

The Man with Night Sweats



SUMMARY

I awake feeling chills. After enjoying dreams about heat, I now wake up to the effects of those dreams: perspiration and a bedsheet sticking to my body.

My body (or skin) used to be its own protection: wherever it was cut or injured, it restored itself to health.

Growing up involved exploring my body, which I trusted to protect itself even as I loved the risk-taking that strengthened it.

Everything that tested the resilience of my flesh was wonderfully exciting.

I can't help feeling sorrow that the "shield" of my body broke—that my mind is now racing with anxiety, and my flesh is emaciated and badly damaged.

I have to change my sheets, but instead I find myself standing still, wrapping my arms around my body as though to protect it from the suffering it will experience.

As though hands alone could keep away the future "avalanche" of pain and death.

Nostalgically, he recalls that "My flesh was [once] its own shield: / Where it was gashed, it healed." In other words, even when his body went through intense or dangerous experiences, it seemed able to heal itself and protect him from lasting consequences.

These lines seemingly [allude](#) to the sexual penetration and drug injections through which HIV is often transmitted, and the implication is that the speaker contracted his illness through sex or drug use that he didn't expect to cause him lasting harm.

Rather than expressing regrets, however, the speaker acknowledges that "risk[s]"—including risks that may have led to his illness—were part of what made youth wonderful. He says that he "adored / The risk that made robust"—meaning that his risky behavior was thrilling and even empowering. In fact, he found "A world of wonders in / Each challenge to the skin." His risk-taking seemed to open up a whole liberating "world" before it made him ill.

Though the speaker doesn't *regret* specific experiences, he does *grieve* that youth and health had to end this way. The poem laments the suffering that youthful thrills can lead to, and the fact that death comes for our bodies no matter how much we "trust" and enjoy them. He can't help feeling "sorry" that the "shield" of his body "cracked" (failed to protect him), "reduc[ing]" him to mental anxiety and physical deterioration.

Again, this phrasing expresses sorrow more than regret: a life he clearly enjoyed has fallen apart too soon, but he doesn't express a desire to undo any of his past. Instead, he "hugs" his own body "As if to shield it from / The pains that will go through me." Since his body couldn't shield *him*, he's trying to shield *it*—but he knows that he can't actually protect it from internal deterioration and suffering. He acknowledges that his own "hands" won't be "enough / To hold an avalanche off."

At the time, AIDS was fatal in most cases, so this is a metaphorical acknowledgment of his own approaching death. But it also implies that the "avalanche" of death eventually comes for everyone, despite all human efforts. In the end, then, the poem broadens beyond the speaker's situation, mourning all victims of the AIDS epidemic and lamenting mortality as something that no human body can protect against.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24



THEMES



ILLNESS, VULNERABILITY, AND MORTALITY

"The Man with Night Sweats" portrays a man coping with a severe illness, implied to be HIV/AIDS. (This is the title poem of a collection that reckons with the AIDS crisis, and night sweats are a common symptom of AIDS.) As the speaker laments his current vulnerability, he mourns the lost strength and daring of his youth, when his body seemed to be a self-healing "shield" against the "risk[s]" he took. "Hugging" his body protectively, he anticipates the [metaphorical](#) "avalanche" of death—something he knows he can't "hold off." The poem thus laments human mortality in general, as well as an [irony](#) familiar to many AIDS patients: risky experiences that feel empowering and thrilling in youth can cause great vulnerability and suffering as we age.

The speaker wakes to "cold," "Sweat," and a "clinging" sheet, having suffered night sweats. It's implied (especially in the broader context of Gunn's 1992 collection) that these sweats are a symptom of AIDS, which at the time was generally a terminal condition.

As the speaker now feels ill and vulnerable, he looks back wistfully to a time when he felt healthy and resilient.



