

# The Unknown Citizen

- W.H. Auden

- Prepared by R.Nappinnai

# W.H Auden

- ▶ W.H. Auden (1907 – 1973) was prolific British American Poet.
- ▶ Wystan Hugh Auden was a famous playwright, editor and essayist.
- ▶ Born in England, he studied in Oxford and became friends with noted writers.
- ▶ In 1939, he moved to America and became US citizen.
- ▶ His early poems are marked with Marxist (communist) ideologies.
- ▶ His later poems have a touch of religion in them.
- ▶ Auden talks mostly about social and political problems in his works

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- ▶ The Unknown Citizen was written in 1940.
- ▶ Auden migrated to US only the previous year.
- ▶ He had a culture shock at the consumerist and capitalist society of America
- ▶ This poem reflects this culture shock.
- ▶ Form – Satiric Elegy
- ▶ Theme – Loss of Individuality
- ▶ It is a satire on the bureaucratic society .
- ▶ It ironically shows how the man loses his individuality in Capitalist Society.

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Epigraph –

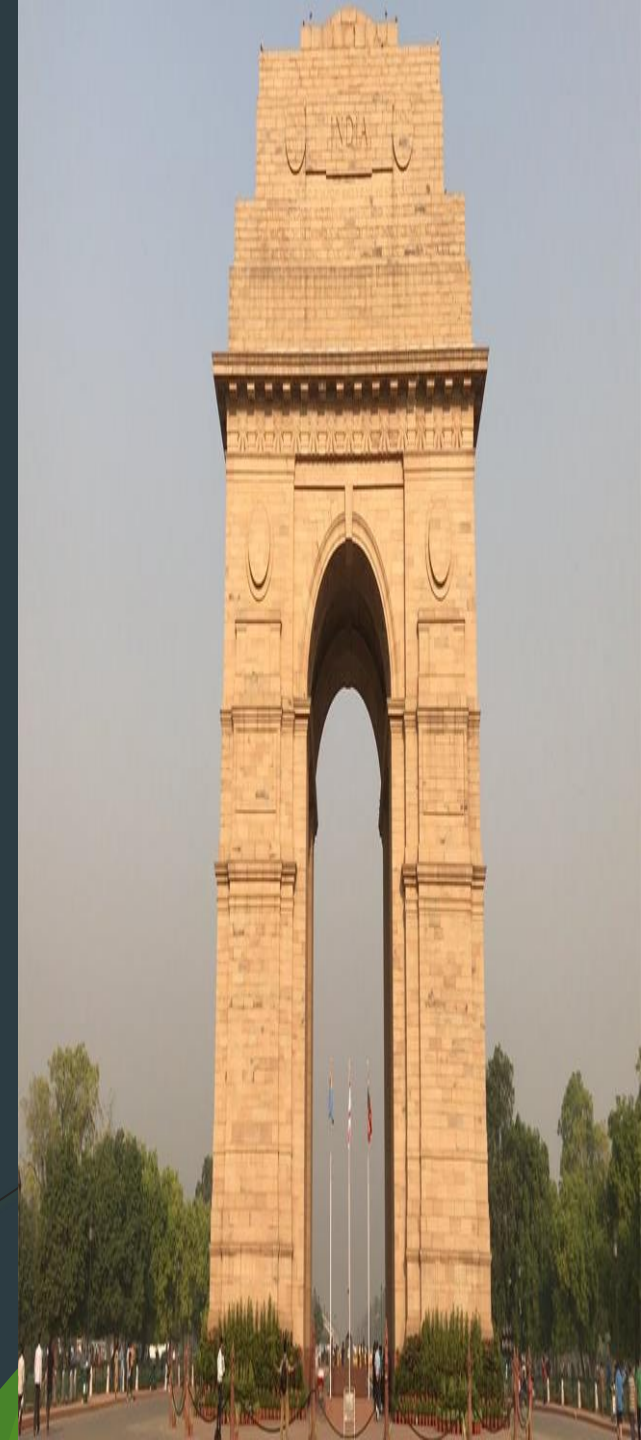
1.an inscription on a building, statue, or coin.

2.a short quotation or saying at the beginning of a book or chapter, intended to suggest its theme.

