The Unknown Citizen

SUMMARY

This marble monument has been created by the State to commemorate JS/07 M378.

According to the Bureau of Statistics, nobody ever made a formal complaint about him. The other reports about his behavior all say that he was basically the perfect citizen, because he did everything he was supposed to do in order to serve his society. He worked the same job his entire life until he retired, apart from a break when he served in the War. His employer, Fudge Motors Inc., was fine with him. He had a totally normal outlook on life and politics, and he contributed to his Union (which, we've checked, was not a threat). Our Psychology institution also established that his friends liked hanging out with him. According to the Official Media, he bought a paper regularly and responded to adverts as was to be expected. He had the proper insurance, and our official health records show he only needed to stay in the hospital one time. The departments in charge of organizing society agree that he approved of the State's vision and that he had all the possessions that a modern individual needs—like a record player, radio, car, and fridge. Our Public Opinion department asserts that he always held the right view on the big issues: if it was a peaceful time, he approved, but he also went to war when we needed him to. He had a wife and five children, contributing the correct number of new human beings to society according to our governmental official who aims to optimize the gene pool. He let the children's teachers do their work without questioning their teachings. It's ridiculous to ask if he was free or happy, because we would have known if there was anything wrong with him.

THEMES

OPPRESSION, SURVEILLANCE, AND THE STATE

"The Unknown Citizen" is a parody of an elegy (a poem to commemorate someone who has recently died). This elegy is delivered by "the State"—the government and its institutions—rather than by a loving friend or family member. Through this, the poem pokes fun at and implicitly critiques the modern world for granting too many far-reaching powers to the state, showing how the state oppresses those unlucky enough to live within its grasp.

In particular, the poem looks at how this oppression is achieved through surveillance—through the state knowing everything about its inhabitants. The title is thus ironic, as there's little that the state *doesn't* seem to know about the dead man. Overall, the poem argues that freedom is impossible in a society that so closely watches its citizens, even under the guise of helping them live a supposedly good life.

Though on the surface the poem is praising the life of the dead "unknown citizen," it only does so because this person lived a textbook example of an obedient, non-questioning life. In the poem's world, a good citizen is one who does everything they're is supposed to. Indeed, that's why the speaker—the creepy "we" of the poem—begins by offering what is probably the highest compliment in this dystopia: "there was no official complaint" against the dead man (according to the Bureau of Statistics). In other words, he never did anything wrong. If he had, the state would "certainly have heard" about it—revealing the frightening reach of their view into people's lives.

This points to one of the poem's main criticisms of the state: its over-reaching surveillance. The state treats life as a kind of science, improvable only through increasingly detailed data sets—and denying life any sense of mystery, joy, or freedom in the process. There is *one* way to be, this implies, and the surveillance is there to help (or, more likely, force) the individual to be that way.

Accordingly, the state encroaches on every aspect of the dead man's life. Indeed, the poem reads pretty much as a list of all the ways that a state can violate its citizens' freedoms. The state approves of the dead man's life because it knows so much about him: his working life, sociability, opinions on the news, his personal possessions, his attitude to his children's education, and so on. There is a kind of parable at work here, as the poem implies that a state with too much power will only use that power to sink its claws deeper and deeper into people's everyday lives.

And not only does this oppressive state spy on its citizens, it also co-opts their language. So while an alternative view of humanity might prioritize, say, happiness, a tight-knit community, and moral virtue over everything being done correctly and by the book, the state here has already got that covered. "Community," "saint[lines]," and happiness have all been re-defined to fit what the state wants, not just taking away people's freedoms but eroding the ways in which they can even *conceive* of those freedoms.

Overall, then, Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" reads as a cautionary tale to modern society—asking people to question the relationship between the state and the individual, and to examine whether their government upholds the right values in terms of what it means to live a good life. Ironic and a little funny, yes, the poem nevertheless offers a stark and bleak picture of a sinister world in which genuine freedom is

impossible.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-29

STANDARDIZATION AND CONFORMITY

Closely tied to the poem's ideas about freedom, oppression, and surveillance are its criticisms of the standardization and conformity it views as inherent to modern life. Written against a backdrop of increasing mass production and industrialization, the poem describes the dead citizen as "the Modern Man." The poem displays an intense anxiety about the direction of humanity's travel during the 20th century, questioning whether the values that seem important to this "Modern Man" are actually eroding what it means to be a human being.

The poem implies that modern society, in an effort to optimize productivity and happiness, has made everyone essentially the same and robbed life of the kind of individuality that makes it meaningful in the first place. The state makes it out as if this man was free to choose how he lived, yet the reality is that this choice was an illusion. Modern society has *told* people what they should want and how they should live, which the poem implies makes it impossible for people to actually think for themselves. In such a world, there are right ways to live and wrong ways, and these are defined by the state. This man was thus "a saint" only because he always held the "proper opinions"—the ones that were officially sanctioned.

And while much of this conformity was imposed upon the man by the government, the poem argues that it came from elsewhere too. While its skewering of a surveillance state can be read as an argument against strict government control and communism, its anxiety about increasing mass production and industrialization is a knock against *capitalism*. For example, the man's employer, "Fudge Motors Inc.," clearly had a hand in making sure the man did everything by the book. This suggests the role of giant corporations in the suppression of individuality.

