

'On the move' – a discussion of Thom Gunn's poem

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Quentin Hogge

The Sexual Revolution, Flower Power, long hair, Zapata moustaches, flared jeans, Led Zepellin, LSD – terms evocative of a by-gone era. For one who was a teenager during the heady excitement of the 60s, with the atmosphere of personal liberation and the celebration of youth, it comes as a continual and depressing shock to have to teach kids who were not born until after John Lennon's death and have never heard of The Beatles. The virility, subtlety and energy of the Rock-and-Roll culture is alien to them. Theirs is the endless sterility of the vide-games arcade and the cocooning coma of the walkman CD perpetually circumscribing their contact with the world. [Editor's note: Substitute i-pad, smartphone, etc for today's generation.]

Properly handled, Thom Gunn's poem 'On the Move' can go some way to providing an insight into those halcyon days without descending into romanticism. For, while there was innocence

and creativity, there was an ugly underside too. Particularly for second-language pupils, a fairly detailed explanation of the Beat Generation and its origins is useful. This information is readily available, so I merely mention a few salient points before looking at the poem stanza by stanza. Some general comments and a few exercises follow.

For a variety of reasons, and broadly speaking, the end of the Second World War saw the rise of a Western society geared to materialism: a sort of aristocracy of avarice was created which was elitist and exclusive. Gaining entry to this materialistic society was difficult and not without problems of morality. Therefore many young people rejected it or 'dropped out'. The next problem was: what was to be substituted for the society that was being rejected?

The Calvinistic work ethic and the Middle Class syndrome were to be replaced by a mixture of Zen Buddhism, Indian Peyote rituals and visionary mysticism. This philosophical goulash found its driving force in sex, hallucinatory drugs and unreal rhetoric.

Perhaps Marlon Brando's film *The Wild Ones*, about a motorcycle subculture, is the best way to sum up the alternative society that began to develop. A cult emerged, depicting the 50s bikers as heroes who had cast off the shackles of a society they could not come to terms with. In fact the motorcycle and rider became symbolic of a rebellion against a system that the young rejected. It culminated in the film *Easy Rider* in the 60s. The alternative community that developed around the motorcycle gangs (and the communes of Haight Ashbury, etc) soon proved to be far short of ideal. Poverty, drugs, violence and venereal disease plagued them as much as the 'normal' society they spurned.

Conformity to any of the 'normal' society's norms was scorned and considered traitorous. One of the slogans of the era was, 'Don't trust anyone over thirty.' Perhaps the majority irony

in the rejection of society's norms by the Flower Power mob was that they produced a rigid conformity of their own, a conformity often enforced by peer pressure or muscle or both, often far harsher and definitely cruder than that which they rejected (see Thom Gunn's poem 'Black Jackets').

Through the reversed telescope of hindsight, it does, however, appear to have been a genuine effort to find a better way. Gunn's poem, I think, captures the essence of the underlying confusion that prompted the sociological upheavals of the 50s and 60s. Many of society's mores deserved to be rejected, but it was difficult if not impossible to find worthwhile replacements.

The title and subtitle of the poem suggest action and movement. Implied too is the underlying unsettled state of the bikers. The subtitle indicates an inexplicable urge to be in motion for motion's sake, rather than for some articulate reason – such as a destination. 'Man, you gotta Go' was a slogan of the times, on a par with, 'Groovy' and 'Like wow, Man', along with the Woodstock classics: 'Three days, Man' and 'We're scarred shitless' – not meaningful statements so much as components of an esoteric slang that expressed rumblings of ineffable dissatisfaction.

Stanza 1

In stanza one the first four lines describe a natural scene. Birds dart around in an energetic way doing what is instinctive (natural) for them to do. The birds, while undisturbed by humanity, are in harmony with their environment. In line 6 the pronoun 'One' is ambiguous and operates on more than one level. It refers to the poet, or people (mankind) or by extension to the bikers. This is usually difficult to explain to a class. I generally leave it at the level of the poet and if a brighter pupil spots the possible alternatives, I let discussion develop as far as they can take it. The point becomes clearer further on in the poem

when the poet identifies with the basic feeling of indecision within mankind. In the final lines of the stanza mankind (or the bikers, or the poet) also acts with vigour, like the birds, but it does not know exactly what it is doing nor can mankind express its ideas clearly. In the attempt at articulation, a disturbance is caused – ‘an uncertain violence’. Humans are out of tune with themselves and their surroundings. (See stanza four – humans lack the instinct to direct their actions.) Note the words ‘dust’ and ‘thunder’ foreshadow the appearance of ‘the Boys’ in stanza two. Even the word ‘baffled’ operates on different levels, referring to frustration or an exhaust silencer.

