

## Crisis of Personal Identity in Auden's "The Unknown Citizen"

Dr. Prabhu Ray Yadav<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*This study reflects the value that citizens place on their own nation. It depicts the way citizens live, where government bureaucrats and industrial employers enforce their authority. Their actions often place them in opposition to a citizen. W. H. Auden, in his poem "The Unknown Citizen," critiques the degrading effects of bureaucratic domination and misunderstanding. The individual's rights as a citizen is reduced to an anonymous figure defined more by the Bureau of Statistics than by personal identity. Through subtle satire and irony, Auden exposes how societal norms prioritize efficiency and tradition over citizen's individuality, autonomy, and freedom. This study employs a qualitative approach to explore how government bureaucracy and industrial owners shape and control a citizen's personal identity, freedom, and emotions. It adopts an interpretative method to evaluate the value of a citizen's life. It examines the cost and sacrifice required to maintain the idealized perfect citizen in an objective, system-driven world. This is Auden's clear awareness arising from his knowledge of Marxist liberty theory; its analysis investigates how bureaucratic and capitalist structures diminish citizen's capacity for independent thought and action, making him victim of their agency. This research takes account of the citizen's career covering present, past, and future. Auden's poem serves as both a critique of modern society's dehumanizing mechanisms and a reflection on the commodification of human life. Briefly, the research throws light on citizen's crisis of personal autonomy versus the tyranny of the national mafias.*

**Keywords:** Government bureaucracy, industrialist, capitalists, identity, crisis, personal statistics

### Introduction to the Study

In his poem "The Unknown Citizen (1939)," Auden highlights several issues faced by citizen under state control. The citizen is symbolically represented as an anonymous figure, inscribed on a marble monument with the identification number: "To JS/07 M 378 This Marble Monument Is Erected by the State" (29). This Marble Monument serves as a symbol of a deceased individual known as "the Modern Man" who has dedicated his life to supporting the government and its industrial institutions through social, economic, and political contributions (30). The state and its agencies closely monitor citizens' actions, rewarding compliance with symbolic recognition—such as an inscription on a monument,

1. Asst. Professor of English, Patan Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Email: [yprabhuray@gmail.com](mailto:yprabhuray@gmail.com)

while punishing any deviation from societal expectations. The marble monument itself represents a product of national history, where citizens are reduced to mere numbers, emphasizing the bureaucratic control and the cost of individuality in modern social, political, and economic systems. This researcher attended a lecture by Prof. Dhurba Bahadur Karki, Chief of the Central Department of English, Kirtipur, on June 20, 2024, at the CDE Hall. In his lecture, Karki discussed how contemporary fiction that addresses citizens' concerns about national issues has become a new trend in literature. He suggested that themes of identity, national issues, and personal concerns are particularly reflective of modern literary perspectives. In the same way, Auden critiques the loss of citizen's identity in contemporary society, illustrating how industrialized governments diminish his individuality or originality in favor of state efficiency and control.

Similarly, Ripa Akter's essay entitled "Modern Saint of W. H. Auden in The Unknown Citizen," states: "This is exactly what happens in the case of the modern man. Modern society has told people what they should want and how they should live, like the right and wrong ways of living defined by the state" (25). The citizen, who follows societal customs and government rules—much like "the unknown citizen"—is expected to remain silent or be perceived as a saint by conforming to the "proper opinion" dictated by government officials, bureaucrats, and administrators. The essay explores how state governance exerts control over an individual's identity, especially that of the innocent citizen. Auden's critique portrays the modern citizen as someone recognized primarily for their adherence to economic, social, and traditional duties rather than personal identity. The poet underscores how social customs and conventional systems are upheld as the foundation of state order. Auden's narrative opening lines, in the poem, serve as evidence of what defines a "good citizen," whose individuality is diminished within the structured expectations of society.

The Bureau of Statistics determines that "he was a citizen against whom no official complaints had been made, and all reports confirmed that, in a modern interpretation of an old-fashioned term, he was a saint—someone who devoted his life to serving the greater community" (29). However, personal knowledge, independent thought, education, emotions, and other unique qualities hold little value in the eyes of the state. Auden critiques bureaucratic control with irony and satire, illustrating how government officials and industrial leaders assess citizens based solely on their compliance while disregarding their individuality, curiosity, and personal needs. The citizen's personal experience remains unheard, silenced by a system that prioritizes societal conformity over intellectual freedom. Citizen is expected only to respect social customs, as this alone is sufficient to earn governmental approval. In this controlled environment, government agencies and industrial employers, Fudge Motors Inc. define the ideal citizen as one who simply adheres to societal norms, fulfilling the rituals of the system rather than expressing personal identity.

