



DC English IV

Composition & Rhetoric

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Poems of Witness / Poems of Protest

Protest Poem

These are works of literary expression seeking change in society; much like the images projected about the early Sixties in the Twentieth Century with songs created by **Joan Baez** or **Bob Dylan**, even **Johnny Cash**, asking for change from the status quo for the common good.

In the case of poetry, the poet acts as a **witnesses** to issue in society and he/she reflects upon the perceived injustice using poetic conventions.

As an individual the poet cannot affect change by him/herself.

The collective public therefore is asked to make a change, to shift the dynamics of what is perceived as an injustice.

Poems of Witness / Poems of Protest

Poet versus Persona

In some cases, the **persona** of the poem is shown as an isolated figure, in the background, as a non-participatory character; he/she **witnesses**, but does not act directly in the scenes provided.

- Because the persona cannot act (or chooses not to act) the reader is therefore expected to be an agent of change and reform.
- Such poems ask for reactions on the part of the audience due to the persona's inability to affect change.

Poems of Witness / Poems of Protest

Closed Forms

Generally speaking, poetry can be divided into two forms:

closed forms or open forms.

Closed form poetry follows a strict, traditional pattern & specific restrictions.

- Poet follows an expected formula with
 - line count
 - rhyming techniques
 - meter

An Elizabethan love sonnet for example follows these basic rules:

- rhyme pattern (or rhyme scheme) of **ABAB CDCD EFEF GG**
- fourteen lines
- expected to use **iambic pentameter**
- should contain a *volta*

Poems of Witness / Poems of Protest

Open form poetry

In this case, open form follows no formal pattern, no restrictions.
The work is open for wider creative variations.

- Also referred to as **free verse**.
- Poem can rhyme if the poet desires, **but it is not required**.
- Poem can use meter if poet desires, **but it is not required**.
- Poem can use regularized stanzas if poet desires, **but it is not required**.

W. H. Auden, “The Unknown Citizen”

“**The Unknown Citizen**” is a protest poem discussing issues of complacency and non-action by citizens in a dystopian environment.

- The poem raises images similar to conditions and situations in Germany during the years prior to, and during, World War II.
- The work was written/published in 1940.

The poet is not the narrator.

- The persona in this case is a member of a controlling governmental agency.
- He does not react to the scene he unemotionally reports, he merely relates the history of an unknown man, a figure without true identity.

Poems of Witness / Poems of Protest

This work is considered open form.

- It does not contain a steady rhythm or standard meter.
- However, the lines do rhyme— albeit the full poem lacks a formal rhyme scheme.

Use of Rhyme

A	be	G	day
B	complaint	G	way
A	agree	H	insured
B	saint	H	cured
A	community	I	declare
C	retired	J	plan
C	fired	J	man
D	inc	I	Frigidaire
E	views	K	content
E	dues	I	year
F	sound	K	went
F	found	L	population
D	drink	L	generation
		L	education
		M	absurd
		M	heard

Poems of Witness / Poems of Protest

Comparisons of Meter

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

shall *I* / comp*are* / thee *to* / a *sum* / mer's *day*

- perfect iambic pentameter
-

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be

One against whom there was no official complaint

he *was* / found *by* / the bur *eau* / of *sta* / tis *tics* / to *be*

- awkward iambic rhythm, merged with a three count, back to iambs

Poems of Witness / Poems of Protest

The awkward nature of the **opening line** serves a major purpose in this work.

- the **lack** of traditional, recognizable patterns reflects the awkward, confusing notion of the poem's main theme which discusses a character's lack of identity under a controlling, oppressive government

Likewise, the opening **epigraph** reads:

(To JS/07/M/378
This Marble Monument
Is Erected by the State)

- Typically an epigraph offers further insight, or offers in depth commentary to a literary work.
- In the next unit we will bump into another use of this device when we read T. S. Eliot's long poem: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."



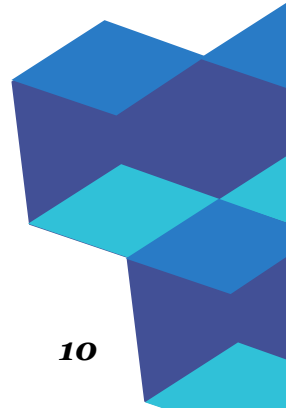
Poems of Witness / Poems of Protest

Strategic Setting > Theme

The more one reads the poem, the more the setting slowly reveals more details:

- an over-controlling government, simply referred to as the State in the epigraph
- as a result a theme emerges, discussing how an over-abundant governmental bureaucracy cripples and hinders individualism
- the Unknown Citizen is not intended to own a full identity.

The lack of name, date, or recognizable geography adds a sense of unsettling and **strategic** distance between the reader and the poem.



Poems of Witness / Poems of Protest

Overall Message

The work is similar to the themes expressed in *1984* by George Orwell or *Brave New World* by Aldos Huxley who depict situations of dystopian futures for a fractured society.

- Characters in these novels are depicted as dehumanized individuals.
- Notice every act by the unknown citizen is tracked and recorded.
- He is followed where ever he goes.

Additional Satire — in the form of Bitter Sarcasm exists also

W. H. Auden is generating a poetic satire as a means of projecting his warning about government control over the individual.

- Notice the proper nouns that run throughout the poem:

Bureau of Statistics
Greater Community
War
Fudge Motors, Inc.
Union
Social Psychology
The Press

Health-Card
Producers Research
High-Grade Living
Installment Plan
Eugenist *

* *The last term is a person who is in control of improving the human population through genetic control, government supervision of marriages and proper breeding.*