

Comparative essay: the elegy

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



The poems “ In Memoriam,” by Alfred Lord Tennyson and “ The Unknown Citizen,” by W. H. Auden are opposite in their general approach and poetic structure and effectively leave different impressions on the reader. Through Tennyson’s lyrical and expressive approach, “ In Memoriam” draws our attention to the pain and acceptance of human loss. However, “ The Unknown Citizen,” with its non-traditional poetic form and unusual perspective, makes us think about the ways in which we define human importance in modern society. Each of the two poems uses different poetic devices to communicate their messages.

Tennyson’s stanzas are written in quatrains following the rhyme pattern of ABBA. Each stanza resolves itself, making it unnatural for the reader to easily move on to the next verse. Through this construction the reader experiences Tennyson’s struggle to move on with life after the resolution of his loss. This resilience is embodied in the reading of the poem due to its great length as a compilation of 131 poems. In contrast, “ The Unknown Citizen” follows a sporadic yet witty rhyme pattern throughout its brief 29 lines, including patterns such as ABAB, AA, BB, and ABCCCA which makes it less lyrical.

The rhymes in this poem happen seamlessly yet do not distract the reader from the main informative focus of each line. Tennyson’s use of repetition and alliteration within stanzas in poems 8 and 115 communicate the personal and emotional qualities of the poem: He saddens, all the magic light
Dies off at once from bower and hall
And the place is dark, and all
The Chambers emptied of delight

Now rings the woodland loud and long

The distance takes a lovelier hue And drowned in yonder living blue The Lark becomes a sightless song (Tennyson, 8, 115)

As displayed in these verses, the mood of “ In Memoriam” shifts from sadness early on in section 8 towards happiness much later in section 115. The repetition of the word “ all” in relation to the absence of light and people in the common places like the ‘ bower’ (garden) and hallways, leaves the reader with an emptied feeling and a sense of total loss. Later on, alliteration is used to emphasize words with positive connotations such as “ loud” “ long” “ lovelier” and “ living. ” The loud and long distances of the woodland now seem vibrant and full of hope for the future.

Through these lyrical verses, the reader enjoys the beauty in nature’s sights and sounds. In “ The Unknown Citizen”, Auden uses a simpler more neutral approach omitting devices such as alliteration and repetition, which makes his elegy more of a report than an expressive or celebratory reflection like that of Tennyson’s. By Auden’s straightforward approach, the reader immediately gets an understanding from the first two lines about who is reporting on the death and what was thought about the unknown citizen.

There is no presentation or development of emotional themes associated with mourning: He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be One against whom there was no official complaint, (Auden, 1-2) Throughout the rest of the poem Auden simply quantifies and qualifies the subject’s worldly belongings and accomplishments: He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment Plan And had everything necessary to the Modern Man, A phonograph, a radio, a car and a Frigidaire. Auden, 19-21) “ In Memoriam”

follows a natural emotional process that is characteristic of the elegy and reminds the reader of elements of Kubler Ross's five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. "The Unknown Citizen" uses the elegy in an unconventional way; not to mourn the death of a real person, but to intellectually address the notion of an idealized citizen. This reminds the reader of Sigmund Freud's theory of mourning where a loss can be that of an abstraction rather than a specific person. The poem acknowledges the citizen's lifelong achievements which appear adequate but mundane.

It is not until the ending couplet that we get a sense of what Auden is communicating when he introduces the notion of an emotional theme for the first time: Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard. (Auden, 28-29) It appears that Auden is asking the reader to contemplate the process by which we evaluate a person's life. Although the bureaucracy of society might be content with our conduct, we should be aware of how statistics and research ignore our quality of life as unique individuals.

In comparison, each elegy communicates a different experience of mourning and is deliberate in what it impresses on the reader. When reading Tennyson's poem, I feel as though I am participating in a genuine process of human mourning through a real life perspective and lyrical poetic structure. When reading Auden's poem I feel detached from the subject, due to his hypothetical point of view and lack of expressive poetry. The two elegies impact the reader in different ways they are both extremely effective in their objectives.