

A short reflection on  
the unknown citizen  
by w.h auden



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Does an individual's background or attitude affect how they are viewed in society? The poem "Solitude" by Ella Wheeler Wilcox and the poem "The Unknown Citizen" by W. H. Auden imply that background and attitude can affect how an individual is viewed and treated in society. Wilcox's poem "Solitude" and Auden's poem "The Unknown Citizen" share the themes of the individual versus society and the happiness within, but "Solitude" focuses on how a person's emotions and attitude affects their part in society, while "The Unknown Citizen" focuses on how an individual's background and place in society can affect they are perceived.

Wilcox and Auden demonstrate the idea of the individual versus society and the happiness, or lack thereof, within a society in each of their poems. Wilcox illustrates the idea of the individual versus society throughout "Solitude," but the strongest example in her poem would be: "Be glad, and your friends are many: / Be sad, and you lose them all" (Wilcox 13-14). Wilcox is stating that when an individual is happy they will find themselves surrounded by company looking to share in their happiness, however, when an individual is sad or depressed that companionship dissipates because people do not want to be brought down by an individual's grieving. Auden also creates the idea of the individual versus society in "The Unknown Citizen" and makes it clear in the last two lines of his poem: "Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard." (Auden 28-29). Auden's quote takes on a sarcastic tone and states that even though the unknown citizen meets the standards society places on a person, including contentment with one's life, there is no way of knowing whether a human is happy with their life based solely on their personal background and

placement in society. Although Wilcox and Auden both utilize themes of the individual versus society, both poets use two entirely different approaches to make that point.

Wilcox shows how an individual's emotion and attitude can affect an individual's place in society while Auden illustrates how an individual's background and place in society can shape how they are perceived by that society. Wilcox again and again uses lines in "Solitude" that all come to the same meaning; if a person is happy they will be embraced by society, but if an individual is unhappy they are shunned from the world around them.

Wilcox's poems became and still remain popular, and Gail Shivel, author of the biographical essay "Wilcox, Ella Wheeler," speculates as to why this is: "Although it is commonplace to focus on the emotional content of her work, it is important to note that her popularity probably has more to do with her craft." (Shivel, 70). Auden also had a craft of his own and it is noticed in "The Unknown Citizen." Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" is a poem that turns an individual into just another statistic, and it can be said that the unknown citizen could be anyone at all. The unknown citizen of this poem, based on their personal history and place in society during their lifetime, was speculated by society to have been happy and figured that if he was not, they would have known.

Wilcox's "Solitude" and Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" both demonstrate the idea of the individual versus society and how one's happiness can affect their place in society. Wilcox focuses on how an individual's emotions create their place in society while Auden focuses on an individual's personal background to place them within a society. Both of these poems illustrate <https://assignbuster.com/a-short-reflection-on-the-unknown-citizen-by-wh-auden/>

the idea of the individual versus society, which is an obstacle that every human being will face at some point in their life, whether it is due to the individuals attitude or background. Society has a way of telling us exactly who we should be and how we're expected to act, and Auden and Wilcox display this idea beautifully in each of their poems.