

Who's Who
by W.H.Auden
P.G. Semester 3
CC – 10
Unit III

Dr. Md. Shahnawaz Alam

Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty)

P.G. Department of English

Maharaja College, Arrah

Wystan Hugh Auden, 1907–1973, was a renowned British-American poet whose style blended wit, irony, and social commentary. His work often explores love, politics, and human frailty. First published in his collection *Look, Stranger!* in 1936, "Who's Who" satirizes the biographical summaries of famous figures found in *Who's Who* directories by setting public achievements against private emotional longing. It epitomizes how such accounts compress complex lives into heroic clichés while ignoring those ordinary people who really anchor us.

Full Text of the Poem

A shilling life will give you all the facts:

How Father beat him, how he ran away,

What were the struggles of his youth, what acts

Made him the greatest figure of his day:

Of how he fought, fished, hunted, worked all night,

Though giddy, climbed new mountains; named a sea:

Some of the last researchers even write:

Love made him weep his pints like you and me.

With all his honours on, he sigh'd for one

Astounded critics would say, who lived at home;

Did little jobs about the house with skill

And nothing else; could whistle; would sit still

Or potter round the garden; answered some

Of his long marvellous letters but kept none.

Brief Analysis

Structure: This is a Petrarchan sonnet, comprising an octave and sestet. The rhyme scheme provides a shift as follows: the octave's ABABCD CD shifts to EFEFGG in the sestet, reflecting in form the "turn" of the poem at line 9, where the focus shifts from public glory to private longing.

Themes:

Fame vs. Intimacy: The first stanza mocks the sensationalized biography that celebrates traumas and triumphs alike: "Father beat him," "named a sea"; even love is reduced to the universal cliché: "weep his pints like you and me." The second stanza shows the great man's longing for an unheralded lover—presumably a spouse—who lives modestly and dismisses his "marvellous letters," emphasizing that authentic emotional life is found in the banal. **Satire on Biography:** Auden attacks the ways in which "Who's Who" types of entries commodify lives for a "shilling," eliding what makes someone human. "Astonished critics" underscore how society is baffled by valuing the ordinary. **Tone and Style:** Ironic and understated, with vivid, rhythmic imagery-e.g., "giddy, climbed new mountains"-that parodies adventure tales. Auden's modernist edge shows through in the deflation of heroism that is typical of his work pre-WWII. This poem typifies Auden's early voice: sharp, accessible, and probing the gap between public persona and private self.