The Bureaucratic Control Of The State In The Unknown Citizen

Since the voice of the poet is the driving voice of society, Auden, a virtuoso poet, uses it to unravel the folded political and romantic lies of the modernist era of post World War 1, propagated by the hegemonic institutions of governance through representations of “The Modern Man” in The Unknown Citizen (1940) and the personal voice of the speaker in the elegy “Funeral Blues” (1936). In his poems, Auden critiques the bureaucratic control of the State and he also questions the idealised perceptions of love.

Through The Unknown Citizen, Auden critiques the bureaucratic control of the State, suggesting that traditional conformity to societal expectations is detrimental to the human condition. This has been achieved through the satirical tone of the poem, where Auden pokes fun at the conventions of bureaucracies forced upon the average citizen of a dystopian reality in the modernist era. The use of fragmented sentences in the enjambment, “Both Producers Research and High Grade Living declare/ He was fully sensible to the advancements of the Installment Plan/ And had everything necessary to the Modern Man” highlights the list of attributes of the ideal American citizen who lived the American Dream. The “Modern Man” can be representative for all the citizens in the 20th century who were subject to oppression by the State or a symbol of shallow conformity. The fact that America had organizations such as “Producers Research” and “High Grade Living” reporting every detail of the unknown citizen’s actions demonstrates America’s overbearing bureaucracy and state surveillance despite being a so-called capitalist country which would be a form of oppression. This is represented by the salience of the stringed cage. The statistical list of attributes almost seems as if the information presented here were the truth with no room for lies. However this is ironic as the political lie of the ideal American lifestyle is revealed in the rhetorical question “Was he free? Was he happy?”. This demonstrates that traditional conformity is detrimental to the human condition. Traditional conformity, as seen by the rows of robots in the foreground of my poster, has lead to the absence of notable personalities, creativity and independent thinking as any signs of disagreements against the state would have been heard. Being denied life of any sense of expression, joy or freedom has rendered the death of the soul. This is represented by the caged pigeon which symbolises the State’s entrapment of citizens. Therefore, through Auden’s voice in the poem, the political lie of the ideal life of a citizen has been revealed through America’s bureaucratic control.

In addition, Auden questions the idealised perceptions of love in Funeral Blues which formed the bulk of 19th century romantic era literature and exposes the truth about the limitations of romantic love in the public and private domain respectively. Auden subverts the notion of love allowing a person to feel exuberant and elated. Instead, love has caused the persona to mourn and grieve for his lost loved one. This is shown by the salience of the ripped heart in my poster and grief is represented by the grey background and the skull. We can also see this in the hyperbolic idea of the “traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves” which suggests that the persona wants the rest of the world to mourn with the speaker and acknowledge the magnitude of this loss. The reflective tone of the speaker in “I thought that love would last forever; I was wrong” highlights the romantic lie in that romantic poets idealised love to be eternal and transcend life’s struggle and death however Auden unveils this lie and provides his readers

with the reality that love is in fact fleeting and that love will always be separated by death. In the last two stanzas, the poem shifts its focus to the domestic domain and private self in which they reminisce their past memories with their loved one and further emphasises their beloved's importance to their life through the asyndeton in "my north, my south, my east, my west, my working week…". Hence, through Auden's stylistic choices and chameleonic prowess, he uses his voice to question the validity of love in romantic poetry to expose the romantic lie of idealised love.

To sum up, Auden's stylistic versatility has revealed the folded political and romantic lies of the hegemonic political system and love. Not only is Auden's poetry beautiful in its form but he also created the impeccable balance between poetic art and reality.