



Tikrit University

College of Education for Women

Fourth Year/ Modern poetry

Subject: "The Unknown Citizen" by W.H. Auden

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“The Unknown Citizen” by W.H. Auden

“The Unknown Citizen” is a parody of the idea of the “Unknown Soldier”. After the First World War, European governments erected marble monuments to honor the dead soldiers whose lives are sacrificed for the sake of victory and politicians. These soldiers remain unknown. Like the Unknown Soldier, the unknown citizen’s life and individuality are sacrificed for the sake of the “Greater Community”. So, the unknown citizen refers to the common average citizen who is dehumanized by a state-controlled society. His individuality has been sacrificed for the sake of the “Greater Community”.

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official complaint,
And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old-
fashioned word, he was a saint,
For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.
Except for the War till the day he retired
He worked in a factory and never got fired,
But satisfied his employers, Fudge
Motors Inc. Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
For his Union reports that he paid his dues,
(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)
And our Social Psychology workers found
That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.
The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day

And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.

Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,

And his Health-card shows he was once in hospital but left it cured.

Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare

He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Instalment Plan

And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,

A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.

Our researchers into Public Opinion are content

That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;

When there was peace, he was for peace: when there was war, he went.

He was married and added five children to the population,

Which our Eugenist says was the right

Number for a parent of his generation.

And our teachers report that he never

Interfered with their education.

Was he free? Was he happy?

The question is absurd:

Had anything been wrong, we should

Certainly have heard.

Poem's Analysis: The speaker begins by stating that the "Bureau of Statistics" had no "official complaint" against this "unknown citizen." This unknown individual

obeys the state blindly. Thus, he is described as a “saint” by the state. He is a “saint” not because he believes in God and spirituality but because he serves the government perfectly. Despite being unknown by name, the citizen is identified by his social identification, the number, “JS/07/M/378.” This number is much like a social security number. He is simply representative of all the citizenry who conform to set standards and practices, standards which are dictated by the mass organizations and institutions that shape society.

Auden attempts to portray the sense of conformity social forces press upon the individual. The individual is not simply one man but every man. During peace time, this Unknown Citizen works hard in a factory and tries so hard to satisfy his employers. He is a blind follower of orders and laws. During war time, he joins the army and fights.

This unknown citizen enjoys a drink with his mates. Such a detail reveals the intrusion of the state in the lives of individuals. The state has employed “Social Psychology workers” to inspect every aspect of the individuals’ lives. The image of reports reveals the lack of freedom in the citizen’s life. He is monitored in every simple step he takes. He is not allowed to choose for himself and has no free will. Although certain “details” regarding a person are contained in such reports, the individual remains truly unknown, and this is the central irony the poem plays upon. The unknown citizen should read a daily newspaper. He is expected to respond to “advertisements.” He is enslaved by the state. He buys the insurance policies. His health insurance covers his hospital stay, and he leaves the hospital “cured owns”. By the state standards, the unknown citizen is a successful man because he owns the modern conveniences, such as a record-player, a radio, a car, and even a refrigerator. His success is measured by his material gains. No one cares for his feelings and his identity. The citizen always tries to please the state.

He does not hold his personal views on anything. He does not have the freedom of choice.

This citizen follows the state plan even when it comes to his family life. He gets married and has five children. He does not even dare to interfere with his children's education. "Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd". These two questions need no answer. Obviously, the citizen is enslaved by the state which does not care about his personal happiness and freedom.

Themes:

State control and dominion of bureaucracy: As the citizens have no sense of self, the state is free to take control over every aspect of everyday life. And the bureaucracy doesn't just control jobs, medicine, and jail-time. On the contrary, the state has dominion over every aspect of a person's life, deciding what is right or wrong and using that decision to completely dictate a person's value in society. All in all, the state controlled every aspect of his life from his job to his children to his opinions and beliefs. Nothing is out of their control, and even in death they are free to judge the deceased based on their compliance to society's expectations.

Conformity, standardization, and loss of self: The unknown citizen is praised for his exemplary life because of his ability to conform to society's standards. He was a model citizen, not because he was happy or fulfilled, but because he did everything he was supposed to. He is praised, not because of who he was as a person, but because of his lack of personal sentiments. One can notice that he's not a saint because of any good acts or morality. Instead, he is a good person because his life was consumed by this bigger-than-thou force, "the Greater Community." The man doesn't even have a name; he doesn't have any physical description or desires or ambitions. Any of those things might have detracted from his ability to

serve the community as a mindless follower. In this dystopia, the best quality a person can have is a complete and utter lack of self and desire to conform.