

Harvest Hymn

- *John Betjeman*

*List the things that we get from Nature. What do we give in return?
What is likely to happen if there is no land to cultivate in the future? Discuss*

We spray the fields and scatter
The poison on the ground
So that no wicked wild flowers
Upon our farm be found.
We like whatever helps us
To line our purse with pence;
The twenty-four-hour broiler house
And neat electric fence.

All concrete sheds around us
And Jaguars in the yard,
The telly lounge and deep-freeze
Are ours from working hard.

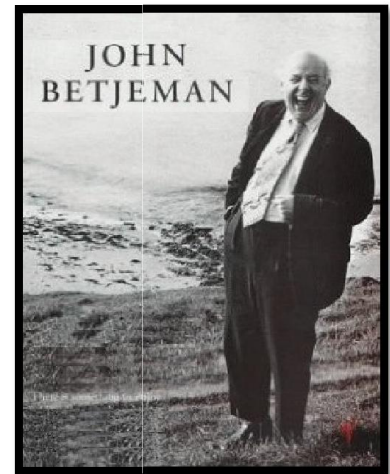
We fire the fields for harvest,
The hedges swell the flame,
The oak trees and the cottages
From which our fathers came.
We give no compensation,
The earth is ours today,
And if we lose on arable,
The bungalows will pay.

GLOSSARY:

- Harvest (*n*) : the process of gathering mature crops from the fields
- Hymn (*n*) : a type of song, usually religious,
written for the purpose of praise or prayer
- Harvest Hymn (*Explanation*) : The harvest season is a time for celebration and thanksgiving to God for the bountiful crops. But there is bitter irony in the title of this poem. Instead of worshipping Nature, man is desecrating and exploiting her.
- The poison (*n*) : (here) toxic and hazardous substances used by man that pollute the land, these could be pesticides or factory washes.
- To line our purse (*n*) : to fill our purse, to make a profit
- Pence (*n*) : plural of penny, a small unit of currency used in several English speaking countries
- Broiler house (*n*) : a building where broiler chickens are reared on a large scale
- Electric fence (*n*) : an electrically charged wire fence which gives a warning shock when touched (*used in agricultural areas to prevent wild animals from destroying crops and to restrain domestic animals from straying*)
- Telly (*n*) : colloquial word for television
- Lounge (*n*) : a big room, especially in a hotel or airport, with seating where people can wait
- Concrete sheds (*n*) : small structures built of sheds
- Jaguar (*n*) : a British luxury car
- Fire the fields (*Explanation*) : destroy land 'for harvest'. Ironically today, our notion of harvesting is to destroy arable land and build houses on it. We burn the entire field, including the hedges, and build concrete structures for commercial gain.
- Hedges (*n*) : rows of closely planted shrubs
- Swell the flame (*v*) : increase the intensity of the fire
- Arable (*adj*) : suitable for cultivation, fertile

ABOUT THE POET:

John Betjeman (1906-1984) was an English poet and writer, who became Poet Laureate in 1972. Most of his poems are humorous and satirical. His famous works are *Mount Zion* (1932), *Continual Dew* (1937), *Old Lights For New Chancels* (1940), *New Bats In Old belfries* (1945), *Poems In The Porch* (1954), *Summoned By Bells* (1960), *High and Low* (1966) and *A Nip In The Air* (1974).



ABOUT THE POEM:

The poem 'Harvest Hymn' is a parody of the following song is sung during harvest time in the English countryside:

*We plough the fields and scatter
The good seed on the land,
But it is fed and watered
By God's almighty hand:
He sends the snow in winter,
The warmth to swell the grain,
The breezes and the sunshine,
And soft, refreshing rain.*

The poem speaks of man's exploitation of Nature and its resources. Man takes Nature for granted and uses it for his own ends. He keeps using resources from Nature without giving back anything in return. The poem depicts the changing countryside. We hardly see fields and farm houses any more. Instead, concrete structures are coming up on every available piece of land.

The poem begins with the way man abuses Nature. He sprays the land with toxic and hazardous substances and pollutes it. All his activities are directed towards his own selfish ends – to live in the comfort of a warm house with a television in his lounge, a refrigerator in his kitchen and a car in his yard. He does not feel any sentimental attachment towards the land that has been so lovingly passed down the generations. Instead he views the land as a commodity from which he can make quick profits. He does not feel any remorse as he burns down fertile fields and builds concrete structures which make him rich. Thus, man takes everything from Nature but gives nothing in return.

UNDERSTANDING THE POEM:

1. What does 'poison' refer to in line 2?
2. Why are the flowers 'wicked'?
3. What are the things that we like to have?
4. What are the things that we have inherited from our fore-fathers?
5. What are the things that man has given back to Nature?

ADDITIONAL READING:

You may like to read the following poem on the same theme.

Nature's Final Destruction by Kiari 300 ([www. quizilla.com](http://www.quizilla.com))

As we humans grow old and nature grows new
We humans polluted it, haven't you?
We tried not to, we just can't resist
Everything we try it fails in a mist
The beaches the grass, it'll turn to dust
We could act now, we will, we must
The beautiful trees, the nice fresh air
With nature's beauty, we just don't care
Even though we need it to survive
We can't stop it even if we tried
Because some people like to make big plans
When things go wrong, it's all in our hands.