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*I wake up ...
... a clinging sheet.*

The poem's first [quatrain](#) introduces the speaker, whom the title identifies as "The Man with Night Sweats." The poem appears in Thom Gunn's collection of the same title, which mourns victims of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (including a number of Gunn's friends). It's implied, then, that this speaker is experiencing night sweats as a common symptom of AIDS. (Later lines in the poem will [allude](#) to other symptoms as well.) Gunn didn't suffer from the disease himself, so the poem is a dramatic monologue; the speaker is a character different from the poet.

This first stanza describes the aftermath of the night sweats themselves. The speaker "wake[s] up cold" with the sweat-soaked bedsheet clinging to him. The speaker describes the sweat as a "residue," or byproduct, of his "dreams of heat," which he says he "Prospered through" before waking. This unusual description could have a few different implications:

- His "dreams of heat" may have been prompted by fever (another common symptom of AIDS).
- They may have seemed pleasant (he thrived on, or "Prospered through," them) while he was asleep, but unpleasant once he woke to the cold, sweaty sheets.
- Alternatively (or additionally), "dreams of heat" might suggest *hot* dreams—dreams involving sexual desire. Since HIV is most often sexually transmitted, the speaker might be suggesting that his illness is [metaphorically](#) a "residue" of sex and desire. Similarly, his feeling of "cold" on waking could have a metaphorical element: illness might have drained his passion and joy.

This first quatrain contains short, trimeter (three-beat) lines and a tight, alternating [rhyme scheme](#) (ABAB; "who"/"residue" and "heat"/"sheet"). Throughout the poem, these quatrains will alternate with [rhymed](#) trimeter [couplets](#). In general, the poem's short lines and formal strictness suggest a certain emotional containment, as if the form is barely keeping a lid on the speaker's fear and pain.

LINES 5-6

*My flesh was ...
... gashed, it healed.*

Lines 5-6, a [rhymed couplet](#), present a [metaphor](#) for the seeming invulnerability of youth. The speaker remembers when his body seemed as strong as a self-healing "shield":

My flesh was its own shield:

Where it was gashed, it healed.

"Flesh" here can refer specifically to the skin or more broadly to the body. The speaker means that whenever and wherever he was injured, his skin/body seemed able to protect him and heal quickly.

As the overall context of the poem makes clear, the speaker's body no longer has this ability. HIV/AIDS compromises the human immune system—basically, its innate ability to protect and heal itself—leaving patients vulnerable to a variety of infections and cancers. Skin conditions such as sores and lesions are often early symptoms of HIV infection. And at the time the poem was written, AIDS was fatal in most cases. Thus, both the speaker's skin and his body as a whole have become exceptionally vulnerable; they no longer feel shield-like at all.

Notice how the speaker heightens the painful [irony](#) by making the shield comparison a metaphor rather than a [simile](#) ("My flesh **was** its own shield" rather than "My flesh **was like** its own shield"). By now, he knows that his flesh, and the "flesh" in general (the mortal, human body), is vulnerable in all sorts of ways. Even at its healthiest, it was never a reliable source of protection; it *needed* protecting.

The combination of all-monosyllabic words, /w/ [alliteration](#) ("was"/"Where"/"was"), and strong /sh/ and /d/ [consonance](#) ("flesh," "shield," "gashed," "healed") makes these lines sound heavy and dense, like the supposed "shield" they describe.

LINES 7-12

*I grew as ...
... to the skin.*

Building on the "shield" [metaphor](#) from lines 5-6, the speaker now describes how his feelings of youthful invulnerability led him to take, and even seek out, "risk[s]."

Because he "could trust" his "body" to heal itself, he "explored" its capabilities in all sorts of ways. Notice how the phrasing here reverses expectations: instead of saying he explored his body as he grew up, he says he "grew as [he] explored" it. He feels this exploration was a vital part of his coming of age: by learning more about his body and what it enjoyed, he "grew" as a person. These lines refer, of course, to the kinds of fun but risky behavior many young people enjoy: experimentation with sex, drugs, etc.

Even as he "trust[ed]" his body throughout this phase, he "adored / The risk that made robust." In other words, he loved the thrill of risk-taking even as he felt confident that he'd survive these risks unharmed, and even that surviving them would make him more "robust." (The poet may be thinking, here, of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's famous claim: "What does not kill me makes me stronger.") In fact, the speaker enjoyed his experimentation so much that he found:

A world of wonders in
Each challenge to the skin.