Indeed, the poem takes special aim at the world of advertising, suggesting that it sells falsehoods about individual happiness that actually amount to further conformity. The dead man's "reactions to advertisements were normal"—he thought what he was *supposed* to think—and, accordingly he bought all the items that advertisers wanted him to: a phonograph, radio, car, and fridge. While advertising encourages people to make purchases as a way of defining and expressing their individuality, here this is shown to be a lie.

The poem's repeated mention of increasing absurd governmental departments is another way it makes fun of the standardization of modern life. There is seemingly a "bureau" for everything in this society, which implies that this government desperately wants to control every aspect of people's lives. The fact that some of this is framed as a way to make life better, to *optimize* society though "High-Grade Living" and "Social Psychology" departments. This is something the poem implicitly rejects as naive, ridiculous, and, with the mention of an official "Eugenist," outright dangerous. (Remember that Auden wrote this poem during WWII—when Nazi "eugenists" were murdering millions of Jews.)

Lurking under the surface of the poem is a question that strikes at the heart of this theme—to what extent the dead citizen *himself* can be held responsible for his now life. He has no voice in this poem whatsoever—which makes sense given his lack of individuality—but perhaps he *willingly* surrendered some of his freedom in order to fit in. Auden leaves this question open-ended, but it certainly speaks to contemporary obsessions with brands, celebrity culture, and social media. That is, all three of these have the surface illusion of enabling people to *be themselves*—to express who they really are. The poem thus implies that people should always question and examine the values that they use to define their freedoms and sense of individuality.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-15
- Lines 18-24
- Lines 25-29

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1, LINES 1-5

...
... the Greater Community.

"The Unknown Citizen" is a sinister elegy delivered by the government for a man who has recently died. There is tension between the contents of the elegy and the description of the man as "unknown." In fact, this isn't an *unidentified* man, but rather one whom the government seems to know *everything* about. The poem even begins with an inscription that looks to be some sort of identification number! The poem, then, asks the reader to think about other ways in which the man could be described as "unknown."

The poem opens by offering a general report about the man's life. Most of the poem follows a similar formula—a specific institution offering its creepy approval of the man for behaving in the "correct" way. This praise is, of course, steeped in irony—Auden's poem criticizes over-bearing state control and invasive surveillance (and, perhaps, the man's own willingness to conform). So it is the "Bureau of Statistics" that offers the

dead man the high praise that "there was no official complaint" against him. In other words, he never did anything to *upset* the system. There was no particular praise of him either; he was considered good just because he never did anything wrong (at least anything that the state knew about).

The fact that this ultimate judgement is issued by this particular institution speaks to a particular ideology about human life and society—that it can be measured, understood, and even improved by scientific statistical analysis (implying that there is no part of being human that *can't* be quantified).

Lines 3 and 4 then state that numerous "reports" on the man's "conduct" are in agreement that he "was a saint" and was a faithful servant of "the Greater Community." Here Auden builds a wider picture of this dystopia of surveillance and suspicion. The dead man is a "saint" not in the religious sense but in his obedience to the state, placing the state in a powerful role akin to that of God in earlier centuries.

In this section, the state—which, it's worth remembering, is also the speaker here—co-opts the language of humanity for its own purposes. So the notion of "community" is no longer about genuine togetherness and empathy, but relates more to an individual playing their role in fulfilling the state's vision for society—one in which everything is controlled and micro-managed through bureaucracy and official authority. The capitalization of "Greater Community" makes into just another state institution—like the "Bureau of Statistics"—rather than something that develops organically within a society.

The caesurae in line 4 (those pauses after "That" and "word") help the poem mimic the rhythms of speech in a real elegy, showing another way in which the State imposes itself on the language. Also notice how the rhythms and language in this section—and elsewhere in the poem—evoke the rhythms of an official report—it's easy to imagine this speech being written in a government office!

LINES 6-8

Except for the ...
... Fudge Motors Inc.

Lines 6-8 provide more detail about the unknown citizen's life. They describe a life of drudging ordinariness, this man apparently having held the same job in a factory for his entire life, right up "till the day he retired." His only reprieve was during "the War," the speaker again using capitalization that suggests a major, society-defining event.

The dead man specifically worked for "Fudge Motors Inc.," a name which is probably an allusion to the Ford Motor Company. Henry Ford, the real company's founder, is credited for developing the mass production model, in which huge factories house an abundance of workers all with their place on an assembly line. These operations run like clockwork, the build of a car divided up into small, repetitive tasks. And that's kind of what's being suggested here—that the dead man's factory work exemplifies his general conformity.

The mention of "Fudge Motors Inc." also speaks to the role of huge global corporations as a kind of collaborator with the state. There is no space for individual creativity and definitely no outlet for questioning the dominant way of life—both the state and the corporations are too big to argue with. Lines 7 and 8 show a rare instance of sound patterning in the poem:

> He worked in a **f**actory and never got **f**ired,
> But satis**f**ied his employers, **F**udge Motors Inc.

These consonant /f/ sounds link "factory," "fired," "satisfied," and the company together, hinting at the power held by "Fudge Motors Inc." over the life of the unknown citizen. Just like he is to the state, to the factory he is really just a number—not a person. The neat rhyme between "retired" and "fired" further hems in the man by his relationship to his job. It's also worth noting that he isn't praised here for doing anything particularly well—just for doing things well enough to never be "fired." Again, he is entirely ordinary.

