

The Unknown Citizen

he Unknown Citizen is a poem that Auden wrote at a turning point in his life, when he left England for the USA and left behind the idea that his poetry could make anything happen in the world.

The year was 1939, Hitler had plunged Europe into darkness and the young Auden was horrified. But he had already done his bit for the cause, having married Erika Mann, the daughter of famous writer Thomas Mann, to help save her from the brutality of the Nazis.

His move to America helped broaden his artistic output. He began to concentrate on religion and relationships in his poetry, as opposed to left-wing politics, and he also ventured into writing drama and libretti.

Auden was a gifted craftsman as a poet, writing long, technically astute poems but he also embraced the move towards free verse, combining both modern and traditional elements. The human condition was his main focus, but he did say that:

"poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil..."

Teacher, essayist and social commentator, but above all a poet, he continued to live in the USA, after becoming a citizen in 1946. New York city was his home for many years.

During the latter part of his life he moved back to England - Oxford, Christ Church College - establishing a small reputation as a talk show guest on prime time British television. Great writers could hold a modern t.v. audience back then.

Witty, wise, with a cigarette in his hand and a dishevelled look about him, he kept a close eye on matters social, spiritual and cultural, right to the end, which came in 1973.

- *The Unknown Citizen*, with its long rambling lines and full rhyming end words, has a bureaucrat as speaker paying tribute to a model individual, a person identified by numbers and letters only. It is delivered in, some might say, a boring monotonous tone, a reflection of the bureaucracy under which the citizen served.
- The poem is a powerful reminder to us all that the state, the government, the bureaucracy we all help create, can become a faceless, indifferent and often cruel machine.
- It raises the two important questions - Who is free? Who is happy?

It can manipulate and exploit, keeping us all under control without us even knowing. Think of Orwell's 1984, or Huxley's Brave New World. Ideas such as freedom of speech, non conformism and individual expression are not entertained, not even understood.

The Unknown Citizen is both satirical and disturbing, written by Auden to highlight the role of the individual and the increasingly faceless bureaucracy that can arise in any country, with any type of government, be it left-wing or right-wing. There is mention of the Social Psychology department, part of the state who no doubt investigated his background when he died, and found all was normal according to his mates.

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 complied 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.

He bought a newspaper each day, that is, he read the propaganda dished out by the bias press, and had no adverse reaction to the advertisements in that paper. There is some sound corporate brain-washing going on here and this citizen has one of the cleanest in the Greater Community.

He's not a critical thinker but a solid type of guy who you would want living next door. He keeps up with his household goods, he adheres to all societal rules. This man is an average Joe, a perfect citizen who is conditioned to routine and will never question the settled life, unless the state call on him for purposes of war.

This citizen is treated like a little boy himself, patted on the head for being a good if unquestioning person. But note that the speaker mentions the Eugenist - a person who investigates eugenics, the genetic make up of this man's family - and coldly says that his 5 children was the 'right number' for his generation.

As if the state was counting, making sure they had enough fresh conformists to carry on in the Greater Community.