Like the earlier "flesh"/"shield" metaphor, this "challenge" metaphor hints that some of the risks he enjoyed involved the penetration of his body or piercing of his skin (e.g., sex with men, drug injection, etc.). Though the language is slightly ambiguous, the general idea is clear: some of the same "risk" and "challenge" that brought a "world of wonders"—liberating him as he came of age—also led to his current illness.

Strong **alliteration** ("risk"/"robust"; "world of wonders") accentuates these lines, making the language sound more "robust" and intensifying a description of intense pleasures. Frequent **enjambment** (lines 7-9 and 11) adds a feeling of openness to these memories of "explor[ation]":

[...] I explored
The body I could trust
Even while I adored
The risk [...]
A world of wonders in
Each challenge [...]

In fact, the **line break** after "explored" makes the word itself seem to float freely for a moment.

LINES 13-16

*I cannot but ...
... reduced and wrecked.*

Lines 13-16 mark a shift in **tone**, as the speaker acknowledges the illness (AIDS) that's "wreck[ing]" his body. He can't help feeling "sorry," he says, that:

The given shield was cracked,
My mind reduced to hurry,
My flesh reduced and wrecked.

"The given shield" is a **metaphor** for the body he was born with (and echoes the language of lines 5-6). The speaker laments that this shield "cracked": his body once seemed able to protect him from anything, but it proved more vulnerable than he realized. In fact, since AIDS compromises the immune system, his body is now vulnerable to almost anything (disease, infection, etc.). Like a broken shield, it no longer offers any real protection.

The word "sorry" in line 13 isn't an apology, and it doesn't necessarily express regret for past risk-taking. It does express *sorrow*, however, as the speaker copes with his illness. Now that his body is breaking down, his "mind" feels "reduced to hurry": his thoughts are dominated by anxiety, panic, and a sense of time slipping away. Meanwhile, his "flesh" is "reduced and wrecked"—gaunt and badly damaged. Weight and muscle loss

(sometimes called "HIV wasting syndrome") can be a symptom of advanced HIV/AIDS, and AIDS sufferers are exposed to a range of conditions, including cancers and infections, that damage skin and body tissue.

This **stanza** contains the poem's first **slant rhymes** ("sorry"/"hurry"; "cracked"/"wrecked"); the previous lines used perfect rhymes only. It's as if the rhymes' perfection has suddenly "cracked," like the speaker's body.

Meanwhile, the **diacope** (of "reduced") and **anaphora/parallel structure** of lines 15-16 ("My mind reduced [...] / My flesh reduced") draw out two related, but subtly different, meanings of "reduced." The speaker's mind feels *metaphorically* diminished (it's not what it used to be), whereas his flesh has *physically* diminished (he's wasting away).

The **asyndeton** between these lines also makes them feel swift and concise, adding to the poem's solemn tone.

LINES 17-22

*I have to ...
... go through me,*

In lines 17-22, the speaker stops, stands still ("upright" in place), and clasps his own body tightly. He's about "to change the bed" because he's soaked his sheets with sweat during the night. Apparently, he's still at home and not yet hospitalized. Still, he anticipates that his sickness will only get worse. He may be "catch[ing]" and "Hugging" himself partly due to feverish aches or chills, but he also seems to feel a protective tenderness toward his own body:

As if to shield it from
The pains that will go through me,

Because his body hasn't been able to shield *him*, he feels the need to "shield" *it*. But there's a poignant **irony** here: he can't actually shield his body against these internal "pains." Unavoidably, they "will go through him" no matter how much external protection he now tries to give himself.

The speaker's use of **simile** ("As if to shield it" rather than, say, "In order to shield it") drives home the way his "shield[ing]" is only **figurative** or imaginative. Meanwhile, the word "Hugging" (as opposed to a near-synonym like "Clasping") conveys the *love* he feels for his body: there's a sense that he's mourning its inevitable loss.