## Methodology of the Study

This research analyses the idea about whether morality and the duty of conformity can coexist with true individual freedom requiring absolute self-possession. In *The Ego and Its Own*, Max Stirner argues that “true liberty comes from radical individualism, where individuals reject external authorities—such as the state, religion, and societal norms” (17). Similarly, Auden’s poem illustrates how bureaucratic officials and industrial institutions impose restrictions that override the personal will of the innocent citizen. Stirner cautions that concepts like free and fair justice, autonomy, or Marxist liberty theory cannot fully support individual self-assertion unless government, industry, and social institutions lessen their ideological control. Instead of being governed by bureaucratic, industrial, or political systems, Stirner advocates for personal autonomy and mutual cooperation, emphasizing self-interest over the rigid expectations imposed by employers like Fudge Motors Inc. (8). In this sense, government bureaucratic and industrial employers function as a “union of egoists,” where individuals are bound by moral and ideological obligations that limit their true freedom and rights.

## Analysis of the Study

Auden’s “The Unknown Citizen,” written in 1939—the year when the World War II began—reflects his belief that poetry could bring about positive change. Auden’s narrative asserts that poetry is not merely a literary genre of conveying something new or old but is also a way of illuminating the right and wrong aspects of time, work, and human existence. In his poem, entitled “The Unknown Citizen,” Auden explores the anonymity of human suffering, emphasizing how individuals are often reduced to faceless figures within society. In the similar way, Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard suggests that the increasing privatization of human life “makes their age even more insane” (71). In the modern era, dominated by science and technology, society as well as its bureaucracy has diminished human value by turning individuals into indistinguishable travelers through life. Lacking self-awareness, people passively follow societal norms, doing what they are told without questioning their own identity. As a result, their personal knowledge, skills, and artistic expression often remain unrecognized and unheard. Individuals conform submissively to societal expectations, sacrificing their unique personality in the process.

William Shakespeare’s play *As You Like It* explores social conformity through the famous lines: “All the world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players” (36). This suggests that societal traditions dictate individuals’ autonomy, freedom, and independence. People are expected to abide by societal norms unconditionally, adhering to roles assigned to them throughout their lives. In same fashion, Biswarup Das also observes, “the whole world appeared to him chaotic because it was moving rapidly ahead to its own destruction” (45). Furthermore, Auden shares a similar concern about the condition of modern citizens. His poem reflects the government’s objective of enforcing

social conformity, encouraging individuals to work diligently within societal structures. Auden critiques this reality by asking, “Was he free? Was he happy?”—questions that are ultimately dismissed, as government bureaucrats prioritize control and order over the well-being and personal freedoms of their citizens.

### **A Symbol of Modern Citizen**

The reason for this issue discussed above is that such a citizen is deemed incompetent, inefficient, and incapable of holding a position or earning recognition by bureaucrats, officials, and administrators. Similar to Auden’s use of imagery, symbolism, and metaphor to represent the modern citizen, George Bernard Shaw, a literary critic, a socialist and a playwright, employs similar techniques in his one-act play “Augustus Does His Bit”. Its main character, namely, Lord Augustus Highcastle, an aristocratic and self-important government official in the War Office during the World War I, perceives himself as “a distinguished member of the governing class, in the uniform of a colonel, and very well preserved at forty-five, is comfortably seated at a writing table with his heels on it, reading *The Morning Post*” (34). However, Augustus’s misguided leadership exposes the contrast between true intelligence and the cunning of bureaucratic officials. Shaw’s depiction of wartime government bureaucracy critiques blind patriotism and nationalism, highlighting the gap between genuine intellect and the self-serving government system. While Shaw’s “Augustus Does His Bit” satirizes the absurdity of government bureaucracy, Auden’s “The Unknown Citizen” symbolizes the silencing of individuals within an inefficient bureaucratic and industrial company. Both works of Auden’s “The Unknown Citizen” and Shaw’s “Augustus Does His Bit” critique the oppressive nature of bureaucratic power, likening it to a prison that suppresses the autonomy of the ordinary citizen. Additionally, Lekhanath Paudyal’s poem “The Parrot in the Cage” also evokes striking imagery to further explore themes of restriction and control:

