**The Waste Land Summary**

The poem begins with a section entitled "The Burial of the Dead." In it, the narrator -- perhaps a representation of Eliot himself -- describes the seasons. Spring brings "memory and desire," and so the narrator's memory drifts back to times in Munich, to childhood sled rides, and to a possible romance with a "hyacinth girl." The memories only go so far, however. The narrator is now surrounded by a desolate land full of "stony rubbish."

He remembers a fortune-teller named [Madame Sosostris](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-waste-land/study-guide/character-list#madame-sosostris) who said he was "the drowned Phoenician Sailor" and that he should "fear death by water." Next he finds himself on London Bridge, surrounded by a crowd of people. He spots a friend of his from wartime, and calls out to him.

The next section, "A Game of Chess," transports the reader abruptly from the streets of London to a gilded drawing room, in which sits a rich, jewel-bedecked lady who complains about her nerves and wonders what to do. The poem drifts again, this time to a pub at closing time in which two Cockney women gossip. Within a few stanzas, we have moved from the upper crust of society to London's low-life.

"The Fire Sermon" opens with an image of a river. The narrator sits on the banks and muses on the deplorable state of the world. As Tiresias, he sees a young "carbuncular" man hop into bed with a lonely female typist, only to aggressively make love to her and then leave without hesitation. The poem returns to the river, where maidens sing a song of lament, one of them crying over her loss of innocence to a similarly lustful man.

"Death by Water," the fourth section of the poem, describes a dead Phoenician lying in the water -- perhaps the same drowned sailor of whom Madame Sosostris spoke. "What the Thunder Said" shifts locales from the sea to rocks and mountains. The narrator cries for rain, and it finally comes. The thunder that accompanies it ushers in the three-pronged dictum sprung from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: "Datta, dayadhvam, damyata": to give, to sympathize, to control. With these commandments, benediction is possible, despite the collapse of civilization that is under way -- "London bridge is falling down falling down falling down."

**The Unknown Citizen*by***[***W.H. Auden***](https://poemanalysis.com/w-h-auden/biography/)

## **Summary**

‘The Unknown Citizen by [W.H. Auden](https://poemanalysis.com/w-h-auden/biography/) describes, through the form of a [dystopian](https://poemanalysis.com/genre/dystopia/) report, the life of an unknown man.

The poem begins with the [speaker](https://poemanalysis.com/diction/speaker-in-poetry/) stating the fact that throughout his life there was never one “complaint” against the citizen. No one thought badly of him, in fact, he was more like a “saint” than anything else.  The next section of the poem tells of the man’s popularity. He was well-liked by his friends, social enough to be normal, and dedicated to his work. The man served the “Community” for his entire life. The only lapse in his work for his company was when he went to serve in the “War,” and now, after he has died.

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The speaker also states that the man read the newspapers to a sufficient degree. He went to the hospital once, but left quickly, “cured,” as he should have been. The citizen consumed all the latest technologies, as a “Modern Man” should, and owned the proper devices.

In the final section of the poem, the speaker concludes his report. He states that the man was “for” war when he was supposed to be, and for “peace,” when the government told him to be. The last lines prompt the questions a reader might have been wondering the whole time. Was this man happy? Was he free? These are things that the speaker sees as “[absurd](https://poemanalysis.com/genre/absurd/).” He states that, of course, the man was happy, the government would have “known” if he wasn’t. ‘The Unknown Citizen‘ by W.H. Auden is a 32 line poem that utilizes a number of different [rhyming](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/rhyme/) patterns. The poem contains examples of both skillfully written [rhyming couplets](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/couplet/) and seemingly patternless portions of [verse](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/verse/) that are variable in their [end rhymes](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/end-rhyme/).

It is impossible to escape the lighthearted nature with which intense [subject matter](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/poem-subject/) is being tackled in the poem. In fact, the surprising rhyming [couplets](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/couplet/) add to the [humor](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/humor/) that is pervasive in this piece.

Read more [poetry by W.H. Auden here](https://poemanalysis.com/w-h-auden/).

## **Analysis of The Unknown Citizen**

### **Lines 1-5**

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official complaint,
And all the reports of his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of the old-fashioned word, he was a saint,
For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.

