

## Aspects of comedy: Text overview – Betjeman selection

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This resource gives you an explanation of some of the ways this text can be considered in relation to the genre of comedy. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning in that it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of comedy. There are some brief comments on how some elements of the genre can be linked to the text, although teachers and students may well think of other relevant ideas. Not all aspects of the genre occur in the Betjeman selection and individual poems may only contain one or two aspects. This is reflected in the commentary. We hope this will provide a useful starting point and a springboard for thinking about the text in more detail. It is important to note that the Betjeman poetry selection is an examination set text for AS students only, although Betjeman can be studied by A-level students for the NEA.

### Overview

Betjeman's poems make an interesting contribution to the comedic genre, not least of all because of their slightly off centre take on comedy. Many of the poems are comical snapshots of Britain and its people from the 1930s to the 1960s and they present a vision of England that has now passed though some of its types are still part of English culture. The anchoring in time can be seen in the specific details that Betjeman uses: Ford Cortinas, flannel slacks, corporation tram cars, Hillman Minxes and luncheon dates. Betjeman creates a variety of voices in his poems and at times the voices are satirical, at times playful and self-deprecating, at times slightly serious and sad. In the main, his poems are true to the comedic genre in that they are not about kings and nobles who are the heroes of tragedy, but recognisable types that might be seen in society. Specific places are sometimes the target of Betjeman's mockery, though of course those places reflect the people who live there. There are 18 poems for students to study in this selection. It is important that all poems are studied since it is together that they will offer a comprehensive understanding of the variety of ways Betjeman handles the genre. An extract from any poem can be chosen for the AS poetry question so all poems need to have been analysed during the course in terms of the genre. Some poems contain more than one aspect of comedy, some focus only on one. Some aspects that can be found include courtship and sexual relationships, representations of gender, bawdy humour and sexual innuendo, comedy as a challenge to the status quo, comic deflation of pomposity and manners, the mockery of the privileged classes, green

world ideas, satire, farce and nonsense, the comedic aspect of ritual, religion and festivity, allegory and upbeat resolutions.

## Mockery of Betjeman's contemporary world

Betjeman lived and wrote during changing times and his poetry reflects a sceptical and critical view of that change. He chooses satirical voices to debunk modern life, especially the world of advertising and commercialism. He mistrusts progress and mocks what he sees as the vandalism of the past by those whose sole interest is in making money. His loathing of greed is evident in *Advertising Pays* and *Executive*. *Advertising Pays* is a comedy of manners of sorts told through the voice of an advertising man. In it Betjeman attacks the deceit of advertisers, their wide ranging powers and changing faces. Betjeman uses comic hyperbole to mock the unscrupulous attitudes of advertisers who will say anything to make a quick buck ('six tons of government glue' are sold 'in tins as Irish stew') In *Executive* Betjeman laughs at the smart young business man and his double identity. The poem's speaker is the executive whose aim seems to be to acquire status symbols (the scarlet Aston-Martin and a speed-boat) and to promote modern living and attitudes: 'The modern style' he tells his assumed listener 'has really come to stay'. *Village Inn* offers a comic swipe at commercialism and modernity with the brewer's P.R.O. the particular butt of Betjeman's satire. The poet's speaker mourns the loss of the traditional Georgian inn but is told by the glib voice of the P.R.O. that it has been improved and sanitised with walls that are 'red and smart', with steel stools and bars lined with 'washable material'. In *Christmas* Betjeman satirises the superficiality of the modern world where Christmas decorations have supplanted spiritual understanding of the religious festival. Although the poem contains joyful voices (those who bedeck the church altars with holly and yew and those who hang bunting in the red Town Hall) those voices are undercut with irony as Betjeman laughs at the gifts such people buy - the 'tissued fripperies', the 'sweet and silly Christmas things', the 'inexpensive scent' and the 'hideous tie'.

