THE UNKNOWN CITIZEN

BY

W.H. Auden
W.H. Auden and The Unknown Citizen

- W. H. Auden, was an Anglo-American poet, born in England, later an American citizen, regarded by many critics as one of the greatest writers of the 20th century.
- His work is noted for its stylistic and technical achievements, its engagement with moral and political issues, and its variety of tone, form and content.
- The central themes of his poetry are love, politics and citizenship, religion and morals, and the relationship between unique human beings and the anonymous, impersonal world of nature.
The Unknown Citizen by W.H. Auden is a satiric poem. It describes an average citizen in a government-controlled state. In many big cities, there is a monument to the Unknown Soldier that stands for the thousands of unknown soldiers who die for their country. The title of Auden’s poem parodies this.

The citizen to whom the monument has been built has been found to be without any fault. He was a saint not because he searched for God but because he served the government perfectly. He did not get dismissed from his job.

He was a member of the Union and paid all his dues to the union. A report on the Union shows that it was a balance union and did not take extreme views on anything.

The social psychology workers found that he was popular among his fellow workers and had a drink with them now and then. He also bought a newspaper everyday. He reached to the advertisements normally.
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- He had good health and although he went to hospital once, he came out quite cured. The citizen was sensible about buying things on an instalment basis.
- He had everything a modern man needed at home. Moreover, this ideal citizen was found to be sensible in his view. When there was peace, he supported it. But when there was war, he was ready to fight.
- He didn’t hold his personal views on anything. He had the right number of children and he did not quarrel with the education they got.
- The poet now asks the important questions. Was this man free? Was he happy? No government statistics can ever answer these kinds of questions.
- ‘The Unknown Citizen’ is a typical Auden’s poem in that it shows the poet’s profound concern for the modern world and its problems. A keen intelligent observer of the contemporary scene.
Auden was one of the first to realize that the totalitarian socialist state would be no Utopia and that man there would be reduced to the position of a cog in the wheel.

A citizen will have no scope to develop his initiative or to assert his individuality. He will be made to conform to the State in all things.

It is the picture of such a citizen, in a way similar to Eliot’s Hollow Man, which is ironically presented in the poem.

Auden dramatizes his theme by showing the glaring disparity between the complete statistical information about the citizen compiled by the State and the sad inadequacy of the judgments made about him. The poet seems to say, statistics cannot sum up an individual and physical facts are inadequate to evaluate human happiness- for man does not live by bread alone.

In the phrase ‘The Unknown’ the word ‘unknown’ means ordinary, obscure. So the whole phrase means ‘those ordinary, obscure soldiers as citizens of the state who laid down their lives for defending their motherland wanted name and fame, but remained unknown.'
Significance of the Title

- The title of Auden’s poem parodies this. Thus ‘The Unknown Citizen’ means the ordinary average citizen in the modern industrialized urban society. He has no individuality and identity. He has no desire for self-assertion. He likes to remain unknown.

- At the end of the poem the poet asks two 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.

- And ironically, the poet suggests that the modern man is slaver to routine and he is incapable of understanding such concepts freedom and happiness. Therefore, such a question in this context would be ‘absurd’.

- Thus, this poem ‘The Unknown Citizen’ is a bitter attack on modern society-its indifference towards individuality and identity. The only way for an individual to survive in a regimented society is to conform, obey and live in perpetual mental slavery. Such a creative is this ‘unknown citizen’ who is utterly devoid of any urge for self-assertion. Such a modern man is a slave to the routine, is incapable of understanding such concepts as freedom and happiness.
In a Nutshell

- The poem is the epitaph of a man, identified only by a combination of letters and numbers somewhat like an American Social Security Number who is described entirely in external terms: from the point of view of government organizations such as the fictional "Bureau of Statistics."

- The speaker of the poem concludes that the man had lived an entirely average, therefore exemplary, life. The poem is a satire of standardization at the expense of individualism.

- The poem is implicitly the work of a government agency at some point in the future, when modern beaureaucratizing trends have reached the point where citizens are known by arbitrary numbers and letters, not personal names.

- By describing the "average citizen" through the eyes of various government organizations, the poem criticizes standardization and the modern state's relationship with its citizens. The last lines of the poem dismiss the questions of whether he was "free" or "happy", implicitly because the statistical methods used by the state to be his life have no means of understanding such questions.

- The epigraph to "Unknown Citizen" is a parody of the symbolic Tomb of the unknown soldier commemorating unidentified soldiers; tombs of unknown soldiers were first created following the first World War.
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