LINES 9-13

Yet he wasn't ...
... liked a drink.

By line 9, the poem's formula is well-established. The state-delivered elegy goes through a full appraisal of the unknown citizen's life, assessing each aspect of his existence (and offering praise for how he lived in accordance with the state's expectations). Of course, Auden intends this all ironically—using the poem to create a picture of a sinister and over-bearing state.

Now, the poem moves on from the dead man's working life to a focus on to his "views" and social interactions. His views weren't "odd"—they were exactly as expected. And he "wasn't a scab," which is a word for a worker who breaks a strike (thereby undermining that strike's aims). On the contrary, his "Union reports" testify that the man never rocked the boat.

This is perhaps a surprising commendation from the overbearing state, which so far has praised the man for doing his duty. Yet even striking from work is apparently expected and controlled in the society of the poem. A Union is a collective of workers usually organized to give them greater power against large companies by joining forces, but even the Union *itself* has a report from a higher authority to show that it is obedient and reliable! As such, any strikes workers participate in likely offer only the *illusion* of choice, and are no real threat to the way the state wants society to run. Workers like this man have no real power.

Lines 12-13 expand on this by discussing the man's official "Social Psychology" report (the capitalization again satirically illustrating the reach of the state's power, which apparently has

a wing devoted to judging every aspect of citizens' lives):

> And our Social Psychology workers found
> That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.

In this state-run society, then, there is hardly any separation between work and leisure. That is, people are expected to behave in a way that appeases the authorities even when they are technically having "time off." So the man is "popular" and likes a drink—but only insofar as the state allows this. A degree of social life is permitted because it probably makes a rebellion less likely.

The use of the colloquial English term of affection, "mates," is especially sinister, another example of the way that the State co-opts the language of the people in order to oppress them. Whereas hanging out with friends is part of what makes human life worth living, here it is just part of the overall picture of being a loyal and unthinking citizen.

The sound of the poem continues to be straightforward and steady here, with two rhyming couplets in a row ("views"/"dues" and "sound"/"found"). The final word of line 13, "drink," also rhymes perfectly with "Inc." back in line 8. The rhymes are neat, tidy, and predictable, just like this man's life.

LINES 14-17

The Press are ...
... left it cured.

Lines 14 and 15 discuss the unknown citizen's relationship to the media, the capitalization of "the Press" suggesting that the news, like everything else, is state-controlled. The two lines use enjambment to form one long and relatively clunky sentence:

> The Press are convinced that he bought a paper
> every day
> And that his reactions to advertisements were
> normal in every way.

Here the rhythms are stiff and distinctly not beautiful, reminding the reader that this is an elegy totally lacking in emotion or sincere sentiment—plus, of course, it's delivered by the state itself (or a representative of the state)! The dead man is praised for having kept up-to-date with the propaganda of the era, and for reacting "normal[ly]" to "advertisements." Once again, the State shows itself encroaching into areas of life that it shouldn't—having an opinion is entirely meaningless if everyone is made/expected to think the same thing.

Lines 16 and 17 ("Policies taken out ... left it cured") briefly switches the focus to the dead man's health insurance:

> Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully
> insured,
> And his Health-card shows he was once in hospital
> but left it cured.

Notice how the alliteration in these two lines and line 14 doesn't make the poem sound pleasant on the ear. Instead, it's kind of harsh, reminiscent of the sound of forms being stamped and boxes being ticked—as if each instance of alliteration merely indicates an official mark of approval.

The fact that the unknown citizen once went to hospital "but left it cured" could tell a more ominous story than it first appears. Perhaps the man *did* rebel against the state, or at least question the restrictions on his life—but was then sent away in order to be "cured" of his problems (his incorrect thoughts). Oppressive states often use the strength and anonymity of their institutions as a way to impose their ideology on their citizens.

LINES 18-21

Both Producers Research ...
... and a frigidaire.

Lines 18-21 focus on two further aspects of the unknown citizen's life. Two ominous-sounding state institutions—"Producers Research and High-Grade Living"—are involved, offering their approval of the dead man's attitude and behavior.

What's interesting about Auden's picture of dystopia is that it seems to combine aspects of both American and Soviet state ideology (these were the two biggest states at the time Auden was writing). Though the poem preempts the Cold War—the ongoing psychological and ideological conflict between the two superpowers—it combines elements from both sides of the dividing line. When the dead citizen is described as approving of the "Instalment Plan" in line 19, it is probably an allusion to the Five-Year Plans for economic and social development imposed on citizens by the Soviet Union. But lines 20-21 shift to something that seems much more in line with the ideology of the American dream—capitalism and consumerism:

> ... had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
> A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.

The American vision of 20th century modernity was very much based on an individual being able to acquire possessions: the right car, and all the trappings of a modern home (here a fridge and record player). The caesurae in line 21 create a list, suggesting the number of items required to make a man truly "Modern." The capitalization of "Modern Man" gives the sense that this is a defined concept, an idealistic vision of how a man ought to be.

Of course, items like those listed above existed in the Soviet Union too—but they were developed within the state, not by companies within a capitalist system. But it would be wrong to oversimplify these two different approaches and suggest one

represents freedom and the other oppression—it's a far more complex issue than that.

LINES 22-27

Our researchers into ...
... with their education.