## Laughing at human foibles, manners and types

In many poems Betjeman ridicules human behaviour, often through his creation of absurd voices. His attacks in some poems are gently mocking as opposed to scathing - perhaps because he was fascinated and slightly intoxicated by the very aspects of behaviour that he attacked. This is especially true of his representations of English civility, the manners of the privileged classes and of snobbery as seen in *Upper Lambourne* and *Hunter Trials*. In both poems he mocks the horse set. In *Upper Lambourne* he uses the repetition of 'leathery', a word used to characterise and satirise the place dominated by horse racing, and in *Hunter Trials* he uses an array of 'frightfully' affected female voices to commentate on the trials ('It's awfully bad luck on Diana' and 'I say, Mummy, there's Mrs Geyser'). In *Westminster Abbey* Betjeman uses a dramatic monologue in a more savage attack on upper class snobbery. The female speaker is xenophobic and a hypocrite who arrogantly thinks she can negotiate

with God in prayer because she assumes he shares her prejudices: 'Keep our Empire undismembered'. In some poems, Betjeman seems to be laughing at his own follies. In *A Subaltern's Love Song* and *The Licorice Fields at Pontefract* he chooses a thinly disguised self deprecating voice which is close to how Betjeman represented himself in interviews, broadcasting and in his journalistic career. In both poems, though in different ways, he mocks the infatuation of men who are in love - or in lust (In *The Licorice Fields at Pontefract* the speaker is so enslaved by his 'red-haired robber chief' that he cannot speak 'for love' and in *A Subaltern's Love Song* the speaker is obsessed by the athletic Miss J. Hunter Dunn to whom he subordinates himself - he is her metaphorical subaltern and in a slightly masochistic way he desires to be overwhelmed by her). In *Late Flowering Lust* Betjeman creates an older male persona to mock the sexual desire of the aging man. Interestingly this poem was written before Betjeman was fifty, but in it he seems to imagine how he might feel when he is skeletal and without the joys he had when he 'was young in sin'.

## Love, courtship and marriage, sexuality, lust and the bawdy

Love, courtship and marriage are central aspects of the comedic genre and they figure significantly in Betjeman's poetry though his poems do not specifically celebrate marriage or end in happy unions. The closest he gets to marriage as a happy outcome in this selection is in *A Subaltern's Love Song*. Here he documents (in a consistently upbeat tone) an amorous courtship between the speaker and the graceful tennis playing Joan Hunter Dunn. Given his own Orsino-like devotion to the real life Joan Hunter Dunn (the inspiration for the comic heroine), it is likely that this poem is partly autobiographical. However, the comedic ending in which, after a seemingly prolonged late night sexual encounter in his Hillman with Miss Hunter Dunn, he ends up engaged, seems more like an erotic fantasy since in real life this did not happen. The comedic aspects of love and courtship though are motivating forces in the narrative as they similarly are in *The Licorice Fields at Pontefract*. In *The Licorice Fields at Pontefract* the speaker is a young lover (a comic hero) who is smitten with the red hair and sultry lips of his love who leaves him 'winded, wilting [and] weak' as she holds him in her strong and bare brown arms. There is comedy in the way the speakers' infatuation is presented in both of these poems yet at the same time there is an innocent appreciation of the beauty of women and the thrill of desire.

A slightly different kind of infatuation is the subject of *Lenten Thoughts of a High Anglican*, another poem which Betjeman said represents an autobiographical experience. Here the speaker is in church salivating over the appearance of a woman he imagines must be some man's 'mistress'. (The comedic aspect clearly is forbidden love). In calling her a mistress, Betjeman could be subverting the traditional comedic journey of love to marriage as here there are layers of extramarital desire, first that of the assumed lover of the woman as she 'has more of a cared-for air/Than many a legal wife' and also of the speaker who sees the woman as sexually alluring himself with the 'droop of her lips', the

nonchalant way she wears her clothes and her elegant movements. The joy at sexual excitement is an escape from routine and from the respectability of marriage.

