

## English Worksheet – Level 04

# “..by any other name”

Sir John Betjeman was born in London in 1906; he died in 1984. He wrote many poems about places, largely about places in and around the city of his birth. He particularly wrote poems that celebrated what he considered good and heavily criticised, and satirised, developments that he thought bad. In this poem, written in 1954, he allows place names to convey meaning because of the associations that his readers would make. Devonshire Street was (and is) a London street where a lot of medical specialists congregated, Kensington a quite well-off West London inner suburb, Piccadilly a main transport hub in the centre of London and “the tube” the London underground railway. W.1 (West One) is the post code.

### Devonshire Street W.1

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 adornments – Devonshire Street.

No hope. And the X-ray photographs under his arm  
Confirm the message. His wife stands timidly by.  
The opposite brick-built looks lofty and calm  
Its chimneys steady against a mackerel sky.

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

She puts her fingers in his as, loving and silly,  
At long-past Kensington dances she used to do  
“It’s cheaper to take the tube to Piccadilly  
And then we can catch a nineteen or a twenty-two.”

## QUESTIONS

1. What is faience?
2. It is an "eighteenth-century scene/With Edwardian faience adornments" and "The opposite brick-built looks lofty and calm" – how does the poet use description of place to contrast with the mood and situation of the man?
3. What is the effect of the poet including three specific place names in the poem?
4. What does the wife mean by "we can catch a nineteen or a twenty-two"?
5. "Oh merciless, hurrying Londoners!" – does the reference to specific place (these are "Londoners" and not from anywhere else) seem just descriptive, or is the poet making a point about the character of the people?"
6. The poem is in four, four line stanzas each with an A/B rhyming pattern – what is this form of poem called?

## ASSIGNMENT

Betjeman's poem relies on place: he both describes place (the buildings, the door, the palisade) and names places. He knows that the names will have meaning for Londoners like himself.

Describe a piece of writing – it can be a story, a poem, a piece of journalism, or writing that you have experienced as performance (film, television) – that evokes place in a way that affects you. What is the effect? Is it to make you want to visit the place? To make you want to avoid the place at all costs?

The place can be real or imagined (Middle Earth, The Magic Faraway Tree) – if it is an imagined place, what made it seem real to you? It CANNOT be a place that you have visited. The challenge is to understand how a writer has made you feel that you know a place to which you have never been!