Lines 22 to 27 continue the speaker's list of all the ways that the dead man was the ideal citizen. Another "research" institution—this time called "Public Opinion"—assesses the "proper[ness]" of people's thoughts and feelings. The state watches its citizens to make sure they aren't thinking anything out of line—anything that might evolve into a threat to the government. The speaker also adds that the man held the right opinions "for the time of year," meaning that the unknown citizen knew when and how he was required to change what he thought. As line 24 makes clear, the unknown citizen always conformed to the correct official line:

> When there was peace, he was for peace: when there was war, he went.

This line contains more significant alliteration and repetition. The two /p/ sounds, followed by the two /w/ sounds, suggests mimicry and obedience—when the State says "peace," the obedient citizen says "peace" too (and the same applies to war). Furthermore, a good citizen fights for his state whenever it is required—without questioning whether it is right to do so. The caesura in this line indicates that the two statements are logically connected—being in favor of *either* peace or war—two opposite things!—respectively can be the correct opinion, depending on what the state needs. In other words, nothing is based on an individual's own sense of ethics or morality. Instead, they're just meant to follow along with the official instruction.

Lines 25-27 then deal with the unknown citizen's family legacy: who succeeds him after he is gone. In this as in everything else, the man lived according to the state's requirements. He had the "right number" of children as required, and "never interfered" with their "education" (indoctrination).

The reference to eugenics is particularly dark and sinister. Eugenics is the view that humanity can be improved by top-down genetic organization—for example, making it illegal for people of low IQ to reproduce. This kind of twisted ideology—which always rests on false notions of superiority/inferiority—was part of the thinking behind a number of humankind's worst atrocities, including the Holocaust.

Auden wrote this poem in 1939, on the eve of the Holocaust. That same year he wrote "Refugee Blues," which is about the plight of German Jews seeking (and failing to find) refuge from Nazi Germany. As such, Auden was certainly aware of the striking resonance using the word "Eugenist" would have, and how it would utterly condemn the misguided society of the poem.

LINES 28-29

Was he free? ...
... certainly have heard.

Lines 28 and 29 are the concluding lines of the poem, zooming out of specific aspects of the dead man's life to a more general overview of its worth. The speaker anticipates two reasonable questions about the unknown citizen—which are the same questions that the reader is expected to ask. While the State speaker dismisses these two rhetorical questions—"Was he free? Was he happy?"—as "absurd," the poem's clear sense of irony dictates that the reader should ask *why* this kind of life doesn't represent a "free" and a "happy" one. And though the poem obviously pushes its dystopian atmosphere to extremes, there's nothing in its contents that is particularly fantastical or far-fetched. The poem thus asks the reader to define their own freedom and happiness, and to measure those within the context of the world they live in (and the state they live under).

The questions are "absurd" for two main reasons. Firstly, because they are conceptually inappropriate—in this suffocating surveillance society, the state decides what a man needs to be happy and, as a model citizen, this man *technically* had everything.

Secondly, even if he *hadn't* felt "free" or "happy"—and the reader has no way of knowing what the man actually thought, given that the elegy is delivered by the state—the state would "certainly have heard." That, of course, isn't because the state is compassionately interested in its citizens, but because it strives to oppress any dissent or disobedience. And the further implication is that if they *had* heard about anything being wrong, they would have acted swiftly to solve the problem—by removing it (the man) from society.

SYMBOLS

BUREAUCRATIC DEPARTMENTS

The poem makes numerous references throughout to different government (or government-affiliated) institutions. The "Bureau of Statistics," for example, is tasked with making the assessment of whether anyone ever complained about the unknown citizen. The banal-sounding, capitalized titles of these institutions give an official air to something that is actually oppressive and sinister. Auden uses these to satirize the bureaucratization and standardization of society, criticizing the intent behind these government organizations. This intent, the poem implies, is to reduce life to data, and to know everything about individual lives in a way that can be quantified, recorded, and analyzed.

These institutions are over-reaching, even to the point of

looking into the unknown citizen's relationships with his friends (the responsibility of the "Social Psychology" department). Over the course of the poem, then, Auden uses these departments to build an argument against State governments becoming too big, invasive, and controlling.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Bureau of Statistics"
- **Line 5:** "Greater Community"
- **Line 10:** "Union"
- **Line 11:** "Union"
- **Line 12:** "Social Psychology"
- **Line 14:** "The Press"
- **Line 17:** "Health-card"
- **Line 18:** "Producers Research and High-Grade Living"
- **Line 19:** "Instalment Plan"
- **Line 22:** "Public Opinion"
- **Line 26:** "Eugenist"

THE MODERN MAN

Lines 20-21 give the reader a glimpse into the domestic life of the unknown citizen, referred to by the speaker as a "Modern Man." First, it's worth nothing how this phrase sounds like ad-speak—it's a kind of idealized image that probably doesn't have much bearing in reality. That is, in reality there is no *one* modern man—people come in all forms and characters. The dead man in this poem is reduced to an anonymous entity—the "unknown citizen"—but this was happening while he was a live too (the "Modern Man").

