



## [The Unknown Citizen](#), by W. H. Auden

### **In A Nutshell**

During the 1920s and 30s, many American writers left the states to become *expatriates* overseas, particularly in Europe. Ernest Hemingway, T. S. Eliot, and F. Scott Fitzgerald are three famous examples. W.H. Auden, however, did the opposite. He was an Englishman who moved back to "the colonies" (the U.S.) in 1939, at the height of his creative powers. Auden wrote "The Unknown Citizen" while living in New York, and the poem gives evidence of his culture shock when suddenly confronted with American-style chaos and consumerism.

As a poet, Auden is a chameleon capable of writing in many different forms and styles. He is considered a "modernist" writer, but his work is unlike that of any other poet of the past century. At a time when many poets were experimenting with obscure forms and new ways of using language, much of Auden's poetry had more popular appeal. He was a master, for example, of the rhyming couplet (AA, BB, etc.), the simplest rhyme scheme in English. "The Unknown Citizen" is so accessible it almost sounds like an elaborate joke.

The poem is written in the voice of a fictional government bureaucrat – someone who sits at a desk and shuffles papers all day – whose decisions affect the lives of people he has never met. You could consider it a poetic version of George Orwell's *1984* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, in that it concerns a Big Brother-like state that knows everything about its citizens except the things that really matter. But the poem doesn't sound as pessimistic or tortured as either of these novels. It uses good old-fashioned humor to protest the numbing effects of

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modern life. It's not the most "intellectual" of Auden's works, but that doesn't make it any less powerful to read. "The Unknown Citizen" is proof that great poetry doesn't have to take itself seriously all the time.

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## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Is the poem a criticism of American life in particular, or could it apply to other cultures? Does America have equivalents to a "Bureau of Statistics," a "Eugenist," and "researchers into Public Opinion"?
- 2 The poem was written in 1939, and some critics have found parallels with the rise of fascist, authoritarian governments in Europe. Is the "State" of the poem a fascist state, or is it merely a subtle parody of democratic and socialist governments?
- 3 If someone were to write a poem on a monument dedicated to you, what would it say? How are you like or unlike the Unknown Citizen? Do you have any "odd views"?

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