

In Westminster Abbey by John Betjeman

(Content/Sound/Language/Imagery/Genre)

Content

Prayer of a lady who takes refuge in Westminster Abbey during early months of World War II. It appears she is seeking spiritual solace, but the poem ends by revealing that she is only killing time until she can keep a luncheon date. Her 'prayer' reveals her social class arrogance, her privileged snobbery, her habitual bossiness, her unthinking patriotism, her unwitting bigotry, her open racism, her stupidity and her selfishness.

This short poem cleverly contrasts the speaker's self-image and the reader's picture of her. The humour derives from the opposition of the hymn-like structure and the blatant prejudice and selfishness expressed.

Sound

Hymn-like verse structure and Biblical language.

Structure resembles "Guide me, Oh Thou Great Jehovah..." and so in terms of rhyme and rhythm this dramatic monologue may be said to parody a famous holy song.

Rhyme scheme is ABCBDD.

Rhythm is well-used metre called spondee (DUM DEE). Basic line has four feet. Technically called tetrameter.

The poet mimics the spondaic tetrameter of a standard Victorian hymn.

The lady is not a "pilgrim". Nor is she "weak". Nor is she in a "barren land". Yet this spiritual message underscores her words and emphasises their selfishness and stupidity.

Rhyme

"What a treat to hear Thy Word

Have so often been interr'd."

The distinctive rhyme defines the woman's accent. She uses Received Pronunciation, the verbal badge of Britain's ruling class.

Alliteration

"...beauteous...
Bask beneath the Abbey bells..."

"Listen to a lady's cry..."

- Creates monotonous pulse, like the deathly tempo of ill-sung Victorian hymns.

Language

- Repetition of possessive personal pronouns

“our Empire”

“our Forces”

“our Nation”

“our lads”

- patriotism which assumes God is English!

- Commands (Imperative Verbs)

“Let me...”

“Listen to...”

“Think of...”

“Reserve for me...”

“Don't let anyone...”

“Keep our Empire...”

- reveal imperious nature of woman used to speaking to servants.

- Use of Biblical language

“beauteous fields of Eden”

“Gracious Lord”

“Thy Hand”

“Lord”

- humorous; worldly wishes in divine diction

- Vocabulary of the Upper Class

“...where the bones of leading statesmen...”

“...one eighty-nine Cadogan Square...”

“...I have a luncheon date...”

“...do not let my shares go down...”

- Patronising Diction

“...gallant blacks from far Jamaica...”

“Protect them Lord in all their fights.”

Euro-centric, imperialist view of other races.

- Bathos

“Gracious Lord, oh bomb the Germans...”

“Democracy and proper drains...”

This use of anti-climax is humorous and makes us view the woman as somewhat stupid. This impression is confirmed when she tells God her address. (He is omniscient!)

Imagery

Metaphor

Only one piece of clear figurative language - the persona is so unpoetic and blinkered.

"...wash the Steps around Thy Throne
In the Eternal Safety Zone."

is a metaphor, but this low-brow upper-class lady appears to understand the sanctuary of the altar in a literal sense!

Symbolism:

lady's glove - She does not work for a living.
She does not get her hands dirty.

white feathers - She projects her cowardice onto men who are not in uniform and enjoys public humiliation of these men.

Both indicate her privileged status.

Genre - dramatic monologue

direct self-explanation by persona

poet adopts voice and personality to make moral point by use of dramatic irony

persona unaware she condemns herself out of her own mouth

dramatic effects and devices

voice/accnt created by rhyme in last stanza - suggesting Received Pronunciation of the ruling class

props to establish persona - summer gloves - white feathers

setting - Westminster Abbey "parish church of the Empire" - prayer (during morning service?) - wartime conditions - poem published 1940

dramatic irony - reader aware of more than speaker - understands two levels of meaning - superficial message the lady conveys and the deep truth of her selfish, patronising bigotry