

# The unknown citizen by w. h. auden. literary analysis

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



“ The Unknown Citizen”, a poem written by W. H. Auden, reflects a period of vast change in Americas history, making “ The Unknown Citizen” an example of the governments view of the perfect modern man in an overrated, unrealistic society.

During the time period that this poem was written, in the late 1930s, The United States was going through tremendous social, political and economic change. Following the passing of Black Monday and at the onset of The Great Depression, many Americans held negative opinions of their government and the many positive aspects that once drew citizens to the United States were becoming increasingly negative. The Great Depression fundamentally changed the relationship between the government and its people. Citizens began to expect and accept a larger federal role in their lives and the economy. During this time period, Americans were issued cards with a personalized federal numbers, better known as Social Security cards, which in turn depersonalized the political system of the United States.

We the people, see our government as a coalition between our leaders and ourselves, leaders that we elect to represent and enforce our values. They merely see us a number. This issue emerges currently with regard to the election of the next president of the United States. The entire issue deals not with the citizens wants and needs, but with the “ numbers”. We are no longer individuals, but merely a vast pool of insignificant numbers. Numbers that only become imperative when the disparity between them is diminutive. “ Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: Had anything been wrong we should certainly have heard (Auden).” This question is still being asked today, the only difference now is that there is no doubt whether or not

the opinions of the masses are being heard. The question remaining is whether or not the government is actually listening to the people.

This poem also expresses that government makes it seem that everyone else is doing the “right thing”, so you must follow in their footsteps and if you do so your reward is a happy and fulfilled life with all the comforts of the modern man. The standards are constantly changing so that you will never reach the optimum point, therefore you must always strive to improve. This can be seen in the 2000 Presidential Race. We the people have followed the same uniform procedures in determining our presidents since the founding of our country, yet we are now being told these standards are “outdated” and “unreliable”, which in turn breaks down our faith and the faith of other countries in our political system. Auden expresses a similar opinion in his poem. He presents the idea of the good society, at best a possibility, yet never actually achievable, but one in which we the people must always work towards. As citizens, we know the obligations of our citizenship, however it often times is the officials we tend to elect that forget their obligations to us. Is this idea not clearly being seen currently in the attempt to elect our 43rd president?

This poem was written at a time when a citizen would rarely voice such an opinionated stance on a subject such as politics. Yet after reading between the lines of the written words of the poem, one can grasp a better understanding the thoughts and feelings of the author concerning the political issues of the era. This poem can shed light on things in a totally different perspective. It can help one to understand that the ways of the “

Modern Man” is not always the best choice. People today move so fast, they never get a chance to slow down and realize that there are more important things in life than being picture-perfect, whatever happened to individuals accepting defeats in their relationships, education and employment?

Whatever happened to individuals being humble and honest? Audens view of the government, depicted through this poem, uses the “ Unknown Citizen” as an example of the perfect modern man in an overrated, unrealistic society, represented by citizens views in this poem.