LINES 23-24

*As if hands ...
... an avalanche off.*

Lines 23-24 close the poem with a **slant-rhymed couplet**:

As if hands were enough
To hold an avalanche off.

The speaker, still "Hugging" himself, recognizes that his own arms and "hands" will not be "enough" to protect him. They can't "hold [...] off" the [metaphorical](#) "avalanche" of pain and death that AIDS patients typically faced before modern treatments. (See the Context section of this guide for more historical context.)

In fact, since AIDS was usually a terminal diagnosis at the time, *nothing* seems able to stop this "avalanche." Once again, the use of [simile](#) ("As if") helps underline the gap between wish and reality: the speaker hugs himself *as if* he could shield himself, knowing full well he can't.

The slant rhyme ("enough"/"off") adds a sense of closure, but not the resonant closure a full rhyme might provide. As a result, the ending conveys a finality that's not quite satisfying—a fitting choice for a poem about terminal illness and premature death.



POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The speaker uses [metaphor](#) to convey his experience of both health and illness.

In lines 1-2, for example, he says that he "Prospered through dreams of heat" before waking up to sweaty sheets:

- The word "Prospered" is [figurative](#) here; it means that he thrived on or enjoyed these dreams.
- The ambiguous phrase "dreams of heat" could be metaphorical as well. Were these feverish dreams about high temperatures, or were they figuratively *hot*—that is, sexual fantasies? If it's the second, the speaker may be suggesting that his illness is a "residue" (line 3), or byproduct, of desire. (HIV is most often sexually transmitted.)

In later lines, he imagines his "flesh" as "its own shield": a protective barrier that "healed" itself whenever it was "gashed," or injured. Since shields are often associated with warriors and heroes, the speaker is suggesting that he once felt youthful, powerful, and even invulnerable. As he experimented with "risk" (implying sex, drugs, etc.), he loved each figurative "challenge to the skin."

Again, pleasures like sex and drugs seemed to *test* his body, or penetrate its "shield," but he didn't feel they could cause serious damage. In fact, they seemed to open up a metaphorical, liberating "world of wonders." Only once the "shield was cracked"—his body invaded by a disease that destroyed his protection against other diseases—did he begin to appreciate his physical vulnerability.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I who / Prospered through dreams of heat"
- **Lines 5-6:** "My flesh was its own shield: / Where it was gashed, it healed."
- **Lines 11-12:** "A world of wonders in / Each challenge to the skin."
- **Line 14:** "The given shield was cracked,"
- **Line 24:** "To hold an avalanche off."

SIMILE

Two [similes](#) occur in [parallel](#) at the end of the poem. The speaker says that he is:

Hugging my body to me
As if to shield it from
The pains that will go through me,
As if hands were enough
To hold an avalanche off.

The "As if" phrasing underscores the wishful nature of these comparisons (note that this repeating "As if" is also an example of [anaphora](#)). The speaker is clasping his own body *like* a shield against the pain he'll experience, and *like* someone who thinks he can hold off an avalanche with his bare hands. But he knows these efforts are doomed. (How can you shield yourself *externally* against pain you'll feel *internally*? And how could a single human being stop an avalanche?)

The word "avalanche" here [metaphorically](#) suggests a disastrous onslaught of pain, sickness, and ultimately, death. (Recall that AIDS patients have compromised immune systems, so in the absence of modern treatments, they generally suffer an increasing number of worsening medical conditions.)

As a result of these similes, the ending conveys a sense of poignant inevitability: pain "**will** go through" the speaker, and he will eventually succumb to his illness. The best he can do is try to "shield" himself from the worst, or "hold off" the inevitable, for as long as he can.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-24:** "As if to shield it from / The pains that will go through me, / As if hands were enough / To hold an avalanche off."

CONSONANCE

The poem's language is very musical, featuring plenty of [consonance](#) and [alliteration](#). Repeating consonant sounds often subtly underline the speaker's meaning, as in lines 5-6:

My flesh was its own shield:
Where it was gashed, it healed.