In *Senex* and *Late flowering Lust* Betjeman's focus is on the feelings and behaviour of old men who still have stirrings of desire and Betjeman comicalises those feelings in a similar way to the way Chaucer laughs at January in *The Merchant's Tale*. In *Senex* Betjeman makes use of exaggeration in the story of an old man on his tricycle who sees the tennis-playing biking girls, the wholly to his liking girls whom he can only enjoy voyeuristically. Sex and lust are key features of Betjeman's comedic vision. From its early roots the comic genre has incorporated bawdy jokes, sexual innuendo and ribald behaviour. In *Senex* Betjeman begins by bemoaning the troublesome nature of the 'flesh' which the speaker calls 'merry misery' and at the end after watching the lovely golden girls he comically says he is 'ill with lust'. In *Late Flowering Lust* lust and ribaldry are depicted in a comically macabre way. There is sexual humour in the old man's drunken philandering (he runs his fingers down his lover's dress with 'brandy-certain aim') but he is really no more than a skeleton: the mouth that opens for a kiss 'has got no tongue inside'. Here Betjeman connects with the comedic aspect of the grotesque; the imagery is comically disturbing.

## Representations of women and men, stereotypes and farce

Both men and women are represented in Betjeman's poetry in comical ways. Some of the behaviours represented are stereotypical – for example the Sloanes in *Hunter Trials*. Here the women have an unwavering belief in the value of their horsey world. They are confident in their upper-middle class culture and their given places in society. They are characterised by the names Betjeman gives both to them and their horses (Diana, Prunella, Monica for the women and Smudges, Guzzle and Margaret for their ponies). The women display an anti-intellectualism which is typical of the type and the exaggerated language Betjeman gives them confirms their superficiality ('Oh Mummy, I'm sick with disgust'). In other poems women are represented in different comedic ways. The girls in *Senex* are nubile, Emily in *Ireland with Emily* is a sacred muse representing the beauty of Ireland (and is only realised in the title), the female speaker of *In Westminster Abbey* is selfish, chauvinistic and a snob.

The representations of men serve other purposes. Men are often active in the commercial world and are ridiculed, as in *The Executive* or the P.R.O. in *The Village Inn*, for their energetic pursuit of power and position. In *The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel* the plain clothed policemen are presented as stereotypes. Betjeman gives them a typical accent and dialect to characterise them: 'Mr Woilde, we 'ave come for tew take yew'. The defiant aesthete Wilde is also comically characterised, perhaps in imitation of the way Wilde represented himself.

In this poem Betjeman captures Wilde's love of eccentricity and comic absurdity and even imitates the epigrammatic style of Wilde when the latest aesthetes to

be included in the Yellow Book are discussed: 'Approval of what is approved of/ Is as false as a well-kept vow'.

## Settings and the green world

Settings are often important in the literature of the comedic genre as backdrops to the stories that are played out on them. While this is true of some of Betjeman's poems, for example the Cadogan Hotel in *The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel* and the Aldershot tennis court in *A Subaltern's Love Song*, in some poems, the places themselves are the subject of comedy, for example Slough and Upper Lambourne. Slough is ridiculed as an urbanised place which destroys the human spirit without 'grass to graze a cow' and with 'air-conditioned, bright canteens' and Upper Lambourne is so dominated by the horse racing fraternity that the very place is subsumed by it ('Leathery limbs of Upper Lambourne').

The green world as defined by Northrop Frye is a significant comedic aspect in Betjeman's poetry. Many of the poems celebrate nature showing it as a retreat from the pressures of existence. In Betjeman's private life, the green world was epitomised by Cornwall, a place where dreams were made and wounds healed. In his poetry, he transports the essence of Cornwall into *Ireland with Emily*, *The Licorice Fields of Pontefract* and *An Edwardian Sunday, Broomhill, Sheffield*. Ireland is presented as idyllic, flooded with women and the beauties of nature: 'yews and woodbine', bogs and brambles and 'warm June weather'. A blissful paradise is evoked, a place of escape where memories are made; it is an ideal setting for love with Emily where the sea blows its song of praise: Te Deum. Broomhill is a tribute to leafy suburbia and serenity, a place of beauty where on Sundays the industrial Sheffield world of knife making and steel can be forgotten and the green world supplants the industrial city. On Sundays an Edwardian world operates, normal rules are relaxed and time is suspended. The same kind of transportation of the green world into an urban environment is seen in *The Licorice Fields of Pontefract*. Here again the setting is Sunday when the sounds of the tanneries and mills are silent and where the speaker can delight in the sweet smells of the licorice fields as he loses himself to sexual joy with his lover.

