

Executive by John Betjeman is a poem in which a character makes a strong impression on the reader. The persona is established forcefully by the content, language, sound and the genre of the poem.

The content of the poem is a self-revelation of a self-satisfied, smug young property developer with flashy material possessions and absolutely no redeeming qualities. Betjeman was an enthusiast about preserving historic buildings and architectural delights. He detested the brash, commercial, grasping property developers. "Some mild developing" makes the executive's work sound harmless, but the reader must remember Betjeman's feelings about architectural vandals.

The content of this short poem cleverly conveys an odious character. He is smug, self-satisfied, boastful and greedy. He lacks social awareness and concern for others. He is materially wealthy but completely crass and uncultured. Betjeman's portrayal may make the reader laugh or even feel pity for this shallow, self-deluded individual. Pride, lust, greed, drunkenness, sloth, anger, jealousy: he seems guilty, or potentially guilty, of every sin. The poet's Christian sympathies would be outraged by the executive's morals.

The language of the poem cleverly brings the executive to life. The repetition of personal pronouns is significant. "I", "me", and "mine" occur eighteen times in only six stanzas. The poet uses declarative statements to set the tone of the poem:

"I am a young executive..."

These statements suggest the executive's lack of concern for or interest in others. The character is almost childlike in his selfishness. His statements do not invite other persons to join in conversation. He answers all his own questions.

The executive also uses jargon to impress:

"partly a liaison man and partly P.R.O."

"essentially I integrate the current export-drive"

"basically I'm viable..."

"that's talking transport-wise"

The underlined expressions are good examples of how the commercial register of the language defines the character of the executive. This young man is also an enthusiastic name dropper. He speaks of –

"the Planning Office, the Town Clerk and the Mayor..."

– blurring out the proper nouns most indiscreetly. This is similar to his boastfulness about possessions where he reveals that he is a brand-name snob. He owns a "...Slimline briefcase..." and uses "...the firm's Cortina...", although he also has "...a scarlet Aston Martin...", not forgetting his "...speedboat which has never touched the water..."

The executive's vocabulary is extremely affected and suggests his social class pretensions. His euphemism for corrupt business practice is "savoir faire", and double-dealing behind his employer's back is "vital off-the-record work". Head waiters have to be called "maîtres d'hotel" and even a country pub becomes a "roadside hostelry".

This pretension is undercut, however, by an overdone brashness. The executive is too insensitive to hide his colloquialisms. With emphatic condescension he tells the listener that his speedboat is:

"...fibre-glass, of course."

He cannot hide his enthusiasm for his sports car:

“...does she go? She flies!”

The sexist language sums up his incurable vulgarity. His utter disrespect for others appears again in the slang reference to –

“...a bird I used to know...”

– and also in his off-hand dismissal of

“...some preservationist...”

who is obviously beneath his notice and beneath his contempt.

The sounds of the poem sum up the executive's personality perfectly. The six stanzas of paired rhyming couplets create a bouncy rhythm which reflects the speaker's outlook. He is riding roughshod over any obstacles, human or architectural. He is as unstoppable as his conversation, into which the other character dare not intrude. The attentive listener may note too the rhyme in the first couplet which serves to establish the executive's Essex accent.

“...cuffs than mine are cleaner.

“...the firm's Cortina.”

Betjeman is hinting clearly at the true social origins of this upwardly mobile individual.

The genre of this poem, dramatic monologue, where the reader enjoys the direct self-explanation of a persona, is ideal for creating a memorable character. Betjeman has adopted a voice and personality to make a moral point by the use of dramatic irony. The persona is unaware that he condemns himself out of his own mouth. A variety of dramatic devices reinforce the reader's idea of the executive. The voice and accent are established by the first couplet's rhyme. The executive props, the briefcase, business shirt, and 'rep-mobile' define him entirely. The setting – a roadside pub's lounge-bar – is ideal for the executive's boastful and indiscreet dialogue with a virtual stranger.

All of these features, the content, language, sounds, and choice of genre make a powerful impression of an executive unaware of his own insecurity, immaturity and inadequacy. If there is no effective use of imagery in the poem, it is simply that the executive toys, the briefcase, car and speedboat, are to act as symbols and represent the pointless and obscene materialism of this persona. This is an utterly memorable poem.