A parrot called a bird, a twice-born child,  
By fate into an iron cage beguiled,  
I find, O God, nor peace nor quiet rest,  
For even in a dread I lie oppressed. (62)

Lekhanath Paudyal crafts a metaphor that resonates powerfully with both beings, whether they dwell in homes or the wild. His use of literary devices encourages the reader to recognize the struggles that modern individuals endure under the control of societal bureaucrats and industrial elites. Paudyal subtly invites the reader to visualize the tension between citizen confinement and the ideals of freedom, liberty, and autonomy. This approach helps the reader grasp the contrast between longing and despair. Through clever symbols, metaphors, and imagery, Paudyal portrays the human condition of an unknown citizen in contemporary society.

The contemporary conformity of the government bureaucracy and industrial owners understand their self-made theory but remain blind to how it turns citizen into fools, ruling over their own misguided knowledge. In modern society, government bureaucrats and industrial institutions exert power over innocent citizens, reinforcing their authority. Their governing philosophy is comparable to Milton's idea in *Paradise Lost*, where Satan declares, "To reign in Hell is better than to serve in Heaven" (117). Milton's poetry, particularly through the story of humanity's fall from grace, explores themes of free will, redemption, and the struggle between good and evil. Auden's portrayal of modern governance reflects a similar dynamic, illustrating how consumerism and materialism reduce individuals to passive participants in the system. The Unknown Citizen is shaped by governmental legacy and conformity rather than personal agency. The government and its institutions ensure that citizens remain occupied with material possessions—reading newspapers, purchasing insurance, and acquiring goods—measuring their success not by individuality or autonomy but by their obedience to consumerist ideals. In doing so, the state transforms its citizens into mere consumers, diverting them from recognizing their own lack of freedom. The citizen's sense of ownership is increasingly tied to consumerism and materialism, rather than to deeper human values. The government's policy encourages citizens to purchase consumer goods, read newspapers, and conform to standardized social habits in their daily lives. Auden's poem is a portrayal of how the role of a citizen, in a manmade rule and regime, looks as if "popular with his mates and liked a drink" (30). The subtle message of the poem reveals the negative influence of government authorities, who aim to smudge the citizen's personal legacy and suppress their curiosity. Their goal is to shape citizen into obedient, submissive individuals, fostering a mechanistic mindset rather than encouraging independent thought and inquiry.

W. H. Auden is widely recognized as one of the most esteemed British-born poets of the Twentieth Century. As an internationally acclaimed poet, Auden highlights the struggles of individuals through his depiction of the British government's monument. His representation of the British government's memorial in the Twentieth Century reflects the responsibilities of citizens toward their nation and its rulers. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" portrays these duties as part of a memoir drawn from his poetry collection *Look Stranger* (1936). The story of the innocent citizen in "The Unknown Citizen" captures the attention of readers, serving as a reflection on the silent suffering of individuals exploited by a harsh ruler.

As a left-wing poet, Auden further explores the plight of the innocent citizen in his republican poem *Spain* (1937). In *Spain*, Auden also examines the citizen's condition through social and political engagement, beginning with a repeated emphasis on three key aspects:

Yesterday, today and tomorrow all the past. . .  
 The stars are dead. The animals will not look.  
 We are left alone with our day, and the time is short, and  
 History to the defeated  
 May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon (37)

Auden depicts the citizen as being caught between the conflicting expectations of society and personal identity, comparing them to animals left to fend for themselves. He criticizes both government bureaucracy and capitalist society, arguing that a citizen's worth is reduced to mere "the Bureau of Statistics to be one against whom there was no official complaint" (29). The government bureaucrats and industrial owners treat citizen as little more than symbols or signs, like "an old-fashioned word, who was a saint" (29). Auden's portrayal of the citizen is defined only by social customs and rules, without the opportunity to address his basic needs. Through his poem, Auden offers a deeper insight into how government institutions prioritize productivity over individual freedom. He exposes the tension between social, economic, and political expectations as they shape a citizen's rights and justice. The question, "Is the citizen 'Free and Happy'?" (30), illustrates how government bureaucrats, officials, and administrators abuse individuals' rights, justice, freedom, and personal identity. Auden's analysis highlights how the true justice and rights of citizens are overshadowed by the rigid conventions and traditional structures of government.