The epigraph of this poem speaks about a monument erected for a citizen of the country. ✎

- ▶ Monument - நினைவுச் சின்னம்
- ▶ Many countries erect monuments for the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the country.
- ▶ But the monument in the poem is a monument for an ordinary citizen.
- ▶ What is his name ? We do not know. But the unknown citizen has a number.
- ▶ The number is the identity of the citizen- JS/07 M 378.
- ▶ This is like our Aadhar number.
- ▶ The monument is built of marble stone.
- ▶ It is built by the State(state here means government)

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This poem reminds us of the TV reality show **BIG BOSS**.  
As the contestants are always under the surveillance of the Big Boss, the government keeps track of the unknown citizen.

- ▶ According to the Statistics department of the government, the unknown citizen seems to be a good citizen.
- ▶ He was never involved in any kind of problems. There are no complaints registered against him.
- ▶ He is considered as a modern saint.
- ▶ The traditional concept of Saint - துறவி - a person who sacrifices everything to attain salvation.
- ▶ In the modern world, The Unknown citizen sacrificed his individuality and his identity for the Greater Community(government)

....To be continued.

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# The Unknown Citizen (Part II)

## - W.H.Auden

- ▶ The unknown Citizen was a conventional person.
- ▶ He worked in a big factory called Fudge Motors Incorporation till his retirement without any black mark.
- ▶ He was away from the Factory during the period of war.(World War)
- ▶ Every citizen was involved in the war by the government.
- ▶ During the war time, he went to war. During the Peace, he worked in the factory.
- ▶ The employers were satisfied with him.
- ▶ He was also involved in the Labour Union actively. He was not scab.
- ▶ Scab is a person who does not take part in strikes.



- ▶ He was in good terms with the management of the factory as well as the trade union people.
- ▶ These lines show the government's reach. It can have both the Employer's report and the trade union report about the unknown citizen.
- ▶ He was also a social butterfly. He went out with friends.
- ▶ He drank with his friends at the Pub.
- ▶ The citizens of the country do not have any privacy.
- ▶ His private life was also under scanner.
- ▶ The government also knew about whether he bought newspapers.



- ▶ He bought a newspaper to get himself updated about the country.
- ▶ He went through the advertisements and responded to them.
- ▶ (He might have bought things recommended by the advertisements.)
- ▶ He also insured himself.
- ▶ He had a Health card. With the help of the health card, we can have his medical history.
- ▶ He once fell ill and was hospitalised.
- ▶ He was a healthy man. He was discharged after getting cured





# The Unknown Citizen (continuation )

## -W. H. Auden

- ▶ Workers of the Social Psychology department found him a social person.
- ▶ The departments of Producers Research and High Grade Living also have analysed his life.
- ▶ These departments take care of a citizen's life style.
- ▶ These reports show that he utilized the installment plans fully.
- ▶ The Capitalist government convinced people to follow high grade lifestyle .
- ▶ It convinces the citizens to buy things in installment plans.

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# The Unknown Citizen (end part)

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- ▶ “Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.”
- ▶ This final couplet is in the form of rhetorical question.
- ▶ These lines are ironic.
- ▶ They bring out the satire in the poem.
- ▶ Auden is sure that the citizen had lost all his feelings.
- ▶ He had been conditioned by the government.

Satire - a literary work which criticizes stupidity of people in a funny, ironical way.

- ▶ His thoughts were moulded by the government.
- ▶ He thought the way as the government wished him to think.
- ▶ The question never arises whether he was happy.
- ▶ Was he free? Physically he was free.
- ▶ But he was bound psychologically.
- ▶ It would be funny to ask the above questions.
- ▶ Auden ironically says that the government would have a report if he did not feel happy.

Irony-the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect.

- ▶ This poem is written in a prosaic style.(prose)
- ▶ Through the rhetorical questions ( questions asked in order to create a dramatic effect or to make a point rather than to get an answer)Auden presents the pathetic situation of the citizens of a capitalist society.
- ▶ They look at the outset or they are made to believe that they are happy and free. But they are not happy and free.
- ▶ The irony is that they themselves do not understand that over their entire life.
- ▶ Elegy - a poem written in memory of a dead person.
- ▶ This poem is a satire, an ironic elegy.

Eugenists - People who attempt to improve the human gene by encouraging people having the needed character to produce children.

- ▶ The unknown citizen was a married man. He had five children. The Eugenists were convinced of the number of children.
- ▶ (It is not new that governments control birth of children. Few countries like China have strict rules whereas few countries like India canvass for fewer children. A few other countries encourage child birth).
- ▶ The teachers in the school where his children studied also gave a clean chit to him.
- ▶ He never interfered in the school affairs.
- ▶ He co-operated with the school authorities. The government had a big role in moulding the children in the desired way.