

The Unknown Citizen: A Modern Man's Cry for Identity

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Abstract

The Unknown Citizen is one the best poems of WH Auden where he portrays a common man's plight of being an anonymous person without any identity of his own. The poem shows how an ordinary citizen is known by different numbers and names assigned by the government. The paper will focus on how the writer employs satire and irony to emphasize this lack of identity. The paper will also highlight the fact whether or not the person is happy in being anonymous? Whether the person is free? Or do these questions hold no meaning as nothing is going to change in the life of a common modern man?

Keywords: Anonymity, Identity, Free, Happy, Modern, Disillusionment

English poet, playwright, critic, and librettist Wystan Hugh Auden had a major influence on the poetry of the 20th century. Auden grew up in Birmingham, England and was known for his extraordinary intellect and wit. His first book, *Poems*, was published in 1930 with the help of T.S. Eliot. Auden published about four hundred poems, including seven long poems (two of them book-length). His poetry was encyclopedic in scope and method, ranging in style from obscure twentieth-century modernism to the lucid traditional forms such as ballads and limericks, from doggerel through haiku and villanelles to a "Christmas Oratorio" and a baroque eclogue in Anglo-Saxon meters. Auden won the Pulitzer Prize in 1948 for *The Age of Anxiety* which also became a popular phrase to describe the modern era. Auden at first wrote poetry in romantic style but later turned to the modern form by the influence of TS Eliot.

The Unknown Citizen is a poem written by WH Auden in 1939 when he moved to the United States from England. The poem was first published on January 6, 1940, in *The New Yorker*, and first appeared in book form in Auden's collection *Another Time* (Random House, 1940). The Unknown Citizen as the title suggests is a poem about a modern man who has no identity of his own and who lives his life under a certain tag or a number assigned to him by the government. The poem through its unique style of language and irregular rhyme scheme evokes a sense of disillusionment that a modern man undergoes living under an authoritarian regime. Throughout the poem, the poet employs irony and satire to tease the readers into thinking whether a modern

man is free and happy? The poem brings out the fact of how a modern man lives an average and ordinary life without any choice of his own.

The irony and satire employed by the poem criticizes the relationship between the state and the modern man.

"He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official complaint"

The very opening lines of the poem are an example of sharp irony showing the modern man's lack of choices. He has to live his life as per the rules and regulations of the government. The fact that no official complaints have been registered against him showcase how controlled his life has been.

"And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint"

The above lines continue the pungent satire on a choice less and a caged man who lives a meek and submissive life.

"And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire"

In the above lines the poet implies that although the modern man is in possession of all the material things for a happy life yet there is something that he craves for. The modern man so to say has been reduced to believe that happy life consists of possessing small material things.

All these facets of a modern man bring the poet to ask a very relevant question of freedom and happiness. Under these circumstances where everything is decided by the government, the question of whether this man is free or happy is an absurd question in itself because nothing is going to change the life of a modern man. The government will continue to work as it deems fit, the modern man will go on living a controlled and caged life.

"Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

As long as the surveillance of the states continue the freedom of expression and action of a modern man will continue to be compromised. Left with no choice other than to live a state-imposed disciplined life the sad journey of a modern man will continue thereby becoming an Unknown Citizen.

Conclusion:

The poet influenced by the modern poetry of TS Eliot coupled with the post-world war scenario sees a general depression in the masses who are disillusioned and disenchanted. The authoritarian governments add to the miseries of the people by compromising their freedom of choices and their freedom of speech. In addition to it they are not even given the chance to express whether they are happy or not.

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