Stanza 2

Stanza two opens with the view of the motorcycle gang in the distance as small and insect-like. They grow larger as they approach and the roar of their engines increases in volume. Soon the riders are seen astride their powerful machines. In their leather uniforms they all look the same (‘donned impersonality’). The distasteful images in line two suggest disapproval and even something alien. The gang’s physical (sexual?) mastery of the machines is suggested by ‘... held by calf and thigh...’. Lines 7 – 8 deal with the uniformity of clothing and behaviour – two aspects of the gang which are purposeful. The uniforms, their collective way of life and their constant movement almost give them a sense of purpose in life which may overcome their doubts about themselves.

Stanza 3

In Stanza three , the Boys’ are trying to prove their manhood, but are uncertain about how tough they really are. They know their origin, but they are not certain of their destination. The bikers disturb the birds and the poet sees this as typical of modern life: nature has now to submit to the will-power and control of man. This control is often unplanned and uncoordinated. Modern man makes ‘both machine and soul’ – he

consciously shapes his beliefs and his characters – and he uses both these elements (although he cannot completely control either) to take great risks in unusual or novel enterprises. Men do not move (or are not motivated) by instinct only, as the birds do, but by their own acts of will – men have a measure of free will in their actions.

Stanza 4

Stanza four suggests that attempts by man (or the poet) to shape his future should not be condemned. Because man is only half animal he cannot act by pure instinct only, as the birds do. Man has to make decisions. These decisions are difficult and it helps him if he joins a gang or groundswell of human change ('movement': line 5) which will give him moral support and some values with which he can identify, while in that group. The actions of the gang make 'the Boys' feel that at least they are getting somewhere, but there is no concept of how or where the journey will end (death being an accepted absolute).

Stanza 5

In the final stanza, 'the Boys' do not stop for long. Soon these self-assured(?) young men mount their man-made machines and roar away. Their way of life (the route they travel) has no final goal or resting-place, and does not achieve a natural wholeness, as the lives of birds or saints do. Although they do not gain a feeling of satisfaction or completeness from life, they do at least feel that they are moving somewhere – which is better than sitting doing nothing at all. George McBeth in his book *Poetry 1900 to 1975* (Longmans 1985) has this to say concerning the ending of the poem:

'The last three lines of the poem have immense authority and might stand of Gunn's central philosophy of life.'

Generally, the attitudes expressed in the poem are similar to the philosophy of existentialism: men have no God-given

purpose, but must define themselves (line 34), manufacture their own souls (line 22) and choose their own destinations (line 31), thus creating some sort of value system where none existed before (line 30). (Elsewhere in his book McBeth states that Gunn has a

'... clearly articulated group of attitudes. These seem to be that man is a creature possessing free will whose identity lies in his power to choose and pick his future by his own actions. This philosophy derives from the existentialism of Jean-Paul Satre and Albert Camus.')

Furthermore, men still have a measure of free will: life is a journey with an uncertain, if not unattainable, destination. Moving fast may give man the illusion of reacting vigorously to the difficulties of life. Man is not sure, however, that what is being moved forward is good or not so good.

It is worthwhile to note the ambivalence of the poet to of clear goals in life. Yet he seems to sympathize with them and to understand them, and he does not wish them to be condemned. He even seems to admire their powerful machines, their group feelings and their attitude that it is better to be doing something active rather than to sit inert.

EXERCISES

Title and subtitle

1) Give a possible reason for the capital 'G' in the word 'Go' in the subtitle.

Stanza 1

2) Quote three words that vividly describe the energetic movement of the birds.

3) What, in your own opinion, is the 'hidden purpose' that motivates the birds?

4) Quote three words (do NOT use 'uncertain') that suggest the uncertainty of man's actions within the context of the stanza.

5) Why does man act with uncertainty?

6) Supply a synonym for 'dull' within the context of the poem.

Stanza 2

7) What figure of speech is '... as flies hanging in the heat, ...'? What is its effect?

8) Fully discuss the poet's choice of the participle 'hanging'.

9) Rewrite in your own words, 'their hum/bugles to thunder held by calf and leg'.

10) What does the poet mean when he describes the riders' jackets as '... trophied with the dust ...'?

11) Discuss the significance of the adverb 'almost' in line 8.

Stanza 3

12) What does the 'direction where the tyres press' suggest about the destination of the riders?

13) What does this stanza reveal about the poet's belief in an omnipotent God?

Stanza 4

14) How does the punctuation in lines 3 and 4 reinforce what the poet is saying?

15) Explain the repetition of the word 'toward'.

Stanza 5

- 16) What image is the poet trying to create in line 1?
- 17) What is the effect of the verb 'burst' in line 3?
- 18) What figure of speech is 'towns they travel through'?

Quotes from *Poetry 1900 to 1975* edited by George McBeth and published by Longmans in 1985. Both quotes from page 264.

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