

**THE FIGURE OF THE EXISTENTIAL OUTCAST  
IN THOM GUNN'S EARLY POETRY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Thom Gunn (1929-2004), baptized Thomson William Gunn, kept moving from one poetic mould into another, rejecting to commit himself to any school. He experienced both British and American traditions, but he refused to be under the garment of either. Instead, he preferred to call himself an Anglo-American poet forging as such a bridge between the two trends. In addition, Gunn was fascinated by Existentialism, which urged him to employ the figure of the existential outcast that lies at the centre of his poetry and reflects much of his personality and attitudes towards his surroundings.

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Throughout his career, Gunn showed a deep impact of Existentialism, which inspired and underscored the bulk of his poetry. He was a devoted existential disciple who further spread the thoughts that were central to this philosophy. B. C. J. Hinton argues that "The extent of [Gunn'] involvement... goes well beyond the merely fashionable, and its influence lies behind almost all of his work." <sup>1</sup> He was attracted to such themes as man's freedom, will-to-power, the importance of choice, meaning making, risk and action, among other existential ideas.<sup>2</sup> In addition to his academic journey to Paris, Gunn was first introduced to Existentialism by his friend Tony White, "It was he (Tony White) who first get me to read Sartre's novels and Camus' plays,"<sup>3</sup> Gunn writes.

The figure of existential outcast in Thom Gunn's poetry arises as a result of his employment of narrative elements, which can be attributed to his own tendency for borrowing from other literary genres. In addition to historical allusions and ancient myths, his poetry draws on novelistic material, which can be traced in the narrative situations within which

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poems are grounded. Furthermore, many of his poems make use of narrative frames and contain fictive characters. Nonetheless, his poems remain "...operate within lyric definitions [that is, his is] a poem of concision and concentration." 4Such a preoccupation with narrative elements reflects Gunn's emphasis that poetry should take its right place among other genres. He believed that poetry lost its position, to be taken by novel, and this position should once again be restored. He writes, "My hope for poetry is that it can once again become a major genre." 5 One way to restore the significant place of poetry, in his view, is to derive from novel and modern drama whatever makes these two genres prevail. Joshua Weiner best explains Gunn's idea about retrieving the place of poetry among other genres saying, "Modern poetry in English at mid-century, in Gunn's view...was too self-absorbed...One solution...was ... to capture human character with the objective analysis of the novel...without giving up the formal virtues of lyric intensity." 6

Critics usually refer to Gunn's first two collections as his early poetry, which also stand as the most obvious representatives of Gunn's pure canon. In other words, the first two collections, *Fighting Terms* and *The Sense of Movement*, taken with the first part of the third collection, *My Sad Captains*, have been described as "a 'unicum' [a unique example or specimen], an expression of the initial phase of Gunn's works." 7

This collection opens with 'The Wound', which first introduces the image of the soldier. Commenting on the subject matter of this poem, Gunn says that it is "...about someone recuperating from a mysterious wound... [He is] at one time Achilles, the real soldier in a real war, and at another time the self who dreamt he was Achilles." 8'The Wound', therefore, "...like so much of *Fighting Terms*, is concerned with the divided self, inner and outer, man and mask ..." 9The sense of dualism, which captures the existential outcasts in this collection, occurs at various levels such as "...the contrast between reason and instinct, the real and the ideal, past and present, a tendency towards isolation and need for contact with others." 10

The soldier in this poem appears with a wound on his head from which he is being cured: "The huge wound in my head began to heal/ About the beginning of the seventh week." 11 Its effects on the protagonist's head are as tremendous as valleys and villages on ground, and hence this existential outcast can neither move nor speak with ease. He explains that this wound cannot be treated by a doctor. Such a wound is cured only by time, which can cure both literal injuries and injuries

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attained by human experiences that cause emotional suffering: "For joy I did not move and dared not speak;/Not doctors would cure it, but time, its patient skill." (FT, 9)

