

Slough by sir john betjeman essay



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Sir John Betjeman's poem, *Slough*, opens with a wonderful, dramatic stanza. There is huge tension between the ideas of cows grazing and the idea of death. Even in the opening line there is conflict friendly bombs' is a contradiction in terms, as bombs are almost never thought of as friendly, and Betjeman's use of this defines what a bad place. Another tool Betjeman employs is rhythm; the stanza is at a steady, predefined pace until the last line where the rhythm is broken with the word Death', which gives a powerful image of *Slough*. In the second stanza, Betjeman cleverly compares people's minds' and breath' to tinned products, giving everything a feeling of sanitised dullness, without fresh air. He also uses the form here, listing the everyday tinned items and then adding tinned minds, tinned breath' on a new line.

The third stanza powerfully repeats itself in the phrase mess up the mess'. It also has an elegant form. In the fourth stanza, Betjeman repeats always' in the second line which implies the fact that it is this man's way of life. He also uses this man with double chin' as a way of expressing all the people who have this attitude and life, and the image of washing with women's tears is extremely effective. Every line in the next stanza opens with And', which makes it seem rather like a list, a list of the poet's demands. Indeed the entire stanza is simply stating things which he demands be done to this man. The poem changes tack after this: it speaks of sparing clerks. There is tension simply in using the description bald young'. The rhythm again breaks at the harsh phrase They've tasted Hell'. The next two stanzas continue the description of these bald young clerks'.

There is a comparison between birdsong' and the radio', two things which would generally be contrasted. In the last two lines Betjeman introduces a wonderful tranquil image of looking up and seeing the stars, but then dispels it with the disgusting line 'But belch instead'. The ninth stanza is a bit like a throwback to the 'canned breath' it speaks of chemicals and synthetic things. It discusses 'peroxide hair' and painting nails, poking fun at them. The final stanza concludes the poem. The opening line is the same as the opening line of the first verse and it reminds us of the aims of this whole poem and of the subject, Slough. It is aiming at finally bringing some positive light into the poem by speaking of regeneration of some form and starting afresh. It ends with 'The earth exhales' which in one line releases the tensions which have built up during the poem.