

# In Westminster Abbey and Devonshire Street W1 and Vocabulary

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John Betjeman (1906-84) was a Poet Laureate of England (1972-84). It is a very prestigious post that has been held by such noted literary figures as William Wordsworth, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Ted Hughes. Betjeman's poetry was not dramatic but was understated and had subtle touches. He was said to represent the dry wit and common touch of the ordinary Englishman.



Sir John Betjeman's Home

## Did You Know...?

At the University of Oxford, one of Betjeman's teachers was the writer C.S. Lewis, then a young tutor. The two never got along and Betjeman left Oxford without a degree. Betjeman later became a travel writer, a film and architecture critic, and a television broadcaster, as well as a poet.

## *In Westminster Abbey*

Westminster Abbey is a famous landmark in London. It is one of the oldest and most venerable churches in England. Religious services have been conducted there continuously for over 600 years. The coronation ceremony of all British monarchs has been held at Westminster Abbey 1066 C.E., as also the burial of many. It is a point of honor for noted literary figures to be buried there. The Abbey maintains a holy, hushed silence for the most part, even though it is visited by scores of tourists every day.

In the 1940s, the British were very proud of their colonial power and claimed that the sun never set on their Empire. It was vast and stretched from Australia and India in the East through present-day Iraq in the Middle East and Kenya in Africa to Jamaica in the West Indies and British Guyana in South America. However, soon after World War II ended, in 1947 the Empire started to disintegrate when India gained independence.

Set in the period of World War II, this poem is apparently a prayer said by a lady at Westminster Abbey for the well-being of her country, Britain. As we said in the introduction to this unit, many details of a character can be known from her background. The first indication of the lady's high position in society is that she calls herself a 'lady' rather than a 'woman'. Secondly, she has gained access to the pews at Westminster Abbey, which is not usually open to the public. Further, she lives in Cadogan Square, an exclusive neighborhood for rich people. Her references to owning shares and shopping at expensive shops such as Boots indicate her wealth while the luncheon date is a sign that she is a lady of leisure who does not have to work for a living.

Her sense of superiority, reflecting the British sensibility of her time, is established very early in the poem when she presumes to forgive God for any mistakes He might make! Nor does she hesitate to equate Britain with God's Kingdom, making them one and the same. She is obviously selfish, concerned about her own well-being and safety above all others. Her self-centeredness prompts her to appreciate the class distinction that characterizes British society and supports her luxurious lifestyle. She is shallow and is willing to participate only in the most superficial of wartime efforts. Her colossal vanity is revealed in her belief that her selfish prayer represents a satisfactory dialogue with God.

When you study Irony, you may want to re-visit this poem to understand what the poet is actually saying through the character of this lady. Does he really approve of her sentiments? What is his comment on society?

### *Devonshire Street W1*

Situated in the heart of London, Devonshire Street, like Harley Street, is famous for its medical practitioners who were reputed to cater mostly to wealthy private patients. As described in this poem, the buildings in this upmarket area have lasted more than a hundred years and are decorated with faience, antique tin-glazed pottery. The doctor's office is stately and well-decorated with mahogany and wrought-iron. It is a bright beautiful day with a blue sky, unusual in England, which is famous for its steady drizzle. All around people are hurrying about their business; for them life goes on.

The couple has just come from a visit to the doctor who has pronounced the man terminally ill and due to die in a short time. Contrast the description of the setting with the despair the man feels at this news.

There are only two pieces of dialogue in this poem. One is an **internal** utterance, a thought, while the other is an **expressed** utterance, a spoken dialogue. The character of the man is revealed by what he thinks but does not say. He is despairing but stoic, unwilling to give voice to his despair. He is the epitome of the strong, silent man who takes all bad news with an appearance of calm, even if he is inwardly wretched.

The woman is the only one the poet describes directly and the adjectives he uses, *loving* and *silly*, imply affection but not sensitivity. In keeping with that description, the comment she makes, the only speech in the poem, is banal and commonplace. She disregards the enormity of the news and talks about traveling cheaply by tube (the underground train system in London) and bus. She does not seem to be aware either of her husband's imminent death or of his anguish.

Consider this: The man and the woman in this poem have no names, thus implying the universality of life, death and misery.

### *Vocabulary*

Poetry, by its very brevity, catches the essence of a feeling, a mood in a few words. As you read these two poems, pay very close attention to the placement of words. For instance, in *Devonshire Street W1*, the phrase *No hope* begins both a sentence and a verse, emphasizing the despair of the man. *Shuts* in Line 2 refers to the screen in Line 1 but it also echoes the idea of the door of life shutting the man out. Note other words that have a negative connotation and their placements in the lines of the poem.