Chunkit Fan explains that such incurable injury as in 'The Wound' can be viewed both as literally and symbolically. On the literal level, it is "...symptomatic because the poem features a localised head injury that seems to disassociate the speaker's head from his body."<sup>12</sup> On the symbolic level, "...it is an imaginary [war-wound] that calls up memories of Patroclus death, one of the most horrific episodes of the Trojan War."<sup>13</sup> Fan proceeds to reveal the multi-layered meaning of the wound in this poem relating it to the traditional patriotism: "In war-wounding is...an emblem of surviving exposure to maximum risk.It is a heroic insignia inscribed on the body, an approved tattoo etched in the name of national glory...."<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, a state of confusion overshadows the soldier, in which he keeps oscillating between two sites, his bed and the stark atmosphere of the Trojan War: "And constantly my mind returned to Troy." (FT, 9) This state makes him indifferent to who would win this war, and hence he is depicted fighting with both opponent groups: "After I sailed the seas I fought in turn/ On both sides, sharing even Helen's joy." (FT, 9)

Such a confusing condition results in an identity crisis, making it hard for readers to recognize the real identity of the protagonist. It becomes unclear whether the soldier is involved in a real experience or only he is in a state of hallucination. Therefore, he is, as Rosemary M. Canfield Riesman explains, a modern soldier who resorts to the "...myth in the damaged and 'darkened' valleys of his mind. When he rises to act again, his wound 'breaks open wide', and he must again wait for 'those storm-lit valleys to heal', [h]is identity is thus never resolved."<sup>15</sup>

David Richards, however, links Gunn's wounded soldier to the wounded consciousness emphasized by Sartre when the latter discussed Baudelaire. Sartre asserts that Baudelaire aimed at exploring the mind as a knife exploring a wound. In so doing, Sartre believed, Baudelaire made the "reflective" consciousness a knife and the "reflected" consciousness a wound. Therefore, the "...wounded reflected consciousness results from a masochistic self-probing into one's psyche."<sup>16</sup> Gunn's poem signals his own affinity with both Baudelaire and Sartre through referring to the cutting in the head and the knowledge gained through this process. It follows that, in this poem, the "...head injury, strongly links the concepts of a lacerated skull, an incapacitated body and a maimed mind..."<sup>17</sup>

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'The Wound', therefore, is an exploration of man's anxiety to attain an authentic existence. It is based on the Trojan War, which represents a framework in which it is possible for the existential outcast to reveal his anxiety, since it provides an occasion to explore this psychological condition. It follows that 'The Wound' symbolizes the "...profound and general existential angst. Here the hero...embodies the virile, stoic attitude of...man in the face of the wound of his existence, which reopens continually in his daily experience."18

The wounded soldier also appears in Gunn's 'Incident on a Journey', whose "...refrain is a variation of the familiar Existential idea of 'Regretting nothing'." 19 In this poem, the speaker, sleeping in a cave, sees a wounded soldier in a dream. A sense of brutality is reflected in depicting the soldier wearing a red coat, which also alludes to the fact that this soldier has been killed:

One night I reached a cave: I slept, my head  
Full of the air. There came about daybreak  
A red-coat soldier to the mouth, who said  
'I am not living, in hell's ache,  
But I regret nothing.' (FT, 37)

In the second stanza, the speaker shows his affinity with the soldier. Having his head seriously wounded, the soldier announces what the speaker himself wants to express. In so doing, the soldier becomes an alter ego or the unconsciousness of the speaker, which exposes his own instinct for brutality and bloody acts. The confusion between the speaker's thoughts and the soldier's words makes the former unsure whether the words he is hearing are the soldier's speech or his own: "Whether his words were mine or his, in dreaming/ I found they were my deepest thoughts translated./ I regret nothing." (FT, 37)

Alfred Corn sees that the image of wound on the head symbolizes Gunn's crisis of being homosexual in an age that forbade the exposure of such tendency. Corn argues that the poet's treatment of homosexual subject matters reflects Sartre's influence, who sees it as "...a choice, an act of will that incidentally or purposely establishes the freedom of the chooser."20

Since it is a matter of imposing one's will on the others, then there is no regret to be shown for killing enemies. In so doing, there is no reasonable answer, because man follows his own instinct or impulses rather than his reason. Killing others, however, is also an action or a choice that retains one's concrete existence, rather than committing

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oneself to rules of false wisdom adopted by the herd: "No plausible nostalgia, no brown shame/ I had when treating with my enemies." (FT, 37)