Auden has chosen to craft a speaker for the “Unknown Citizen” who is completely concealed, but strangely familiar. He speaks with a candidness and emotionless tenor which is hard to connect with. Once the identity of the speaker is a bit clearer though, one might come to recognize the faceless, seemingly lifeless person of a government worker or customer service representative.

The speaker is going about his job, as he would any other day, and is not impacted by the facts he is relaying about the “unknown citizen.”  The speaker’s lack of inflection is made up for by the [rhymes](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/rhyme/) which are pervasive in his [speech](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/dialogue/).

It was Auden’s goal in this piece to present the words of a dystopian [narrator](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/narrator/), to the tune of a [rhyme](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/rhyme/). This [contrast](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/juxtaposition/) is quite forceful as the reader will discover throughout the poem’s 32 lines.

The speaker begins by introducing the main [subject of the poem](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/poem-subject/), who will never receive a name or proper identification. The reader will only come to know him through the facts that the “Bureau of Statistics, “the Greater Community,” and other fictional dystopian sounding organizations, have seen fit to share.

The first thing of note that the speaker mentions is that there are no “complaints” lodged against this person. No one stepped forward, during their investigation, to say that he had done some wrong. All of the reports that this speaker has at his disposal tell him that the “unknown citizen” is a “saint.” His record is spotless and pristine.

This poem certainly reads like a report and it is interesting to consider why these particular facts about this person’s life were chosen. What do these things really tell about someone? It is important to note that there is nothing deeper discussed in these lines. One cannot come to fully know the “unknown citizen” through this report, hence the [irony](https://poemanalysis.com/figurative-language/irony/) between the title and the goal of the [verses](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/verse/).

### **Lines 6-14**

Except for the war till the day he retired
He worked in a factory and never got fired,
(…)
That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.
The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day,

In the second set of lines, the report continues. Throughout the “unknown citizen’s” life, he did a number of things to serve the community. In fact, he spent his whole life “serv[ing] the Greater Community.” Capitalization is utilized throughout the poem to acknowledge bodies, or official groups that exist in the world of the poem. The citizen served the community up until the day he died. The only exception was when he went to fight in the “War.” Which war this is meant to be is not made clear.

The citizen,

…worked in a factory and never got fired,

But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.

The man did as he was told, dedicated himself to his work, and was continually in the good graces of his employers. So far this person seems incredibly straightforward. There is not much more revealed besides surface-level details that anyone could infer.

The man did not have any “odd views” and he always paid his “union dues.” He was on time with payments and was not strange in any way. That is to say, he did not believe in, or participate in anything, that went against the tenants of this dystopian feeling world.

The man not only did well at work, but he was also popular with his friends. They were social and completely normal. One might at this point be suspicious of the total normalcy that filled this person’s life. Shouldn’t there be more there to see and learn about?

### **Lines 15-22**

And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.
Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,
(…)
A gramophone, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.
Our researchers into Public Opinion are content

The poem continues and the speaker refers to a number of other organizations that have been keeping an eye on the citizen. The “Press,” presumably a government-run news organization, reported to the speaker that the citizen,

…bought a paper every day

And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.

The man was as susceptible to advertising as he was supposed to be, and committed to the news of the day. Continuing in the theme of this [dystopia](https://poemanalysis.com/genre/dystopia/), it is quite likely his life was consumed with the [propaganda](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/propaganda/) produced by these agencies. It is hard to know who this person truly was with these purely surface-level details.

Additionally, the man went to the hospital, but did not stay long. He left “cured” just as he should. He was sufficiently healthy and sufficiently interested in acquiring all the appliances a “Modern Man “would need. He had,

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

### **Lines 23-29**

That he held the proper opinions for the time of the year;
When there was peace he was for peace; when there was war he went.
(…)
Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

In the final section of this piece the speaker concludes his report on the “unknown citizen.” The researchers at “Public Opinion,” perhaps the government organization the speaker works for as he uses, “Our,” conclude that the man had all the “proper opinions.” The propaganda was doing its job and the man believed what he was meant to. He was an advocate for what the government told him to be, whether the was “peace” or “war.”

The man’s personal life consisted of a normal wife, and “five children” that were “added…to the population.” The number was not too many or too few, it was just “right” for a man of his “generation.”

The final lines of the piece bring greater attention to the absurdity of the poem’s premise. The speaker, as if defending himself, states that the “question” of whether the citizen was “free” or “happy” is absurd. He was certainly happy, otherwise, “we should…have heard.”