The "Modern Man" is thus a symbol of shallow conformity. There is an emptiness to the idea that what a modern needs can be summed up by a record player, radio, car, and a fridge—this is distinctly lacking in any kind of individuality whatsoever. It is instead a hollow image of happiness, a false promise not dissimilar to the way advertising and marketing sell people dreams of a better life. Ironically, this supposed achievement of individual happiness—acquiring all the essential belongings of modern man—actually amounts to a kind of conformity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 20-21:** "And had everything necessary to the Modern Man, / A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"The Unknown Citizen" features some some key instances of alliteration. The first occurs across lines 7 and 8:

> He worked in a factory and never got fired,
> But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.

This section describes the unknown citizen's working life. The repeated /f/ links "factory," "fired," and "Fudge" together, the forceful sound suggesting the power and might of the state-approved corporation.

In lines 14, 16, and 17, alliteration is used to give the poem a particular rhythmic sound. The placement of "Press" and "paper," "Policies" and "prove," and "Health-card" and "hospital" are all quite uniform—the start of the line and roughly halfway through. The prominence of the alliterating sound thus becomes a kind of regular, bureaucratic process—like stamps being pressed onto official documents.

Next up is the phrase "Modern Man" in line 20. The alliteration here makes it sound like an advertising slogan, or some kind of ideologically-inspired concept thought up by the state. This reflects the poem's broader ideas about freedom and conformity in the modern world; society sells people an image of what a good life looks like, and people are compelled to recreate this image, thinking it will bring them happiness.

Another striking example of alliteration comes in line 24, in which the speaker discusses how the unknown citizen always held the officially-endorsed opinions:

> When there was peace, he was for peace: when there was war, he went.

The idea here is to create a kind of echo—representing the way the dead man would always repeat what he was meant to. So when the State said "peace," he said "peace" too.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "factory," "fired"
- **Line 8:** "Fudge"
- **Line 12:** "Social Psychology"
- **Line 14:** "Press," "paper"
- **Line 16:** "Policies," "prove"
- **Line 17:** "his Health-card," "he," "was once," "hospita," "cured"
- **Line 20:** "Modern Man"
- **Line 23:** "he held"
- **Line 24:** "peace," "peace," "war," "went"
- **Line 25:** "population"
- **Line 26:** "parent"
- **Line 28:** "Was," "he," "Was," "he happy"

ALLUSION

There are allusions throughout "The Unknown Citizen," some

of which are more obvious/definite than others. The title itself is an allusion, signalling that the poem is a kind of parody. Around the world, there are numerous "unknown soldier" graves that commemorate those slain in battle—particularly those who never received proper burial or identification. Those are solemn sites meant to reflect on the tragedy and heroism of war, an idea that Auden plays with here—except in this poem the heroic deed is merely being an obedient servant to the state.

There are at least two other significant allusions elsewhere in the poem (though the overall tone/atmosphere could also be read as an allusion to dystopian literature like George Orwell's *1984* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*). The first of these two comes when the poem discusses the dead man's working life. He worked in the same factory for his whole life, building cars for "Fudge Motors Inc." This name is close enough to Ford Motor Company to be considered an allusion, and the reference highlights the mundane drudgery of the dead man's daily life. The repetitiveness of the factory work, under the watchful eye of a powerful corporate employer, mirrors the unknown citizen's compliance with whatever the State asks of him more generally.

Later in the poem, the speaker states that the unknown citizen "was fully sensible to the advantages of the Instalment Plan." The phrase "Instalment Plan" is evocative of the top-down societal restructuring down by the Soviet Union in the 20th century through what were known as the "Five-year Plans." These aimed to turn the Soviet Union into a world superpower through rapid economic development, but also caused great suffering along the way. Citizens were expected to approve of the plan, and to support it through the daily activities—something similar is suggested here.

The "Modern Man" phrase in line 20 could also be an allusion, this time to the kind of language found in advertising. The phrase has a catchiness which wouldn't be out of place on a mid-20th-century billboard.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Fudge Motors Inc."
- **Line 19:** "Instalment Plan"

CAESURA

There are a few caesurae dotted throughout "The Unknown Citizen." Overall, the poem opts for quite prose-like sentences. These tend to be fairly long, perhaps removing the need for too many caesurae.

The first one, in line 8 ("But satisfied ..."), just serves a simple grammatical function, introducing the name of the unknown citizen's employer. The caesurae in line 21 are more significant (quoted with the preceding line):

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

Here, the caesurae help create a list of "Modern Man's" necessities. These items are linked to identity, to being a "proper" citizen. This seems to speak to a more capitalist/consumerist type of state—in which people's possessions play an important role in defining who they are.

There are three caesurae in line 24:

> When there was peace, he was for peace: when there was war, he went.

The two commas make both phrases similar in construction, implying a kind of logic that is intended to sound like it is obviously correct. That is, when there is peace, the only legitimate opinion is to be "for peace," and the same is true of warfare. The colon caesura creates a balance between the two halves of the line, making them logically equivalent.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "employers, Fudge"
- **Line 21:** "phonograph, a," "radio, a"
- **Line 24:** "peace, he," "peace: when," "war, he"
- **Line 28:** "free?," " Was," "happy? The"
- **Line 29:** "wrong, we"

END-STOPPED LINE

"The Unknown Citizen" has many end-stopped lines, which help contribute to the poem's tone. The poem takes the form of a mock elegy, pretending to be a heartfelt speech to commemorate the dead citizen. But, of course, it is delivered not by a loved one, but by the state (or a representative of the state). The end-stops help make the poem seem decidedly *unpoetic*, almost as if the speaker is running through the different summary points at the end of an official report.

