THE UNKNOWN CITIZEN

-W.H.AUDEN

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Wystan Hugh Auden is a British-American poet born in York, England on 21st Feb, 1907 in a professional middle class family. He was a prolific writer of prose, essays and reviews on psychological and religious subjects. He also worked on documentary films, poetic plays, and other forms of performance. In 1939, he moved to United States and became an American Citizen in 1946, retaining his British citizenship. A keen, intelligent observer, Auden was the first to realize that the totalitarian socialist state would be no utopia which he brings out in this poem.

ABOUT THE POEM: “The Unknown Citizen” was first published in the New York on January 6, 1940. It describes through the form of a dystopian report the life of an unknown man. The manipulative “State” in Auden’s poem celebrates the “Unknown Citizen” as an ideal citizen. The poem is satire on the standardization at the expense of individualism. A citizen does not have scope to develop his individuality.

It is a satire not on the citizen but on the way in which average man is controlled by the conventions of The Welfare State which ignores the need or man to be free and happy. The poem is implicitly the work of a government agency at some point in the future, where modern bureaucratizing trends have reached the point where citizens are known by arbitrary names and letters, not personal name.

FORM AND METER

The poem is a satirical elegy. The poem resembles an elegy in that it commemorates a dead person. However unlike an elegy it does not have a mournful tone. There is nothing great about this person only that he is a sensible person who comply according to the government

The rhyme scheme changes a few times throughout the poem (from ABABA to couplet). Most frequently the rhyming couplet is noticeable. The rhyme of the poem roughly centres on anapaest (a metrical foot that has two unstressed followed by one stressed syllable). These patterns increase the dry humour of the poem.

The speaker of the poem is a bureaucrat who addresses the readers in first person plural (“we” and “our”) indicating that he is speaking on behalf of government. It has an unemotional, businesslike tone.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

THE EPIGRAPH: “To JS/07 M 378 This Marble Monument is Erected by the State”

The poem begins with epigraph about a person identified as “JS/07 M 378” inscribed on a “Marble Monument”. Epigraph is indicative that the poem is dramatic. The epigraph is a parody of the symbolic Tomb of the Unknown Soldiers commemorating unidentified soldiers who died in battles (tombs of the unknown soldiers were first created after WW1 like in Westminster Abbey, Britain and Arlington, Virginia in USA).The words inscribed on the monument was paid by the State or government. Marble wasn’t cheap and most people couldn’t afford it which indicates that government had infinite financial resources collected in form of revenue.

At the time this poem was written, the Nazis were already starting to identify Jewish prisoners with numbered tattoos. Though this is something Auden wouldn’t have known, this parallel makes the “Marble Monument” that much sinister.

Lines1-5: “He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be

One against whom there was no complaint,

And all the reports on his conducts agree

That, in the modern sense of an old fashioned word, he was a saint,

For in everything he did serve the Greater Community. “

The Bureau of Statistic has found that “no official complaint” has been made against the unknown citizen. The man is a deemed a saint whose good deeds include serving in army and not getting fired. The big brother perspective starts from the very outset of the poem with its evocation of a Bureau of Statistics like the “Ministry of truth” and “Ministry of Love”. (from “1984”)

He is compared to a saint but he not like the religious saint Francis or Mother Teresa who helped and fed the poor. He is a modern saint who serves “the Greater Community”. He worked at a factory. Poem says very few truly nice things about unknown citizen. Everything is phrased in the negative. Example “he never got fired”, “there were no official complaints”.

Lines 6-11: “Except for the war till the day he retired

He worked in a factory and never got fired,

But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.

Yet he wasn’t a scab or odd in his views,

For his Union reports that he paid his dues,

(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)”

He was consistent, holding the same job for his entire life. He never said or did anything to anger the company bosses and union representatives.(scab is a worker who replace a worker in factory but is not a team player and mainly looks out for himself). The man had every aspect of his life catalogued .He served in the community, he held a job, he paid union due and he did not hold radical views; these are the qualities which qualifies him as a good worker.

Union aren’t nearly as powerful as they used to be, they had the power to cripple major companies through labour strikes- assuming there was no one with whom to replace this workers. The biggest accusation made about unions during this time was that they were secretly socialist or even communist organisations. The speaker confirms that the unknown citizen’s union is neither of those things. The line “our report on his union shows it was sound” is a chilling reminder that they have eyes everywhere. “Fudge Motors, Inc” is reference to “Ford Motors, Inc” which points to numerous car manufacturing companies located in America in 1930s.

Lines 12-15: “And our Social Psychology workers found

That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.

The press was convinced that he bought a paper every day

And that is reactions to advertisements were normal in every way,”

Poem shifts from employment to his social life. He likes “a drink” implies that he doesn’t drink too much. The Social Psychology was a new field when this poem was written. It studies the behaviour of humans in groups. The study implies that unhappy people are more likely t drink and our man is not an alcoholic. The man buys a newspaper daily. He reads the paper for advertisement, not for the news and he had normal reactions to advertisements (The news might have provoked him to voice controversial views). This influence dictated his buying habits and he proved to be a good American consumer. The press don’t really care about the man as a person; they are just glad he seems to have brought a paper every day.

Lines 16-19: “Polices taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,

And his Health-card shows he was once in hospital but he left cured

Both Producers Research and High-grade Living declare

He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Instalment Plan “

He had taken policies to cover his health but his Health-card shows that he only went to hospital once which means that he wasn’t too much a burden on the health system. The government’s meticulous data on policies prove good for their treasury. Producers Research and High Grade Living have done a little research and learned that the man has used “Instalment Plans” to buy expensive things. Producers Research and High Grade Living are organisation intended to help consumers know what things to buy. In Auden’s time organisations like Consumer Reports and Good Housekeeping tested out products and provided ratings.

