

## **The Unknown Citizen by W H Auden**

The poem, 'The Unknown Citizen' is intensely ironic and reflects Auden's earlier work in which social, political and economic concerns dominated his texts. It reveals a satirical portrait of an unknown citizen, a citizen who represents the average man and his lack of personal identity within modern society. Dehumanizing institutions as well as complacency on the part of the citizenry are to blame for the lack of individuality. The poem appears to protest against a world in which systems interested in scientific data fail to capture the human quality of life, and mass organizations and commercial exploitation attempt to obliterate originality within humankind.

The unknown citizen is one of the most significant poems of W.H Auden with a recurrent theme, that is, the dilemma and chaos modern man faces in the rapidly changing world. The poem was written in 1939, during the horrific scenario of World War II and in the poem encapsulates this post-war chaos and up rootedness. Besides immense physical suffering, Auden highlights how difficult it is to retain individuality and identity in a fast changing world of chaos. The theme of the loss of identity accompanied by the materialism of modern man, conformism, manipulation, encroachment of technology on the lives of humans, lack of true freedom and loss of values are predominant in the poem.

It was the time of authoritarianism in Europe, and amid dictatorship in the various countries in Europe, Man as a rational individual was losing his stance and distinctiveness. The definition of the average citizen was confined to how well he conformed to authorities. With ever-advancing technology of the modern world it is as if humanity of the world was diminishing. Humans were becoming more and more like faceless citizens, or unknown citizens. It is because of this technology that humans have been reduced to nothing more than statistics and

facts on a piece of paper. The picture that the poem paints of a 'Modern Man' is that he is someone who is devoid of values.

He has no notion of freedom or happiness. Emotions, feelings, dreams and hopes do not matter anymore. He talks about the endeavour and struggle of the modern man to conform to the norms set by the power structures which makes him an accepted and respectable citizen but by doing so he fails in his humanistic/spiritual/ethical/moral principles. It is a critique of totalitarianism as throughout the poem the unknown citizen is compelled to do the works of different organizations and Auden sarcastically mocks his vocation regarding the same through the appreciation he gets from different agencies. At the very beginning of the poem instead of mentioning the unknown citizen by the name he has been represented through a figure 'To JS/07/M/378/' which shows the immense control of state over the unknown citizen. Furthermore, the word 'saint' has been sarcastically used for the unknown citizen that he is a saint who sacrifices his happiness and conforms to what he has been told by the State power. The government sees him as a number on a file in a drawer in some government building. The only thing that could identify him from others in his neighbourhood is as Auden wrote, "He was married and added five children to the population, / Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of his generation" (Auden 26-27). This reference gives a vague reference to how old he might be. He buys a lot of things which are taxable to help the government. He possesses everything a modern man has but relinquishes his identity to serve the state. This conformity and subservience to the state shows complete loss of identity and individuality. Conformity has created apathetic and obedient citizens which is exactly what the government wants. Auden therefore believes that conformity seems dangerous in the world we live in.

At the end of the poem the poet asks two important questions. Was he free? Was he happy? No government statistics can ever answer these kinds of questions. By asking these questions, the poet is drawing our attention to the question of freedom and happiness. Therefore, such a

question in this context would be 'absurd.' The only way for an individual to survive in a regimented society is to conform and obey. The unknown citizen is devoid of any urge for any such self-assertion.

The poet suggests that our society has created a set of rules and regulations in which individuals are supposed to follow and work as the system states. The stress for individuals to conform in this system makes one lose his or her individualism. An ideal citizen, then, is the one who fulfils the social expectations of behaviour demanded by the modern world. Auden satirizes the kind of approach to human behaviour which judges the citizens according to their usefulness for the greater good.

In a nutshell, 'The Unknown Citizen' fits easily into the trends of modern literature and highlights the problems that people face. The citizen remains unknown even though he serves the Community because we are not shown who he really is as an individual which elucidates that individuality is reduced and diminished for the sake of worldly business. The poet says that statistics cannot sum up an individual and physical facts are inadequate to evaluate human happiness. Therefore, the poem reflects Auden's insight of the concept of control versus freedom which brings to light the dangers of losing sense of individuality.

(Edited for Students, Source: *A Study Guide for Auden's The Unknown Citizen*)