"**The Unknown Citizen"**

*W. H. Auden*

(To JS/07/M/378)

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 to 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 a hospital but left it cured,

Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare

He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment 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 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.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think about this man? Do you find him honorable and patriotic for

living in his country, following all the rules, and being the ideal government‘s citizen;

or do you find it dishonorable that he lived simply as an ordinary man?

2. Was this man free? Happy?

3. If you died tomorrow, what would your epitaph say?

4. Would what you want it to say differ from what it would say if you died tomorrow? 48 | P a g e

**Themes of W.H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen"**

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*Conformity and Anonymity in the Modern World*

"Social Security Number? Birthdate? Nine digit telephone number starting with area code? Mother's Maiden Name?" In many ways, we are simply faceless numbers to modern society, not individuals with feelings and emotions and dreams. W.H. Auden, a well-known English poet and dramatist, discusses this important theme in his poem "An Unknown Soldier." Auden, being a modernist, is concerned with this modern idea of people losing their identities in the face of the changing, technological world. In the poem "An Unknown Soldier," Auden speaks of the dangers of modern society to the individual including anonymity, conformity, and government control.

The anonymity of the unknown citizen is shown in Auden's repeated use of metaphor. Auden shows the reader everything the unknown citizen was and was not-"a saint" (line 4), "wasn't odd in his views" (line 9), "normal in every way" (line 15), "was insured" (line 16), "had everything necessary to the Modern man" (line 20), "held proper opinions for the time of year" (line 23), and added the right number of children to the population (line 25.). While it seems as though the unknown citizen is praised for these qualities, Auden is mocking how anonymous the man has

become. This citizen is completely defined by his statistics, not by any of his qualities or feelings. He isn't even given a name but is referred to by a number.

Conformity is the virtue in most in demand by society as Emerson pointed out many years before. Auden's unknown citizen is a model of conformity in a society where everyone must follow the rules if things are to run smoothly. He does all the right things. The government can produce reports to show that he did all the right things. He had the right opinions, owned the right products, and even had the correct number of kids. In this poem, people have become

nothing more than commodities that must fulfill their roles for the wheel to turn. Conformity has created apathetic and obedient citizens which is exactly what the government wants.

Lastly an unknown citizen falls prey to government control. The speaker in this poem is the government itself. That's why Auden uses plurals like ours. In the eyes of the state, this man was a saint (line 4) because he fit into the government's idea of the perfect man. The poem is written in rather a choppy way as though it is a statistical report listing all his "assets." The government does not truly care about him, only the fact that he does what he is told. Words are capitalized like Greater Community, Installment Plan, Modern Man, and Public Opinion to show the emphasis that the government puts on these concepts. Everything about his life is closely monitored, even his private life as the government knows things like the fact that he likes to drink. The government does not care about people's happiness or freedom as evidenced by the last lines. "Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard." As Platizky says in Explicator, "The agencies are content with empirical evidence about his life" (Platizky). There is no need to ask for any more. He was a good follower and that is what counts.

Auden's "An Unknown Soldier" warns us about the dangers of modern society in much the same way as the novel 1984 by George Orwell. Conformity is dangerous. Allowing ourselves to be reduced to faceless numbers is dangerous. Allowing the government too much control is dangerous. As Platizsky says, "In essence, the satiric speaker seemingly praises but, of course, actually mocks the kind of citizen who blindly relinquishes his individuality to the 'Greater Community' (line 5) and the kind of society that insists and depends on such sacrifices from its modern-day Saint (line 4), a saint who does not seek higher truth but merely exists to perpetuate the status quo" (Platizsky). Auden would say that this is the way government wants us to function in the modern-day world, and unfortunately, there are many unknown citizens around, maybe even some of us.