Sometimes, the end-stops make the poem sound extra sinister. Line 5 is a good example:

> For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.

The clear pause after "Community" highlights how the word itself is not being used in its original meaning—this is not a free community of human beings, but an oppressed society. "Community" becomes an ominous example of the way that the state co-opts people's language (just like it does in one of the most famous literary dystopias, George Orwell's *1984*).

The end-stop in line 21 is a little different from the above, creating a moment's pause around the word "frigidaire." This is quite a comical moment, and part of the poem's overall ironic

and satirical tone.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "complaint,"
- **Line 4:** "saint,"
- **Line 5:** "Community."
- **Line 7:** "fired,"
- **Line 8:** "Inc."
- **Line 9:** "views,"
- **Line 10:** "dues,"
- **Line 11:** "sound)"
- **Line 13:** "drink."
- **Line 15:** "way."
- **Line 16:** "insured,"
- **Line 17:** "cured."
- **Line 20:** "Man,"
- **Line 21:** "frigidaire."
- **Line 23:** "year;"
- **Line 24:** "went."
- **Line 25:** "population,"
- **Line 26:** "generation."
- **Line 27:** "education."
- **Line 28:** "absurd:"
- **Line 29:** "heard."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs throughout "The Unknown Citizen." Generally speaking, enjambment works with end-stopping and the poem's meter to create a tone that is distinctly *unpoetic* and not especially beautiful. That's a deliberate effect, and part of the poem's parody of the elegy form (a poem written to honor someone who has died). These devices allow the poem to use long, prose-like sentences that, apart from the rhyme, sound like they could appear in an official government report—which, indeed, is pretty much what this poem is. It's an *official* elegy that praises the unknown citizen for all the ways he did what he was told to do.

The enjambment also allows the speaker to move swiftly between different reports on the dead man's life, as though offering more of a summary than an elegy. The enjambment also allow for the poem's rhymes to happen at a quick pace, adding a kind of absurd nursery-rhyme feel to the poem too. Take, for example, lines 1-4:

> 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 ... he was a saint,

Enjambment ends line 1 on "be" and line 3 on "agree," creating a neat and tidy rhyme pair that reflects the neat and tidy life of this "unknown citizen."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "be / One"
- **Lines 3-4:** "agree / That"
- **Lines 6-7:** "retired / He"
- **Lines 12-13:** "found / That"
- **Lines 14-15:** "day / And"
- **Lines 18-19:** "declare / He"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Plan / And"
- **Lines 22-23:** "content / That"

IRONY

"The Unknown Citizen" is a poem brimming with irony. This is not a sincere address, but a parody of the elegy/eulogy form (an elegy is a poem that honors someone who has recently died, while a eulogy is a broader term for a funeral speech).

There are many things that are deliberately at odds with what is normally expected from this kind of speech/poem. First, it's delivered not by a loved one of the dead man, but by the state itself (or a representative of the state). The link between the speaker and the deceased, then, is removed from its usual emotional connection. The poem's tone, too, places the incongruous summary of different reports into the supposedly somber address—information gathered through surveillance of the man's life takes the place of heartfelt sentiment.

There are other specific instances of irony dotted throughout the poem too. "High-Grade Living" in line 18 seems to refer to a specific state-run institution, assessing whether people are living up to what is expected of them in terms of their domestic life. Of course, the people in this particular society are not living "high-grade" lives, but ones that are heavily oppressed. And when line 21 lists the possession of the "Modern Man," the poem's ironic tone questions how essential these items really are to life.

The ultimate irony of the poem comes from its title. This citizen is deemed "unknown," yet the state clearly knows nearly every detail about his life—from his "views" and "reactions to advertisements" to whether "his mates" enjoyed his company. This is in part because of the dystopian society of the poem, wherein citizens' actions are thoroughly watched by the state, but also in part simply because of the conformist nature of modern life, according to the poem at least. Modern society depicts a clear, uniform image of success, essentially making everyone's lives look the same.

The only "unknown" things about this man are whether he felt truly "free" or "happy" deep down—but, in another instance of irony, the state dismisses such questions as "absurd."

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1

- Lines 1-29

RHETORICAL QUESTION

There are two rhetorical questions in "The Unknown Citizen," both coming in line 28—quoted with the rest of that line and the last line that follows:

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

The questions here are the speaker's way of preempting the reader's own questions about the unknown citizen. That is, the reader is bound to wonder about the *truth* of the man's life—and this knowledge is withheld because the speaker represents the same authorities that oppressed him while he was alive. The life described sounds distinctly *unfree* and *unhappy*—so this is the speaker's way of addressing that question.

The terms of the questions are rejected out of hand. In such a closely watched society—so the logic goes—nothing could ever be "wrong," because if something *was wrong* then the state would be the first to know about it. Of course, this depends on the definition of wrong and, indeed, of "free" and "happy." Because the man obeyed the state for his entire life—and may have had no other choice—the speaker suggests that it follows that he therefore *was* free and happy. The message below the surface of the poem argues that the opposite is true—that no-one is "free" and "happy" when the state has such far-reaching control over their lives.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 28:** "Was he free? Was he happy?"

VOCABULARY

Bureau (Line 1) - An office dedicated to a particular part of government business.

Fudge Motors Inc. (Line 8) - Probably an allusion to the real life car manufacturer, Ford Motor Company.

