

W. h auden: the unknown citizen

Experience, Human Nature



The marble monument erected by the state or town is usually of a hometown hero. The person is almost always someone who did well for the country and originated from a certain town. The statue is almost never of someone who is just an ordinary man living life just like everyone else around him. This man is the model citizen; one who never causes a stir, goes to war when asked, and does everything to serve the common good. He is a conformist, a person whom the government holds high and promotes for others to strive toward becoming.

The monument covers everything from his job record to his health history, all documented parts of his life, showing the reader exactly what the "State" is concerned with. Looking at the poem's structure, use of sound, and the style we see that the man is celebrated because "he served the Greater Community" (Auden 5) in everything he did and never questioned the government. The narrative structure of the poem represents a speech by the local representative. The statue only has a reference number JS/07/M/378 because to the government the behavior is more important than the man himself.

While the speaker calls this man, "in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint" (4), he only knows this because of the research prior to the event. The representative decides to talk about how the man performed all the correct tasks throughout his life. The state hardly cares whether or not the man "was popular with his mates and liked a drink" (13) so long as he "wasn't a scab or odd in his views" (9). It is also important to note that "he held the proper opinions for the time of year" (23) than if he was "free" and "happy" (28).

The use of sound reveals that the Unknown Citizen lived an ordinary life. The speaker consistently uses a simple rhyming scheme- " Our report on his Union shows it was sound/ And our SocialPsychologyworkers found" (11-12) to show the man's existence. The reader learns that the citizen " was fully insured" (16) and that " he was once in hospital but left it cured" (17). The fact that the rhyme scheme is hardly tampered with suggests that the citizen's life was consistently regular and ordinary.

The most significant use of sound comes at the end of the poem, when the speaker asks, " Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:" (28). Here, the speaker reinforces the state's power over the individual and dismisses any notion that happiness and freedom are part of the state's plan. It also forces the reader to acknowledge the state's total control over its citizens and how the man's passive life was led according to the government's will, not his own.

Looking at the style and the use of language in The Unknown Citizen it reveals that the man served the state in every aspect of his life and was rewarded to show other people the benefit of doing the same. The poem states that " there was no official complaint" (2) against this model man and it goes so far as to saying " he was a saint (4). The speaker describes more of the man's qualities in order to show the people what a model citizen should be like. Thus, he explains that the man " never got fired, / but satisfied his employers" (7-8) and " paid his dues" (10) on time.

By doing this, the citizen " had everything necessary to the Modern Man, / a phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire. " (20-21). The man even had the

state in mind when he had a family of five children, for he had "the right number for a parent of his generation" according to the government's "Eugenist" (26). For those citizens who may have doubted whether the man's existence was an ideal one, the speaker explains that questioning whether or not the citizen was happy "is absurd" (28) because only the man's servitude to the state is important.

The overall theme of the poem can be viewed as a symbol as a whole, as it is a symbol of how the government treats conformists versus individuals. A symbol can be found in the line "Our researchers into Public Opinion are content / That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;" (22-23). "Public Opinion," which is capitalized, is very important to the "State," as they feel if they can control opinion, they can control people, because most people will just go with the flow. It is through these subtle symbols that Auden is able to reveal how he feels about conforming to government expectations, as most writers stray from conform. Yet despite the state's assurances, the Unknown Citizen's monument is still dedicated to a reference number instead of an actual name. Being a model citizen does not amount to much in a country where one's freedom and liberty are nonexistent and one's entire life is planned by the state. Indeed, the man's inscription illustrates this point: "To JS/07/M/378 / This Marble Monument is Erected by the State" follows the familiar rhyme scheme that marked the man's passive life.