However, the soldier, describing himself as having a great power, reveals that he is wounded through a battle, in which he is defeated by his enemies. Not only does he have his head wounded, but in the battle he also loses everything valuable to humans: "A minute far beyond a minute's length/ Took from me passion, strength, and life, and all." (FT, 37)

Defeated by his enemies, the soldier is left in the dust, with the marks of defeat covering his head: "Their triumph left my body in the dust;/ The dust and beer still clotting in my hair" (FT, 37) When he rises again, he notices that he is devoid of his will, carrying the shame of defeat. Though he carries such as shame, the soldier does not regret. He at least fights, takes an action against his enemies: "And I regret nothing." (FT, 38)

However, without will, the soldier cannot conduct what he wishes to accomplish. He becomes with his "... lust runs yet and is unsatisfied," (FT, 38) and his "... hate throbs yet but [he is] feeble-limbed." (FT, 38) After all, he is alive, retaining his own instinct and this gives him hope to make a new attempt. Death will prevent him from being cured and from satisfying his own needs: "If as an animal I could have died/ My death had scattered instinct to the wind." (FT, 38) This conception about death is akin to Sartre's, who "sees death as an antiutopia, an antiproject, and the enemy of par excellence that strips the life of the for-itself of all the meaning and brings to light the absurdity of all expectation... ."21

In the final stanza, however, the speaker awakes from his dream. He walks out the cave, finding that everything appears clear to him. It seems that the speaker attains a new insight about his surroundings: "Later I woke. I started to my feet./ The valley light, the mist already going." (FT, 38) Only then does the speaker feel that he is alive and can sense his concrete existence. It seems that he would not realize such an existence unless he commits himself to fulfil what is in his own unconsciousness, as reflected in the way in which the soldier acts. Therefore, one may say that this poem is about a journey conducted by the soul of the speaker himself, which leads him to realizing his own subjective existence: "Uncaked blood in all its channels flowing./I would regret nothing." (FT, 38)

Gunn's 'Wind in the Street' discusses a journey made by the human soul or self, which begins from unknown place and time towards infinite

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future. In this poem, the poet is concerned with the relationship between man and the world with which he cannot conform himself, and yet in which he lives. Man can do nothing to such an absurd world but to show his contempt. This type of relation "...delineates the soul's...journey passing through thick and explicable path of divergent worldliness [and hence] man becomes helpless victim of socio-political evil in the form of global turmoil."22

Unconformity to the world results in a sense of boredom, which the speaker experiences as he enters a shop that he visits frequently. This sense is reflected through the state of sameness and repetitiveness in which this outcast finds himself: "The same faces, and then the same scandals/ Confront me inside the talking-shop... ." (FT, 11)

In the speaker's view, buying something means to buy faces offered by a salesperson, who "Points to the old cogwheels, the old handles." (FT, 11) In this shop, the salesperson decides for people what to "Set in machines which to buy would be to buy/ The same faces and then the same scandals." (FT, 11)

The theme of ascending, however, is emphasized in the second stanza, where the existential outcast ascends the stairs to the utmost height. He is anxious to be at the attic, because there he would find new things. Through his ascending, he also removes himself from what is found down, all that make him bored: "I climb by the same stairs to the same attic,/Where I pause, for surely this is something new!" (FT, 11).

At the attic, things are simple and clear, and they are known in terms of shape and hence simply recognized. The speaker, therefore, becomes in a state of a clear vision. This is reflected through the clear sky that he notices as he reaches the attic. There, he can "...see the same sky through the skylight, static," (FT, 11) but it is cloudless. He also sees "...the same artificial toy-like blue./ The same stairs led to the same attic." (FT, 11) However, it is his soul that experiences an ascending state through which the speaker changes to a new state. The poet makes the idea of ascending clear through the images of stair and attic. These images "...hint at gradual...elevation of soul from layman position to the highest rank which can purge murky nature of modern society."23

The speaker's state of revelation, however, is interrupted by the assistant, who questions him about the aim behind being at the attic. He does not allow customers to be at this area, even for having a look, as the speaker justifies. The questioning of the speaker by the assistant alludes to a dilemma that he experiences in attaining such a high rank. It reflects