The soft /sh/ sounds have an insistent, slicing effect, like something "gash[ing]" the "flesh." On the other hand, the /d/ sounds are harder and more solid, like the "shield" of the "healed" flesh itself.

In general, alliterative words add density and emphasis to the poem's already compact, rhythmic lines. In line 10, for example, "The"/"that" and "risk" /"robust" make the line itself sound weighty and robust:

Even while I adored
The risk **that** made **robust**,

But those /r/ sounds echo in a sadder context (along with /m/ alliteration) in lines 15-16:

My **m**ind reduced to **hurry**,
My **f**lesh reduced and **w**recked.

This second use of /r/ alliteration contrasts poignantly with the first; the body that was once "robust" is now "reduced" and "wrecked" by illness.

Alliteration also highlights the importance of the "world of wonders" the speaker experienced in youth (line 11), as well as the desperation of his wish that his "hands" could "hold" off death (line 24).

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wake," "cold"
- **Line 5:** "flesh," "shield"
- **Line 6:** "gashed," "healed"
- **Line 10:** "risk," "robust"
- **Line 11:** "world," "wonders"
- **Line 13:** "but be"
- **Line 14:** "cracked"
- **Line 15:** "My mind," "reduced," "hurry"
- **Line 16:** "reduced," "wrecked"
- **Line 17:** "bed"
- **Line 18:** "But," "myself instead"
- **Line 19:** "Stopped upright"
- **Line 23:** "hands," "enough"
- **Line 24:** "hold," "avalanche"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses a great deal of [enjambment](#); fully half its lines are enjambed.

In a few instances, this effect creates a sense of *openness* at the ends of lines. The words/phrases "explored," "adored," and "A world of wonders in" all occur right before enjambments (lines 7, 9, and 11); each seems to hang in mid-air for a moment at the end of its line, evoking the spirit of openness and wonder that characterized the speaker's youth:

I grew as I explored
The body [...]
Even while I adored
The risk [...]
A world of wonders in
Each challenge [...]

The poem even enjambes some lines that would normally be [end-stopped](#). Under normal grammar rules, for example, commas would punctuate the ends of lines 8 ("The body I could trust") and 19 ("Stopped upright where I am"), but the poet chooses to omit them. One possible reason for the omission in line 19 is that, along with the other enjambments in this passage, it makes the language seem to tumble quickly down the page:

But catch myself **instead**
Stopped upright where I **am**
Hugging my body to **me**
As if to shield it **from**
The pains that will go through me,
As if hands were **enough**
To hold [...]

With hardly any end-stopping punctuation to slow its "fall," the sentence keeps plunging downward until it reaches that final period. In this way, the poem's form subtly aligns with its closing "avalanche" [metaphor](#). Much as the "avalanche" of death is coming no matter what, the poem itself seems to tumble unstoppably toward its conclusion.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "who / Prospered"
- **Lines 2-3:** "heat / Wake"
- **Lines 7-8:** "explored / The"
- **Lines 8-9:** "trust / Even"
- **Lines 9-10:** "adored / The"
- **Lines 11-12:** "in / Each"
- **Lines 13-14:** "sorry / The"
- **Lines 18-19:** "instead / Stopped"
- **Lines 19-20:** "am / Hugging"
- **Lines 20-21:** "me / As"
- **Lines 21-22:** "from / The"
- **Lines 23-24:** "enough / To"

REPETITION

The poem [repeats](#) a number of key words and phrases, calling readers' attention to their importance in the poem. For example, "shield" occurs three times in the poem, twice as a noun and once as a verb (lines 5, 14, and 21):

My flesh was its own shield:

[...]
The given shield was cracked,
[...]
As if to shield it from

In each case, the word "shield" is [metaphorical](#). The changing context of this word mirrors the changes in the speaker's adult life:

- At first, his body seems to be "its own shield," capable of protecting and healing itself under any circumstances.
- When the speaker contracts HIV, it seems as if the "shield" has "cracked," leaving him vulnerable to other illnesses (and, in fact, to death).
- Finally and desperately, he tries to "shield" his own body by wrapping his arms around it, even though he knows he can't protect it now (and therefore can't save himself, because he *is* his body).