Lines 20-26: “And he had everything necessary to Modern Man,

A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidare.

Our researchers into Public Opinion are content

That he held the proper opinions or the time of the year;

When there was peace, he was or peace, when there was war, he went.

He was married and added five children to the population,

Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of his generation,”

He always held government-approved opinion, never once advocating a controversial idea. If the state declared war, he didn’t question the decision. Instead he put on his uniform and followed the crowd to the battlefield. If it declared peace, he accepted that decision too and returned to society. He led a life of docility. He supported the national economy by having all the things – a phonograph, a radio, a car and a refrigerator. The government Eugenicist found he had the right number of children. The Eugenicist in this poem directs the size of the population. Growing population helped nation’s economy as well as providing soldiers in case of war.

Eugenics is a social movement that believed that the human species could be inspired by engineering changes in gene pool, genetic and theory of evolution. The negative impact of this theory is seen in Hitler’s Holocaust.

Lines 27-29: “And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education.

Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd;

Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.”

The man does not interfere with the education of his children. Teachers are termed as “our teacher” which states that it was under the control of government. Education is essential for the development of a child and the government make all possible attempts to mould the future citizens to their propaganda.

The man is free or happy seems absurd to the speaker. According to him the man is an ideal person and all the data indicate toward his satisfaction. Auden brings out the glaring disparity between the statistical information about the citizen reported by agencies and the inadequacy of the judgement made about him (IRONY). Statistical data cannot sum up an individual and are inadequate to evaluate human happiness. Man cannot be free in strict routine.

From the perspective of the “State” it is more important that people are not desperately happy (so that they don’t create problems for the regime) rather than their personal fulfilment.

THEMES

1. IDENTITY: The title of the poem is itself suggestive of the issue of identity. The poem lauds a citizen who is referred to with the number “JS/07 M 378” instead of a name (This identification reminds us of the soldiers in war who were identified with the numbers carved in their locked in case their body cannot be identified). The State knows a great deal about this man through reports collected by various organisations and agencies .The citizen remains “unknown” because in this statistical data the man’s individuality and identity is lost. There is no respect for one’s uniqueness, characteristics, opinion, ambition, freedom or happiness.

Not only the unknown citizen but the speaker along with the state is anonymous. The entire organisation is in direct control of the State. The utterances like “his employers”, “our Social Psychological workers”, “our Eugenist”- are devoid of personality.

1. MANIPULATION: The authority in power appears to be cold and cynical. The state who has erected the “Marble Monument” is the body in power. This monument is one of the means through with governing body exercises its power. The epitaph is a form of propaganda that promotes conformity. They present before the society an idea of ideal citizen who is anonymous and hasn’t achieved much but who follows everything according to the instructions. Through the idealisation they are trying to manipulate the public to their ideology and to convince people to be like “the unknown citizen”.

The named agencies in the poem give a kind of Big Brother kind of bureaucracy found in George Orwell’s “1984” where it watches over its citizens and collect data on them. This feeling makes the poem eerie and bring sort a dystopian totalitarian state found in the works of George Orwell (1984, Animal Farm) and Aldous Huxley (Brave New World) or the data driven surveillance state of today. In Auden’s context one might think of the state focused government of Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini.

1. PATRIOTISM: Patriotism is progressive for a nation but to be blinded by it to the point that we lose rationality is highly dangerous. The man serves a “Greater Community”. The poem questions the intention of the “Greater Community” that watches over its citizen in all sphere; workplace, society, market, education, family. Through closely monitoring its people the government controls everything . It is also indicates that they are afraid of the people that some may rebel against them. A nation in fear of its people has questionable intention. Many regimes have carried heinous acts by justifying it as a small sacrifice in a process of building a greater nation.

1. CONFORMITY: The citizen is portrayed as a man who is in all sense an ordinary man. He is not a “scab”, he is also not someone with odd opinion, his employer is “satisfied”, his union “reports he paid his dues”. He is a conformist who doesn’t question the intention of government or have difference of opinion. He goes for the war when called for. .He doesn’t ponder whether the war is just or not. We don’t find even an ounce of rebel in his blood and thus he is perfectly controllable by the State.
2. LOSS OF INDIVIDUALTIY: Many European government of that time resorted to dictatorship of some kind or another at the expense of individualism. The average man had been distorted into a totally dictated harmless mechanism. Everything about him could be understood in some kind of statistical formula put out by government agencies. He had surrendered his individuality and was often identified by an alphanumeric value rather than personality which is common to all citizens. It is the picture of such a citizen, in a was similar to Eliot’s “Hollow Men” , which is presented in the poem.

SYMBOLS AND IMAGERY

1. Marble Monument
2. Organisations like Bureau of Statistics etc.
3. Saint as a metaphor(comparison)

IRONY: the ideal citizen is a valueless, colourless entity, nothing more than the mechanical part of a highly mechanized society. He is made representative of the mass society and had no distinctive qualities by which one could identify him.

CONCLUSION: In Auden’s opinion being a conformist and going with the flow all the time isn’t just mind-numbingly boring, its also dangerous and unpatriotic. In this poem Auden shows that the poverty and totalitarian regimes are not the only enemies of freedom. Human freedom is restricted in subtle ways in the so called real capitalistic states as well. The average modern man in a society is constantly under the technocratic, bureaucratic and other regimented establishments.