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the struggle against the social norms that the speaker tries to break in order for him to obtain an authentic state, which is prevented by others. This, however, would not stop him from trying other place where he can attain the rank he wishes for himself: "The assistant coos, I go to the shop door:/I only came, I explain, to look round." (FT, 11)

The speaker explains that he leaves this shop because he has no freedom to choose what he really wants. The free choice, however, is paramount and inevitable in realizing one's authentic existence. Without free choice, man cannot get himself into a high-rank state. Therefore, the speaker shows his determination to keep struggling against obstacles and looking in other places: "Struggle with fluency, the state between/ To which I still return who look elsewhere." (FT, 11)

In Gunn's *The Sense of Movement* (1957), movement is glorified as an end in itself. Though the title of this collection refers to movement, this movement reaches no definite goal. That is, "... no real sense of movement is found, and the direction of action is not defined..."<sup>24</sup>In addition, Gunn also appears nagging on the importance of meaning for realizing one's existence. In other words, one has to act in order for him to attain meaning in the life he is living:

By 'movement' I mean the sort of actions one is involved in...through all one's life – unpacking in a new apartment, riding a motorcycle, writing a poem, murdering one's landlady. By 'sense' I mean both "sensation" and 'meaning.'<sup>25</sup>

In 'On the Move', which is the opening poem in *The Sense of Movement*, a group of young men move, riding their motorcycles, for no obvious destination. Nonetheless, these existential outcasts seek their concrete, authentic existence through practicing their own action. They are shown as small, valueless creatures, as having powerful-will in asserting their existence. It follows that "'On the Move'... provides a good illustration of Gunn's energetic but arbitrary transition from initial circumstances to asserted significance."<sup>26</sup>

At the very beginning of this poem, Gunn urges man to keep moving, or keep being in action. Movement is an activity that proves man's liveliness aspect. This idea is suggested through the epigraph "Man, you gotta go," which is taken from the American film *The Wild One* (1953). It was about a gangster with a black-leather coat riding a motorcycle and moving from one place to another.<sup>27</sup>

The first stanza in this poem shows the outcast figures attempting to impose their own existence. They are depicted stirring the natural scene

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and muting the birds in their nests with the loud roar they produce in driving their motorcycles: "That spurts across the field, the wheeling swallows,/Have nested in the trees and undergrowth."28

The movement, which these outcasts practice, gradually makes them close to grasping some meaning of their existence. That is, as they are moving forth, "On motorcycles, up the road," and then appear "Small, black, as flies hanging in heat..." (TSOM, 11) Eventually, "Until the distance throws them forth, their hum [becomes] thunder held by calf and thigh," (TSOM, 11), they realize some meaning obtained in the noise they produce. This noise is evidence for their existence realized in their own movement: "They strap in doubt – by hiding it, robust –/ And almost hear a meaning in their noise." (TSOM, 11)

However, the direction is not relevant to the movement in which the figures engage, they go wherever "...the tires press." (TSOM, 11) In so doing, they impose their own will upon the well-established, natural norms. The image of the scared birds can stand for the public, nesting on the top hierarchy of society. It also refers to the natural laws in general, which curbs man, preventing him from achieving subjective existence. Nonetheless, the outcasts'rejection of laws makes them submit only to their own will: "They scare a flight of birds across the field./ Much that is natural, to the will must yield." (TSOM, 11)

The following two lines show a direct affinity with the existentialist thinkers in emphasizing the notion of building one's existence. It is man himself who establishes his own existence in the same way as for manufacturing certain device or tool. In so doing, he or she breaks the chains represented by the objective, well-established values, which man is supposed to follow in his behaviour. The freedom that he or she enjoys is created through choosing a path in life: "Men manufacture both machine and soul,/And use what they imperfectly control." (TSOM, 11)

Gunn, then, compares the condition of the public and that of the existential figures. The latter are detached from the objective standards of the herd, and they are not satisfied with the type of life they have. In contrast to the herd, the existential figures make choice. They are "Afloat on movement that divides and breaks," and they join "...the movement in a valueless world." (TSOM, 12) They are "...self-defined, [who are] astride the created will." Since they "...burst away," (TSOM, 12), and they resist the inauthentic existence taken by the herd, they travel through towns that "Are home for neither bird nor holiness." (TSOM, 12) Leaving behind controlling norms, the outcasts keep moving, and only in