## Ritual and the calendar year, festivals and religion

In keeping with the wider comedic genre, Betjeman also uses festivals and ritual for comedic purposes. Sometimes festivals are used to create disorder and to provide a space for revelry, eccentricity and sacrilegious behaviour. For example, in *Lenten thoughts of a High Anglican*, the speaker's thoughts are not focused on Lent or what is expected of High Anglicans – simplicity, penance, discipline, sacrifice and fasting. Instead the speaker escapes the restraint and defies the parson who says that the congregation should observe the Eucharist and not look around. The speaker is sexually excited as he stares at the lovely woman with 'wide-apart grey-green eyes' who kneels to take communion; he thinks about how alluring she is, thereby upturning order and entering into the world of carnival at least imaginatively. However, the poem is ultimately more complex

than simply subverting order as at the end the speaker makes an interesting revelation. He claims that unorthodox as it may seem, his staring at the 'Mistress' gives him a metaphysical experience, in her he gets a 'hint of the Unknown God'.

In *Diary of a Church Mouse*, Betjeman uses allegory to comment on the ritual behaviour associated with human and religious festivals. Allegory is itself a comedic aspect where animals are given a voice to mock human behaviour. Here the church mouse is the narrator and he laments the meagre offerings of the Christmas, Easter and Whitsun celebrations. In contrast, harvest festivals are rich in pickings, with bread and sheaves of oats and wheat. However, the point of the poem is that human beings, like the various rodents who suddenly appear on harvest festival days, are part time attendees. For much of the calendar year, they do not go to church to worship but rather piously appear at harvest time.

## The dark edge of comedy and that which is uncomfortable/ order and disorder

Writers of comedy often focus on order and disorder. In Betjeman's stories, although order is not significantly overturned (the upper classes continue to have power and the industrial machine still turns), his mockery of those worlds creates temporary disorder, offering a challenge to the ordered world as in *Hunter Trials* and *Executive*. Disorder is also created through the slightly shocking way he presents taboo ideas, perhaps best seen in *On a Portrait of a Deaf Man*. This poem could be described as a tragi-comedy or perhaps an example of black comedy. The poem is personal and a tribute of sorts to Betjeman's late father whom he apparently revered. Using an elegiac form, Betjeman uses the five senses to portray his father who was deaf. Betjeman praises his 'kind old face', describing his smile and wisdom, remembering being taken by him on walks in the country. Yet this is no straight celebration of his father's life since Betjeman undercuts the positive impression of his father with grotesque comic images of death. He says he does not like to think of 'maggots in his eyes' or of his open mouth in which the London clay comes in. The gothic imagery in the poem is grimly funny reminding readers that comedy has a dark edge. By juxtaposing images of life and death, Betjeman suggests that life is really a waiting room for death and that ironically while his father might have been physically deaf in life, death is the final silencer. This poem is somewhat disturbing in the ambiguities that it sets up. It could be argued that the humour is a shield for the pain of dealing with death and with his loss of faith. Addressing God directly at the end of the poem the speaker says: 'You ask me to believe You and I only see decay'.

## Comic resolutions

For the most part, Betjeman's poems end joyfully, with a feel good factor, an essential aspect of comedy. It could be argued that through the upbeat tone and content of the poetry, Betjeman helps readers to come to terms with life.

Although the resolution of *On a Portrait of a Deaf Man* is an expression of doubt, that is not the case in *Lenten thoughts of a High Anglican* or *Christmas*.

Betjeman's energy in *Christmas* (another poem dealing with the calendar year) is directed at those who trivialize and usurp Christmas for human ends, but at the poem's conclusion he suggests the tremendous tale of the baby in the ox's stall is a 'single Truth': 'That God was Man in Palestine And lives today in Bread and Wine'.

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