn, until they eventually settled in Hampshire.

After spending two years in military service and six months in Paris, he enrolled at Trinity College, Cambridge. By that time he had finished three novels, none of which was ever published.

He wrote his first poem for a student magazine, and its success prompted him to adopt that medium to express himself. The choice was partly influenced by his readings of Stendhal, Baudelaire and Sartre.

Mr. Gunn graduated from Cambridge in 1953 and published "Fighting Terms," which identified him with the Movement, in 1954. The same year he began his graduate studies with Winters at Stanford and decided to become a resident of California.

He soon started teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, as a lecturer. He was an associate professor of English from 1958 to 1966, after which he conducted classes as a visiting and, later, senior lecturer until four years ago.

ARTICLE TOOLS

- E-Mail This Article
- Printer-Friendly Format
- Most E-Mailed Articles
- Reprints & Permissions

ARTICLE TOOLS SPONSORED BY SEARCHLIGHT

READERS' OPINIONS

- Forum: Join a Discussion on Poetry

TIMES NEWS TRACKER

Topics:

Poetry and Poets:

Most Popular Alerts:

NYT Store



Photo: Robert Frost, 1958 [Learn More.](#)

### NEW CLASSIFIED LISTING



### House of the day

West Village, Manhattan, NY

- Full-service building
- Fabulous 2-bedrooms
- 1,100 sq. ft. wrap terrace

[View this and many other homes in Manhattan.](#)  
[Community page](#)

Besides Mr. Kitay, Mr. Gunn is survived by his younger brother, Ander Gunn, of Penzance, England.

**[Special Offer: Home Delivery of The Times from \\$2.90/week.](#)**

OUR ADVERTISERS

[Free IQ Test](#)

**RELATED ARTICLES**

- [ARTS BRIEFING](#) (July 16, 2003) \$
  - [Kenneth Koch, 77, Poet of New York School](#) (July 8, 2002) \$
  - [Kenneth Koch, 77, Poet of New York School](#) (July 7, 2002) \$
  - [ONLINE DIARY](#) (July 4, 2002) \$
- Find more results for [Deaths \(Obituaries\)](#) and [Poetry and Poets](#)

**TOP BOOKS ARTICLES**

- [Books of The Times | 'Adventures of the Artificial Woman': Sexy and Battery-Operated, She's Too Good to Be True](#)
  - [Practicing the Liberty He Preaches](#)
  - [Thom Gunn, 74, Poet Who Left Tradition for the Counterculture, Dies](#)
  - [Book Review: 'Plan of Attack': The Shot Heard Round Washington](#)
- Go to [Books](#)

[Copyright](#) 2004 [The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Help](#) | [Back to Top](#)