Scab (Line 9) - Someone who refuses to join their union or who works during a strike.

Union (Line 11) - An organization that workers form in order to give themselves collective power.

Mates (Line 13) - Colloquial British term for "friends."

Instalment Plan (Line 19) - Probably an allusion to the Soviet Union's top-down reorganizations of society, known as the Five-Year Plans.

Phonograph (Line 21) - An early version of the record player.

Frigidaire (Line 21) - A refrigerator.

Eugenist (Line 26) - Eugenics is a set of pseudoscientific practices based on the view that humankind can be improved through genetic manipulation (e.g. controlling who is allowed to reproduce).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Unknown Citizen" is a deeply ironic poem that takes the form of a parody. These are words to mark the unveiling of a statue dedicated to a "citizen" known only by his identification number. The speech is meant to be a kind of elegy commemorating this man's death and celebrate his exemplary life—which was exemplary only because he behaved exactly as the state wanted. Like a parasite, the state has taken hold a form usually meant to express deep emotion, sincere sentiment, and genuine regret, and instead uses it here to make tribute to somebody for their sheer conformity.

Though the poem is rhymed and has some metrical elements, the form is just one long stanza of 29 lines (with an epitaph at the beginning). This makes it quite prose-like—indeed, the poem avoids sounding beautiful or emotionally moving, and reads more like a presentation given in a conference room. Essentially, it is a list of all the thing the unknown citizen did right during his life, and the various ways that he was closely watched by the state. Two rhetorical questions at the poem's end indicate that "freedom" and "happiness" are "absurd" concepts in this particular dystopia.

METER

"The Unknown Citizen" does use meter, but not in a particularly consistent way. The poem is based mostly around the anapest, which is a three-syllable foot that goes da-da-DUM (unstressed-unstressed-stressed). But there are variations in meter and line length throughout. Lines 9 and 10 come close to being purely anapestic (though both substitutions):

> Yet he was- | n't a scab | or odd | in his views,
> For his U- | nion reports | that he paid | his dues,

The loosely anapestic sound gives the poem a sing-song quality, which is deliberately at odds with the supposedly serious occasion (this contrast between the poem's lighthearted tone and sinister content is part of the poem's overall irony). But the meter is intentionally clunky and cumbersome throughout the poem, giving it a stop-start feel too—as though the music of the poem is under constant interruption. That's because the poem is in the voice of a faceless bureaucrat, or the state itself—not a usual source of beautiful poetry. At times, the poem sounds

more like a presentation than a tribute.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Unknown Citizen" uses rhyme throughout, but there is no regular rhyme scheme. Sometimes the poem uses rhymes one after another, creating neat and tidy couplets, and sometimes these rhymes sounds are more spread out. For example, line 8's end-word "Inc." doesn't chime with its partner until line 13 ("drink"). On the other hand, lines 6 and 7 rhyme together directly ("retired" and "fired").

Perhaps the rhyming is used to establish the poem's sense of irony—this is not a *real* elegy, but rather a mock one. It's a *parody* of what is usually a heartfelt expression of emotion—and the inability to emote properly is part of the state's problem (or what Auden sees as its problem). That is, the state doesn't *really* sympathize with the dead man—and so it's rhyming seems appropriately random and insincere.

That is, there's a massive disconnect between the almost frivolous rhyming sounds with the seriousness of the subject—which, after all, is a man's *entire* life. Again, take the aforementioned couplet in lines 6 and 7:

> Except for the War till the day he **retired**
> He worked in a factory and never got **fired**,

These lines account for the unknown citizen's whole career, but they sound more like a limerick or a nursery rhyme. If the speaker of the poem—the state itself or a state representative—sincerely admires the unknown citizen, perhaps they would strike a more somber tone in the discussion of his death.

Towards the end of the poem, three lines rhyme in a row (25-27):

> He was married 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**.

These are distinctly unattractive rhymes, all relying on the ending "-tion." These make the lines read more like official documentation that has been turned into poetry in a way that fails to hide its original source. Remember, this is meant to be a tribute—but reads more like a bureaucratic report into the efficiency of human life.

The poem also uses some internal rhyme/assonance to build this tension between what is being said and the *way* it is being said. In line 5, for example, "h**e**" chimes with the end-word "Communit**y**," and in line 14 "paper" links with "day." These just add to the oddly chirpy sound of the poem, deliberately used to highlight the inappropriateness of the speaker to the occasion.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "The Unknown Citizen" is a representative of the state—the government and related institutions.

The epitaph that precedes the actual poem indicates that this is a kind of speech at the unveiling of a statue. This statue commemorates a dead man—the "unknown citizen"—and praises his life throughout. The poem builds a picture of an extremely invasive state that watches its citizens' every move—and approves of this *particular* man because he never did anything that wasn't officially allowed. He went to war when he was meant to, never questioned anything, had the "proper" opinions, and so on.

From this, then, it's fair to deduce that the speaker is either the state itself or someone officially representing the state. This is part of the poem's overall ironic tone, the faceless state taking the place of what should be a loved one or a friend (the normal speakers at this kind of solemn occasion). The speaker also uses the passive voice throughout—"He was found," etc.—which creates a kind of distance between the man and the powers that be (suggesting they are beyond accountability). It's not until the last line when the speaker actually refers to themselves with pronoun, using the sinister "we"—suggesting that there is no escaping the watchful eye of state.

