

Lesson Name : 36

Lesson Title : In Westminster Abbey and Devonshire Street W1

Course Name : English 2 Part 2 [Honors]

Task Id : 54841260

Course Id : 15020



Essential Instruction

Read John Betjeman's "In Westminster Abbey" and "Devonshire Street W1." If you wish to read "In Westminster Abbey" online, click [here](#). If you wish to read "Devonshire Street W1" online, click [here](#).

It is a good idea to use your digital notebook to keep notes on new vocabulary and definitions that you may need to reference later.

John Betjeman was born in 1906 to an upper-middle-class family and was raised in northern London. An interesting fact you might note is that during World War I his family changed their name from "Betjemann" to "Betjeman" to appear less Germanic, though the pronunciation of "Betjeman" would still have a Germanic sound to it. Betjeman was educated and attended the University of Oxford for a time studying at the School of English Language and Literature. You can see religious influence in much of his poetry.

A poet can express his or her thoughts and emotions in many ways: through tone, rhythm, metaphors, symbolism, images, characters—in just about any way he or she wishes. Let's examine how a poet can express himself by analyzing two of John Betjeman's poems: "In Westminster Abbey" and "Devonshire Street W1." These poems are excellent examples of how a poet can use **characters** and **images** in particular.



"In Westminster Abbey"

In "Westminster Abbey," a woman has come to Westminster Abbey and is offering a prayer to God. We can tell that there is a war because she prays for her own safety and that of others, but something's not quite right about the woman's prayer.

The woman prays for people to be bombed. She tells God that it's okay if he makes a mistake and must also bomb the women in Germany, but then she begs not to be bombed. She asks God to spare people's lives, but particularly "the whites." She also promises God that she will attend services, but only if she has the time. She promises to send white flowers to "the cowards," who we can guess are soldiers who were sent home injured. Finally, she must leave the Abbey and her prayer because she has a lunch date. What do you think of this woman? Is she sincere in her prayer? Does it seem like she has a truly deep concern for the individuals involved in the war? It doesn't seem so, does it?

From what you know of Betjeman's life growing up, what do you suppose influenced the poem "In Westminster Abbey"? His experience living in Britain during World War I was certainly an influence, and since the poem was published in 1940, the start of World War II could also have been an influence. His economic class was perhaps another influence and his religion yet another.

Given that this woman is likely meant to be the opposite of Betjeman (in her light treatment of the war and her almost disrespectful speech to God) and that Betjeman probably knew people like this woman at some point growing up, we can determine that this woman was meant to represent people Betjeman thought little of. By showing us this woman's flaws through her words, Betjeman is showing us his disregard for people such as this woman. Here, he is showing us this woman and laughing at her.

“Devonshire Street W1”

“Devonshire Street W1” uses highly effective images to tell its story. This enables the reader to “see” what the characters in the poem see, almost as if the reader really is one of the characters. As you read the poem, put yourself in the characters' place. Use the images Betjeman gives you to see what the characters see. The first stanza is rich in **imagery**:

The heavy mahogany door with its wrought-iron screen
Shuts. And the sound is rich, sympathetic, discreet.
The sun still shines on this eighteenth-century scene
With Edwardian faience adornment – Devonshire Street.

Can you feel the heaviness of the door as it closes? Can you picture the quaint London street where the building sits? This is what **imagery** does for a poem – it brings it alive so that readers can feel like they are right there.

The third stanza gives strong hints to the meaning of the poem:

No hope. And the iron knob of this palisade
So cold to the touch, is luckier now than he
“Oh merciless, hurrying Londoners! Why was I made
For the long and painful deathbed coming to me?”

The words “no hope” and “deathbed” tell us that the building is probably a doctor's office, and that the woman has just gotten unexpected and terrible news about the man's health. The feeling of this poem is much different than that of “In Westminster Abbey,” which poked fun at the praying woman. The **imagery** in this poem shows us hopelessness, and makes the tone of the poem serious.



[Open Video in New Tab](#)



Vocabulary

Understanding the words used in poems can aid your understanding of the poems themselves. Here are some words from John Betjeman's "In Westminster Abbey" and "Devonshire Street W1":

1. **vox humana** – noun – name for the organ stops that aim to imitate the human voice and produce a thinnish tone.
2. **bask** – verb – to relax in a pleasant warmth or atmosphere
3. **gracious** – adj. – of a merciful or compassionate nature
4. **sympathetic** – adj. – comprehending the needs, feelings, problems, and views of others.
5. **faience** – noun – earthenware decorated with colorful opaque glazes.
6. **palisade** – noun – any of a number of pales or stakes pointed at the top and set firmly in the ground in a close row with others to form a fence.