The citizen is portrayed as a mere cog in a machine, constantly turning as part of a predetermined system. This system is used to mislead and manipulate the innocent citizen, an action driven by industrial societies. Auden highlights this when he writes, "And our social psychology workers found that he was popular with his mates and liked a drink" (30). Through this, Auden reveals that products like alcohol are merely produced to serve the diet and desires of the citizen, who becomes prey to such commodities. Similarly, magazines, newspapers, and other forms of media are designed for the citizen's consumption. Auden refers to all of these as "Necessary to the Modern Man" (30), emphasizing their role in shaping modern life.

The government system described in the poem disregards the personal well-being and status of the innocent citizen. This system is depicted as heavy and oppressive, where unquestioning obedience is exploited. The plight of the citizen leads the reader to reflect on the destructive impact of bureaucratic and industrial society's traditionalism in the modern age. Yijie Zhang, in his essay "Segmentarity in W. H. Auden's *The Unknown Citizen*," argues that "the standardization of modern society continually tells citizens how to live the 'right' and 'free' life. People appear to have the freedom to choose their lifestyle, but as this poem demonstrates, freedom is an illusion" (77). In the opening lines of Auden's poem, Shreedhar Lohani notes that the message of "The Unknown Citizen" lies in its silence,



with the irony between the lines drawing readers to the concept of the “unknown citizen” (25). Lohani, in his introduction to Lekhanath Paudyal’s poem *The Parrot in the Cage*, observes that “the poem remains strikingly significant on its most literal level, where a simple human-animal relationship exposes the cruelty and injustice of human dominance over animals” (61). The poem ends by raising two questions about the modern citizen: “Was the citizen free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard” (25).

## Conclusion

Auden’s poem serves as a satirical analysis of bureaucratic societies, highlighting the degradation of citizen within such systems. The poem sounds like an obituary of an unnamed citizen, emphasizing how societal norms and government regulations reduce personal identity to mere statistics. Auden’s citizen is like in subjugated being. This portrayal underscores the loss of individuality and the mechanization of human beings within the “Bureau of Statistics”. The citizen’s worth is measured solely by compliance with societal expectations, with personal desires and freedoms overlooked. Auden’s depiction is similar to Max Weber’s concept of the “iron cage,” where increasing rationalization traps individuals in a system of rules and regulations that prioritize efficiency over personal freedom. The poem concludes by questioning the citizen’s freedom and happiness, highlighting the absurdity of such inquiries in a society that values conformity over individuality. This ending challenges readers to reflect on the true cost of societal compliance and the potential loss of personal autonomy. In essence, the poet awakens readers to reconsider the balance between societal conformity and individual freedom, urging a critical examination of the systems that define and control human existence. Precisely speaking, this poem, written in 1939, captures the essence of the industrial era as well as its conventional norms in modern world civilization. It offers a critical argument, illustrating how the government asserts its control, competing with and shaping modern society through its state power.

## Works Cited

- Auden, W. H. “The Unknown Citizen.” *Visions: A Thematic Anthology*, Vidyarthi Pustak Bhandar, 2024.
- ... “Spain”. *Another Time*, Faber and Faber, 1940, pp. 95-100.
- Das, Biswarup. “The Tragedy of Human Condition: Anonymity of Modern Existence and Auden’s The Unknown Citizen.” *ARJHSS*, vol. 2, no. 10, 2019, pp. 44-47.
- Karki, Dhurba Bahadur. “How Contemporary Fiction.” Lecture, Department of English Meeting Hall, Kirtipur, 20 June 2024.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Crowd is Untruth*. Translated by C. K. Bellinger, Merchant Books, 2013.

Lohani, Shreedhar. *Visions: A Thematic Anthology*, Vidyarthi Pustak Bhandar, 2024.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Norton, 2005. *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradise\\_Lost](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradise_Lost).

Paudyal, Lekhanath. "The Parrot of the Cage." *Visions: A Thematic Anthology*, Vidyarthi Pustak Bhandar, 2024.

Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. Geddes and Grosset, 2001.

Shaw, George Bernard. "Augustus Does His Bit." *Visions: A Thematic Anthology*, Vidyarthi Pustak Bhandar, 2024.

Zhang, Yijie. "Segmentarity in W. H. Auden's *The Unknown Citizen*." *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*, vol. 62, no. 1, Aug. 2024, pp. 75-80.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/62/20241769.

Stirner, Max. *The Ego and His Own*. Translated by Stephen Byington, LibriVox Audiobooks, 2017.