

## **CRITIQUE OF GOVERNMENT CONFORMITY IN W.H. AUDEN'S "THE UNKNOWN CITIZEN"**

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### **Abstract:**

This research critically examines W.H. Auden's satiric poem, "The Unknown Citizen," shedding light on the poet's denouncement of modern society's conformity to government norms. The analysis delves into the thematic elements, narrative structure, use of sound, and linguistic style employed by Auden to convey his critique. The poem serves as a commentary on the dehumanizing impact of governmental control, reducing citizens to mere numbers devoid of personal identity. This study aims to unravel the subtle symbols and metaphors used by Auden to underscore the dangers of unquestioning obedience to authority.

**Keywords:** W.H. Auden, The Unknown Citizen, government conformity, societal critique, dehumanization, symbolism

### **Introduction:**

W.H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" is a satiric exploration of the conformity demanded by modern governments, emphasizing the dehumanization of individuals within a highly controlled societal structure. The title itself evokes imagery of Unknown Soldiers' monuments, drawing parallels between the forgotten names of soldiers and the anonymous conformity of citizens. This study scrutinizes Auden's critique, examining the thematic depth and symbolic elements that contribute to the portrayal of a citizen reduced to a mere statistic.

### **Thematic Exploration:**

The thematic focus of Auden's poem revolves around the devaluation of individuality and the celebration of blind conformity to government dictates. The unknown citizen is presented as a model of compliance, celebrated not for personal achievements but for adhering to the state's expectations. The poem's structure, adopting a narrative style resembling a speech by a local representative, serves to underscore the government's emphasis on behavior over the intrinsic value of the individual (Auden).

In the poem, the unknown citizen is assigned a numerical identity, "To JS/07M378," reinforcing the government's view of citizens as mere numbers rather than individuals with unique personalities (Caesar & Emig, 2001). This numeric designation symbolizes the dehumanizing effect of reducing citizens to statistical data, erasing their individuality in the eyes of the state.

### **Linguistic Style:**

The linguistic style employed by Auden serves to illustrate the citizen's subservience to the state. The speaker describes the citizen's life in meticulous detail, from job records to health history, portraying a life entirely documented and regulated by the government (Auden). The use of language emphasizes the state's preoccupation with superficial aspects of the citizen's life, such as adherence to opinions deemed acceptable for the time of year (Auden).

### **Symbolism and Critique:**

The poem's overall theme acts as a symbol of the government's treatment of conformists versus individuals. The monument erected by the state, usually reserved for hometown heroes, becomes a symbol of how the government promotes and celebrates conformity over individuality. The symbolic representation of "Public Opinion" as a tool for controlling citizens reinforces the idea that the state prioritizes manipulating opinions to maintain control (Caesar & Emig, 2001).

### **Discussion:**

W.H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" masterfully navigates the thematic terrain of societal devaluation of individuality and the concurrent celebration of blind conformity to governmental directives. The poem's structure, adopting the form of a narrative speech by a local representative, skillfully underscores the overarching governmental emphasis on

behavior at the expense of recognizing the intrinsic value of the individual (Auden, Year of Publication). By presenting the unknown citizen as a model of compliance, Auden critiques a society that celebrates individuals not for their personal achievements but for their unwavering adherence to state expectations.

The assigned numerical identity, "To JS/07M378," becomes a potent symbol in Auden's exploration, reinforcing the government's reduction of citizens to mere numbers, erasing their unique personalities in the eyes of the state (Auden,). This numeric designation epitomizes the dehumanizing consequences of reducing individuals to statistical data, echoing the poem's overarching theme of the loss of personal identity in the face of governmental conformity.

Auden's use of sound, notably the simple and unvaried rhyming scheme, contributes significantly to the portrayal of the unknown citizen's ordinary and unremarkable life. The monotony reflected in the rhyme scheme becomes a poignant representation of the citizen's routine existence, highlighting a life devoid of deviation from societal expectations (Auden,). However, the closing lines introduce a notable deviation, as the speaker dismisses the notions of freedom and happiness as absurd, further emphasizing the state's control over individual lives (Auden).

Linguistically, Auden's style serves as a powerful tool in illustrating the citizen's subservience to the state. The meticulous detailing of the citizen's life, from job records to health history, paints a vivid picture of a life entirely documented and regulated by the government (Auden, Year of Publication). The use of language further underscores the state's focus on superficial aspects, such as the citizen's adherence to opinions deemed acceptable for the time of year, exemplifying the pervasive influence of government norms on individual expression (Auden, Year of Publication).

The symbolism employed in the poem encapsulates a broader critique of the government's treatment of conformists versus individuals. The monument erected by the state, typically reserved for hometown heroes, becomes a symbol of the government's promotion and celebration of conformity over individuality (Auden, Year of Publication). The symbolic representation of "Public Opinion" as a tool for controlling citizens highlights the state's strategic manipulation of opinions to maintain control, revealing a deliberate prioritization of conformity over the autonomy of individuals.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, W.H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" serves as a poignant commentary on the societal dynamics that prioritize conformity over individuality. The thematic exploration delves into the devaluation of personal identity and the celebration of blind adherence to governmental norms. The poem's structure, sound, linguistic style, and symbolism collectively convey the pervasive influence of the state on the lives of citizens, reducing them to mere numbers and erasing their unique personas. By presenting the unknown citizen as a compliant model, Auden critiques a society that lauds conformity at the expense of personal autonomy.

The use of a numerical identity, symbolized by "To JS/07M378," becomes a powerful metaphor for the dehumanizing effect of reducing individuals to statistical data. Auden's careful attention to sound, particularly the unvaried rhyme scheme, mirrors the monotony of the citizen's existence, emphasizing a life devoid of deviation from societal expectations. The linguistic style further illuminates the citizen's subservience, portraying a life meticulously documented and regulated by the government.

Symbolism, notably in the form of the monument erected by the state, encapsulates a broader critique of how governments treat conformists versus individuals. The celebration of conformity over individuality becomes evident, with the symbolic representation of "Public Opinion" as a tool for controlling citizens. Auden's critique extends to the prioritization of manipulating opinions to maintain governmental control.

In today's world, Auden's poem resonates with contemporary concerns about the delicate balance between individual freedom and governmental control. The study enriches our understanding of Auden's socio-political commentary, urging readers to reflect on the implications of blind conformity and the erosion of individuality in the face of societal and governmental pressures.

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