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moving do they become free from all social and religious rules that would curb them. They obtain their existence only when they depart "...the automatically fulfilled, instinctual purposes of birds and the transcendent, unwavering values of saints." 29

Written in heroic couplet, Gunn's 'The Nature of an Action' further emphasizes the importance of movement or action taking for realizing one's existence. The speaker of this poem ends with a concrete existence after making few steps. The room, in which he finds himself trapped, is loaded with various furniture. In this room, the speaker sees:

A glass bell loaded with wax grapes and pears,  
A polished table, holding down the look  
Of bracket, mantelpiece, and marbled book. (TSOM, 13)

The furniture in this room is so loosely put that it prevents the speaker from finding a way out or making contact with the external world. This signifies the difficulty which one encounters in apprehending his existence: "Staying within the cluttered square of fact,/ I cannot slip the clumsy fond contact." (TSOM, 13) Lost within a mess of furniture, he resorts to his own intuition, his instinctual impulses, in order to gain guidance: "So step into the corridor and start,/ Directed by the compass of my heart." (TSOM, 13)

However, the speaker explains that it takes him twenty years to go from one room into another, though what separates them is only "...the narrow corridor [that] appears./ So short." (TSOM, 13) It is not merely a walk between two rooms, rather it is a process of establishing an existence. Such a process requires successive acts to be performed, or choices to be made, which are accompanied with difficulties: "Each gesture that my habit taught me fell/ Down to the boards and made an obstacle." (TSOM, 13)

A sense of absurdity accompanies the speaker's attempt to attain his existence, which he expresses in the middle of his way to the other room. He stops watching the marks that are made by a fly, which becomes a huge obstruction that makes it difficult to reach his destination: "I paused to watch the fly marks on a shelf,/ And found the great obstruction of myself." (TSOM, 13) Such a futile attempt is further emphasized when the speaker starts weighing the significance of his movement between the two rooms: "I reached the end but, pacing back and forth,/ I could not see what reaching it was worth." (TSOM, 13)

Standing amidst the corridors, he falls in a state of uncertainty, in which he cannot differentiate between the two rooms: "In corridors the

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rooms are undefined." (TSOM, 13) He sinks in a state reflection, and "...groped to feel a handle in the mind." (TSOM, 13) However, the speaker finds the answers to his doubts about his goal, which is his will: "My cause lay in the will, that opens straight/ Upon an act for the most desperate." (TSOM, 14) Therefore, it is a matter of will to which he must commit himself to grasp the meaning of his movement. Only then can he see the door's handle of the other room and enters: "That simple handle found, I entered in/ The other room, where I had never been." (TSOM, 14)

When he enters the other room, the speaker finds it identical to the first one in having the same furniture. He finds the same "heavy-footed chairs," the "glass bell loaded with wax grapes and pears," the "polished table," "mantelpiece, and the "marbled book." (TSOM, 14) What is really different is his own being, which is established with his own will rather than in terms of objective values imposed by the public. In other words, he attains a new existence through resorting to making movement, where his "being there [becomes] different." (TSOM, 14)

Man, then, is what he makes for himself as reflected in his own acts and choices made in accordance with his own will. Committing himself to no action, man experiences bad faith. Therefore, in his 'The Nature of an Action', Gunn presents a counterpart for Sartre's play *No Exit*, where one man and two women die and are sent to hell, a decorated room with furniture in a Victorian style. They show excuses for their own failures in life, which are the products of their own passivity.<sup>30</sup>

However, committing oneself to action is also highlighted in Gunn's 'The Beaters', whose prologue, "None but my foe to be my guide," evokes the popular Scottish ballad 'Fair Helen of Kirconnell'. In this ballad, a lover, Adam Fleming, laments the murder of Helen by his rival. Helen threw herself to receive a bullet that was sent to her lover and died between his own arms. The lover searched for the murderer and cut him into pieces.<sup>31</sup> This line of the ballad shows the determination of the lonely lover to find the murderer and kill him. The lover explains that only his rival will designate his destiny, since he makes his goal finding his enemy. Gunn employs the idea of determined-will to realize one's concrete existence.