The word "reduced" also repeats twice in two lines (15-16), with subtly different shades of meaning:

My mind **reduced** to hurry,
My flesh **reduced** and wrecked.

The speaker's mind has been [figuratively](#) reduced, its complexities simplified down to constant "hurry" and worry. His flesh, or body, has been [physically](#) reduced; he's wasting away due to HIV/AIDS. The [asyndeton](#) (the lack of any coordinating conjunction) between these lines makes them feel more concise and matter-of-fact, adding to the poem's solemn, resigned tone.

The poem is filled with more *structural* repetitions as well. In the lines quoted above, for instance, note the [anaphora](#) of "My" and broader grammatical [parallelism](#) ("My [mind/flesh] reduced"). This anaphora/parallelism appears throughout the entire poem, in fact, as the speaker begins every single sentence with either "I" or "My." "I" also begins four *lines* while "My" begins three:

My flesh was its own shield:
[...]
My mind reduced to hurry,
My flesh reduced and wrecked.

These repetitions underline the speaker's deep concern for his *body*—something he once assumed could take care of itself—now that he's seriously ill. They also suggest his attachment to his "mind" and self, and his fear that death will destroy them prematurely.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I wake," "I"
- **Line 3:** "Wake"
- **Line 5:** "My flesh," "shield"
- **Line 7:** "I," "I"
- **Line 8:** "I"
- **Line 9:** "I"
- **Line 13:** "I"
- **Line 14:** "shield"
- **Line 15:** "My," "reduced"
- **Line 16:** "My flesh reduced"
- **Line 17:** "I"
- **Line 20:** "me"
- **Line 21:** "As if," "shield"
- **Line 22:** "me"
- **Line 23:** "As if"



VOCABULARY

Prospered (Line 2) - Flourished; thrived (here suggesting these "dreams" were enjoyable).

Residue (Line 3) - Remnants; a substance left over from a process. (Here referring to the sweat that's soaked the speaker's sheets during his sleep.)

Gashed (Line 6) - Cut or broken open.

Robust (Line 10) - Strong, vigorous, and/or resilient.

Cannot but be (Line 13) - Can't help being; can't *not* be.

Reduced (Lines 15-16) - Diminished in size, vitality, power, etc. The speaker's mind has been [metaphorically](#) diminished (so that it seems to contain only the "hurry" of anxiety); his body has physically diminished (gotten thinner).

Avalanche (Line 24) - A large, potentially deadly accumulation of snow, ice, and rock sliding down a mountain slope. (Here, a [metaphor](#) for the disaster of terminal HIV/AIDS, or for death itself.)



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Man with Nights Sweats" alternates between [quatrains](#) (which rhyme ABAB) with rhyming [couplets](#). For example, stanza 1 is a quatrain:

I wake up cold, I who
Prospered through dreams of heat
Wake to their residue,
Sweat, and a clinging sheet.

And stanza 2 is a couplet:

My flesh was its own shield:
Where it was gashed, it healed.

There are four quatrains and four couplets in all, for a total of 24 lines.

Overall, this is a fairly strict form. The short lines and regular rhymes make the poem feel tightly *contained*, reflecting the speaker's attempt to contain himself emotionally and even physically (as when he's "Hugging my body," line 20).

Although the speaker's fear and anguish never burst out into [free verse](#), irregular [stanzas](#), etc., the reader can sense the volatile emotions threatening to disrupt the tidy formal surface. The form even seems to be *holding off* such an outburst, much as the speaker wishes he could "hold [...] off" the "avalanche" of suffering and death (lines 23-24).

METER

The poem's [meter](#) is [iambic trimeter](#), meaning that its lines typically consist of three iambs (metrical units consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable). In other words, its lines tend to follow a "da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm, with sporadic variations.

