

W. H. Auden: Poems Summary and Analysis of "The Unknown Citizen"

The poem begins with an ironic epigraph, "To JS/07 M 378 / This Marble Monument / Is Erected by the State."

The Bureau of Statistics and all other reports show that he will comply with his duties to "the Greater Community." He worked in a factory and paid his union dues. He had no odd views. The Social Psychology investigators found him to be normal, as did the Press: he was popular, "liked a drink," bought the daily paper, and had the "normal" reactions to advertisements. He was fully insured. The Health-card report shows he was in the hospital only once, and left cured.

The Producers Research and High-Grade Living investigators also showed he was normal and "had everything necessary to the Modern Man"—radio, car, etcetera. The Public Opinion researchers found "he held the proper opinions for the time of year," supporting peace in peacetime but serving when there was war. He was married and had the appropriate number of five children, according to the Eugenicist. He never interfered with the public schools.

It is absurd to ask whether he was free or happy, for if anything had been wrong, "we should certainly have heard."

Analysis

"The Unknown Citizen" (1940) is one of Auden's most famous poems. Often anthologized and read by students in high school and college, it is renowned for its wit and irony in complaining about the stultifying and anonymous qualities of bureaucratic, semi-socialist Western societies. Its structure is that of a satiric elegy, as though the boring, unknown citizen was so utterly unremarkable that the state honored him with a poetic monument about how little trouble he caused for anyone. It resembles the "Unknown Soldier" memorials that nations erect to honor the soldiers who fought and died for their countries and whose names have been lost to posterity; Britain's is located in Westminster Abbey and the United States' is located in Arlington, Virginia. This one, in an unnamed location, lists the unknown man as simply "JS/07 M 378."

The rhyme scheme changes a few times throughout the poem. Most frequently the reader notices rhyming couplets. These sometimes use the same number of syllables, but they are not heroic couplets—no, they are not in iambic pentameter—they are often 11 or 13 syllables long, or of differing lengths. These patterns increase the dry humor of the poem.

Auden's "Unknown Citizen" is not anonymous like the Unknown Soldier, for the bureaucracy knows a great deal about him. The named agencies give the sense, as early as 1940, that a powerful Big Brother kind of bureaucracy watches over its citizens and collects data on them and keeps it throughout one's life. This feeling makes the poem eerie and prescient; one often thinks of the dystopian, totalitarian states found in the writings of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley or the data-driven surveillance state of today. In Auden's context, one might think of the state-focused governments of Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini.

The Big Brother perspective begins from the very outset of the poem, with its evocation of a Bureau of Statistics. The man has had every aspect of his life catalogued. He served his community, he held a job, he paid union dues, he did not hold radical views, he reacted normally to advertisements, he had insurance, he possessed the right material goods, he had proper opinions about current events, and he married and had the right amount of children. It does not appear on paper that he did anything wrong or out of place. In fact, "he was a saint" from the state's perspective, having "served the Greater Community." The words used to describe him—"normal," "right," "sensible," "proper," "popular"—indicate that he is considered the ideal citizen. He is praised as "unknown" because there was nothing interesting to know. Consider, in comparison, the completely normalized protagonist Emmet in *The Lego Movie*.

At the end of the poem, the closing couplet asks, "Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard." With these last lines comes the deeper meaning of the poem, the irony that despite all of the bureaucratic data gathering, some aspect of the individual might not have been captured. It becomes clear that the citizen is also "unknown" because in this statistical gathering of data, the man's individuality and identity are lost. This bureaucratic society, focused on its official view of the common good, assesses a person using external, easily-catalogued characteristics rather than respect for one's uniqueness, one's particular thoughts, feelings, hopes, fears, and goals.

Interestingly, and ironically, the speaker himself is also unknown. The professionals in the poem— "his employers," "our Social Psychology workers," "our researchers into Public Opinion," "our Eugenacist"— are just as anonymous and devoid of personality. While a person might be persuaded that he is free or happy, the evidence of his life shows that he is just one more cog in the faceless, nameless bureaucratic machine.