SETTING

The poem doesn't specify its setting, but the epitaph that comes at the start suggests that this is an official occasion. The state is unveiling a "marble monument" to the dead man, and accordingly this is meant to be a solemn and sober speech. What follows is a kind of list of all the ways that the unknown citizen followed the party line, doing everything exactly as his government wanted him to (which is why he is being commemorated). This list, then, gives an overview of the dead man's life, ranging from his work to his family, from his personal views to his household possessions. This builds a picture of an invasive surveillance society, with no action—or even thought—taking place without it being known to the state. The atmosphere of the poem is suffocating and oppressive, rather than sad and profound.

This world feels dystopian, but there are many hints that Auden is satirizing modern society as we *actually* know it. The references to "Fudge Motor Company" alludes to actual industry, for instance, while lines 20-21 suggest an average middle class home at the time of the poem's writing:

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

The poem is skewering modern society by taking things to an extreme conclusion, wherein there are bureaucratic departments devoted to optimizing every aspect of life, down to the number of children someone has. The poem isn't limited to a critique of a single economic of philosophical outlook, and instead takes aim at the conformity and oppression of modern life in general. And while much of this seems absurd, part of the poem's point is that society already does a lot of this—society *already* ties people's worth to the productivity, *already* teaches people to buy certain products to feel successful (like cars and radios, though today that would probably be replaced with flat screen TVs); and *already* dictates what should and should not make people happy.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Unknown Citizen" was written in 1939, shortly after W.H. Auden emigrated from the U.K. to the U.S.A. The poem was first published in the *New Yorker* magazine, before appearing in Auden's collection, *Another Time* (1940). It appears alongside some of Auden's most well-known poems, such as "Musée des Beaux Arts," "Funeral Blues," and "September 1, 1939." Like those poems, "The Unknown Citizen" uses a lightness of touch and Auden's characteristic humor to explore a heavy subject.

Generally speaking, "The Unknown Citizen" fits into the genre of dystopian literature. This refers to works which deal with nightmarish alternative worlds that are usually grounded in a modern trend taken to an extreme. *1984*, which is probably the quintessential work of dystopian literature, portrays a world in which an individual's every action and thought are monitored and assessed by the state. Indeed, that's precisely what is going on this poem (which predates the publication of *1984* by a decade).

It's worth noting that the tone and voice of the poem borrow from the *sound* of official government bureaucracy. State literature—e.g., the instructions found at passport control—are often written in passive voice, as if there is no real human being behind the speech. The faceless "we" in this poem gives no indication about the identity of the speaker other than that they represent the state.

Furthermore, while this poem looks on the surface like a kind of elegy, it reads more like an official presentation made in a board room. The elegy is one of the oldest poetic forms, and to read some that are more conventional and less ironic try Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!," Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," or, for something more contemporary, Emily Berry's "Freud's Beautiful Things."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Unknown Citizen" was written in 1939, around the outbreak of World War II. With the world facing another global catastrophe, questions about what kind of society people wanted to live in were pressing concerns. The atrocities of Nazi Germany, for example, were a horrific attempt to prioritize the so-called master race above those people considered inferior. Eugenics—the pseudoscientific attempt to *purify* humanity—is referred to line 26 of the poem, in which it is implied that a chief "Eugenist" dictates how many children people should have. Eugenics, however, is by no means limited to Hitler's ideology, with various groups and organizations talking up its virtues throughout the 20th century and even in the present day.

One of the most interesting aspects about "The Unknown Citizen" is the way that it takes aim at two very different ideologically-driven societies. In its overbearing bureaucracy and state surveillance, the poem clearly gestures towards the Soviet Union and its methods for top-down control of its citizens. Bloated and invasive institutions like the "Bureau of Statistics" or "High-Grade Living" have roots in their historical counterparts in Soviet Russia. Indeed, the "Instalment Plan" is most likely an allusion to Soviet Union's Five-Year Plans, which instigated sweeping changes to society in an effort to turn the country into an economic superpower.

But the poem also seems to take aim at another dominant world ideology: capitalist consumerism. This, of course, has much more in common with the American Dream than with any Russian vision. The "Modern Man" sounds like an mid-20th century advertising concept, and "Fudge Motors Inc." appears to be a reference to Henry Ford's company, Ford Motor (which was responsible for much of the standardization of life at which Auden takes aim). The personal possessions referred to in line 21 speak to the idea that an individual's status can be demonstrated by the things they own, which is no less an ideology than communism (though may be more subtle in the way it takes hold).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Elegy Form — Ten brilliant elegies, taken from the classical era all the way up to the contemporary. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/18/from-catullus-to-dylan-thomas-the-top-10-elegies)
- The Five-Year Plans — An educational resource looking at the way Russia restructured its society in the 20th century. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z9d2dmn/revision/1)
- The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier — More information about the Tomb that exists in Arlington National Cemetary. (https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/27/us/tomb-of-the-unknown-soldier-trnd/index.html)

- In Auden's Own Voice — "The Unknown Citizen" read by the poet himself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpbK5pQqv6Q)
- Auden's Life and Work — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-h-auden)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER W. H. AUDEN POEMS

- Funeral Blues (Stop all the clocks)
- Musée des Beaux Arts
- Refugee Blues

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