Readers can hear this pattern clearly in lines 11-12, for example:

A world | of won- | ders in
Each chal- | lenge to | the skin.

In lines 5-6, meanwhile, readers can hear variations in the pattern:

My flesh | was its | own shield:
Where it | was gashed, | it healed.

The last two syllables of line 5 are more like a pair of strong stresses (a [spondee](#)) than an iamb (although they *could* be read as an iamb instead; it's ambiguous). The first two syllables of line 6 form a [trochee](#), or a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable.

Occasional *spondaic* or *trochaic* substitutions like these are common in iambic verse. In general, metrical variations help keep a poem's rhythm from becoming too dull and predictable. They can also add meaningful emphasis; for example, the three strong stresses that end line 5 help make the "shield" of flesh sound stronger.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem alternates between [quatrains](#) and [couplets](#). The quatrains [rhyme](#) on alternating lines (ABAB), and the couplets rhyme as well (CC). Thus, the [rhyme scheme](#) of the poem as a whole is:

ABAB CC DEDE FF GHGH II JKJK LL

The quatrains allow a bit of space for reflection, which the rhymed couplets then punctuate with crisp observations such as "My flesh was its own **shield**: / Where it was gashed, it **healed**" (lines 5-6).

Ultimately, the poem builds to a memorable couplet about suffering and death (the [metaphorical](#) "avalanche"). This is the only [slant-rhymed](#) couplet in the poem (though there are other slant rhymes in the quatrains). The "enough"/"off" pairing provides a sense of closure without the satisfaction of a full rhyme, so it helps evoke both the finality and frustration of premature death.



SPEAKER

The speaker is never named or specifically identified; the title describes him only as "The Man with Night Sweats." Night sweats are a common symptom of acute HIV infection, and Gunn's collection *The Man with Night Sweats* [elegizes](#) friends and others lost to the AIDS crisis, so it's fair to assume this speaker is HIV-positive.

The label in the title is significant because it suggests that, in a terrible way, the disease is *overtaking* the man's previous identity. A man who previously lived a "robust" and exciting life has become simply "The Man with Night Sweats." As he protests in lines 15-16, illness has "reduced" him in more ways than one.

A few clues in the poem hint at the nature of his current experience:

- He appears to be "wak[ing] up" at home, in a bed that he "ha[s] to change" himself, so he probably hasn't been hospitalized.
- However, he laments that his "mind" has already been "reduced to hurry" and his "flesh reduced and wrecked." The progression of the disease has filled him with anxiety (a sense of mental "hurry") and left him gaunt and unhealthy-looking ("reduced and wrecked").
- Already chronically ill, he anticipates worse "pains" to come, followed by the "avalanche" of acute physical failure and death. (AIDS compromises the immune system, leaving the body vulnerable to a range of other diseases.)

Thom Gunn was a gay man writing at a time when HIV/AIDS was devastating the gay community, both in the U.S. (where he resided) and abroad. Though he lost many friends and loved ones to the disease, he remained healthy throughout this period. In other words, this poem is a dramatic monologue; the speaker is not the poet.



SETTING

The [setting](#) appears to be the speaker's own bedroom. The speaker describes "wak[ing] up" with the bedsheet "clinging" to him, and later says that "I have to change the bed." This second reference strongly suggests that the speaker is at home, rather than, say, in a hospital or hotel room.

Accordingly, it seems that his illness hasn't progressed far enough for him to be hospitalized. He is experiencing night sweats, but he isn't yet suffering more severe symptoms of HIV/AIDS ("The pains that will go through me"). However, given the extremely high mortality rate of HIV/AIDS patients at the time the poem was written, he is expecting his symptoms to worsen and his illness to be fatal.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Man with Night Sweats" is the title poem of Thom Gunn's best-known collection. *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992) appeared at the height of the U.S. HIV/AIDS crisis, several years before the first effective treatments for HIV infection became widely available.

In 1992, AIDS was the [leading cause](#) of death for American men ages 25 to 44, and throughout the prior decade, its impact on the U.S. gay community had been especially devastating. As a gay man based in San Francisco, one of the epicenters of the epidemic, Gunn saw many friends die from the disease.