In the first stanza of this poem, the speaker sees the beaters alone, calm and reluctant to break the stillness: "I see them careful, choosing limitation, And careful still to break their loneliness." (TSOM, 36) One of the of beaters violates the calmness of the group and becomes a

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"...perfect counterpart [who] welcomes the tools of their perversity." (TSOM, 36) This beater shows his defiance against the condition of stagnation they experience in practicing "Whip, cords, and strap, and toiling toward despair [that] Can feel the pain sweet, tranquil, in his blood. (TSOM, 36)

The movement made by one of the beaters instigates the others to seek their own moves and not to submit to the loneliness and despair in which they live. All of them are united to impose a concrete existence, which is realized through beating the ground with their feet: "In twined and gleaming weight beneath a shirt --/ Are emblems to recall identity." (TSOM, 36)

Realizing their freedom, and consequently, their authentic existence, is conducted by the choice to satisfy the desire to dancing. To make such a choice, they should be ready to bear the consequences, that is, to confront the objective values of the herd and commit themselves to their will however this act is devastating: "Some loose the object of their devastation,/To raise him with an ultimate gentleness." (TSOM, 36)

In the last stanza, the speaker reveals the philosophy of the beaters, which is the prevailing of violence on tenderness. Their will is, therefore, attained in being tough, not in weeping on their condition, since weeping conducts nothing:

The lips that meet the wound can finally  
Justify nothing--neither pain nor care;  
Tender upon the shoulders ripe with blood. (TSOM, 37)

Man, then, can achieve an existence in tolerating pain, which in this poem becomes an emblem for freedom. Edward Luci-Smith writes that "Gunn assumes that pain is for some a means towards the discovery of identity, and thus a means of achieving a kind of freedom." 32

Therefore, Gunn's *The Sense of Movement* can be seen as a document recording the acts of a number of existential outcasts who are in a hectic search for realizing their existence in the world. In this collection, the poet presents existential outcasts whose attempts to realize their concrete existence involve defiance against the objective norms, and therefore, their acts detach them from society. In so doing, the figures make great efforts to practice the acts that they believe to conduct their beings. Though such acts are viewed by others as without a definite goal, the existential outcasts find redemption for their crises in continuous movement. Therefore, the subjects presented in *The Sense of Movement*, taken from a broad view, tackle "...man's capacity to define himself on his own terms and the ways in which he's best able to do so ..." 33

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However, such novel characters whom Gunn presented, added to the individual tone he showed, in his early poetry were related to a fictional world that he imagined. In his late poetry, he showed grown style that tackled the themes of Existentialism with realistic characters and situations. Hinton writes that "Gunn's growing use of existentialism as a framework for [his] poetry and his wider interest in problems of action in the real world, not an allegorical one, can be seen in his later verse."<sup>34</sup>

However, Gunn's early poems can be viewed as a series of acts experienced by characters, who, though distinct, share the goal of attaining a concrete existence amidst restraining norms. Their attempts often accompany undesired consequences that sometimes cause their own destruction. The fictional quality of the characters can be attributed to Gunn's adherence to British poetic mould, which emphasizes what is symbolic rather than realistic presentation of subjects. Gunn's poetry becomes more realistic as it witnesses the American influences.

### ملخص البحث

ان توم كَن (١٩٢٩-٢٠٠٤)، المولود باسم تومسن ويليام كَن، التزم التنقل بين مذهب شعري وآخر، رافضاً بذلك ان يلزم نفسه لأي مدرسة شعرية. لقد خاض الشاعر في كلا المذهبين البريطاني والأميركي، ولكن رفض الانضمام الى أي من المدرستين. بدلاً من ذلك ، فضل كَن ان يدعو نفسه شاعراً أمريكياً-بريطانياً ، مؤسساً بذلك جسراً بين المدرستين. بالإضافة الى ذلك ، اصطبغ شعر كَن بأفكار الفلسفة الوجودية والتي الهتمته لتوظيف شخصية اللامتني الوجودي في شعره. حيث تعكس هذه الشخصية الكثير عن شخصية الشاعر ومواقفه تجاه محيطه الخارجي.

هذا البحث مستل من رسالة الماجستير الموسومة (شخصية اللامتني الوجودي في شعر توم كَن) والتي تم تحضيرها في جامعة القادسية ، كلية التربية ، قسم اللغة الانكليزية.

#### Notes

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