The Man with Night Sweats contains [elegies](#) for some of the loved ones he lost, along with other personal poems. In addition to the title poem, which is framed as a dramatic monologue from the perspective of an AIDS sufferer, famous pieces from the collection include "[The Hug](#)" and "[Lament](#)."

Published to wide acclaim the year Gunn turned 63, *The Man With Night Sweats* was one of the later products of a long and wide-ranging career. Gunn (1929-2004) was born in England and became associated, as a younger writer, with the circle of post-WWII English writers known as "The Movement." This circle, whose other notable figures included Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis, tended to avoid the experimental practices of the previous, "modernist" generation of Anglo-American writers.

Gunn then moved to San Francisco in his mid-20s, where he became loosely associated with a very different poetry movement: the freewheeling "San Francisco Renaissance" of the 1950s and 1960s. As his career progressed, Gunn became known for his skillful blending of conventionally British and American styles and subjects, as well as his equal aptitude with [free verse](#) and traditional verse (i.e., the kind of [meter](#) and [rhyme](#) found in "The Man with Night Sweats").

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Man with Night Sweats" appeared at a time when AIDS was a terminal illness in most cases. Gunn's collection of the same title was published in 1992, by which time roughly 200,000 Americans had died of AIDS-related illnesses since the first U.S. cases were identified in the 1980s. U.S. deaths from HIV/AIDS peaked in 1995, then began declining substantially the following year, as the treatment called HAART (highly active antiretroviral therapy) became widespread. No cure has been found to date, however, and over 36 million people have died from the epidemic since it began in the late 20th century.

The condition called AIDS, or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, results from infection with HIV, or the human immunodeficiency virus. AIDS compromises the human immune system, leaving the body vulnerable to a wide range of other conditions, including fatal illnesses. The speaker of the poem has several common symptoms of AIDS, including the "Night Sweats" of the title. The speaker's "wak[ing] up cold" after "dreams of heat" may also indicate fever/chills, while "My flesh reduced and wrecked" points to severe weight loss (HIV wasting syndrome) and any of various conditions that can affect the skin, such as bacterial infections or viral-induced cancers.

Though not confined to any one population, HIV/AIDS has disproportionately impacted gay and bisexual male communities, including the San Francisco-based gay community in which Gunn was immersed for most of his adult life. Because mainstream U.S. culture largely stigmatized and/or ignored AIDS sufferers in the early years of the epidemic, the period in which *The Man with Night Sweats* appeared saw an explosion of AIDS-related activism.

The AIDS epidemic also featured prominently in other landmark works from these years, including Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart* (1985), Randy Shilts's nonfiction chronicle *And the Band Played On* (1987), Tony Kushner's play [Angels in America](#) (1991-1992), and the film *Philadelphia* (1993).



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poet's Life and Work](#) — Read a biography of Thom Gunn at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thom-gunn>)
- [More on Gunn's Life](#) — A biography of Gunn at Poets.org. (<https://poets.org/poet/thom-gunn>)
- [A Discussion of Gunn and Bishop](#) — Watch author Colm Tóibín discussing the poetry of Thom Gunn and Elizabeth Bishop. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdiYwXwU790>)

- [Gunn: A Retrospective](https://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/28/books/thom-gunn-74-poet-who-left-tradition-for-the-counterculture.html) — Read Gunn's 2004 obituary in the New York Times. (Registration required.)
- [The San Francisco Renaissance](https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-san-francisco-renaissance) — Read an introduction to the San Francisco Renaissance, the post-WWII poetic movement with which Gunn is sometimes associated.
- [An HIV/AIDS Timeline](https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline) — Historical context for the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the U.S., courtesy of HIV.gov.



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Allen, Austin. "The Man with Night Sweats." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Apr 2022. Web. 27 Apr 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "The Man with Night Sweats." LitCharts LLC, April 20, 2022. Retrieved April 27, 2022. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/thom-gunn/the-man-with-night-sweats>.