

Christine Evans

'The Fisherman'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Christine Evans writes out of the small rural community of Aberdaron, situated on the tip of the largely Welsh-speaking Pen Llŷn (the Llŷn Peninsula), which bends westwards into the Irish Sea from the north-western coastline of Gwynedd. Yorkshire-born, Evans moved to the area in 1967 as a newly-qualified English teacher when she was appointed to a post in a school in Pwllheli (her father’s birthplace). She went on to marry into a local family. Now retired, she habitually spends six months of each year on Bardsey Island (in Welsh, *Ynys Enlli*), which lies in the Irish sea, just off the peninsula’s southwestern coastline. The livelihood of her husband and son – fishermen and farmers, like so many of their local community – continues to depend on the coastal environment which has supported their family for generations.

A sensitive observer of the cultural (and economic) as well as environmental ‘ecology’ of her surroundings, and the daily give-and-take which living in this remote locality demands of its inhabitants, Evans’s poems frequently return to the delicate balance between the human and the natural – viewed through scientific, historical, cultural and psychological lenses – which the rhythms of her own family’s life and history, spanning coast and island, lay bare.

Though fluent in Welsh, Evans tends to write in English: the power of language both to erect and erode barriers between and among people of various backgrounds and experiences, whatever their situation or occupation, is one of the most insistent concerns of her oeuvre. Another lasting though more discreet preoccupation is the role of creativity and the arts, represented by writing and occasionally poetry, in a society which tends to value doing over thinking, the mechanical over the imaginative, the economically productive over the spiritually stimulating or psychologically soothing. In an interview, Evans has remarked: ‘I live and write in an environment that is uneasy with artistic expression. I’m part of a community of very practical people who don’t always see the need for it’.¹

(1) Christine Evans, in Alice Entwistle, *In Her Own Voice: Women Talking Poetry and Wales* (Bridgend: Seren, 2014), p. 85.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

Despite being advised against writing by R.S. Thomas, a neighbour and friend of her father-in-law, Christine Evans has been publishing poetry since the early eighties; her poems have appeared in a range of national and international magazines and journals, and have been anthologized in *The Bright Field* (ed. Meic Stephens, Carcanet, 1991), *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (ed. Dannie Abse, Seren, 1997) and *Welsh Women's Poetry* (eds. Catherine Brennan and Katie Gramich, Honno, 2003) among other major Wales-centred anthologies. The seven poetry collections she has published to date (an eighth is in preparation) include a *Selected Poems* (2003); in addition, the lavishly illustrated study *Bardsey* appeared with Gwasg Gomer in 2008.

Interviews with Evans have appeared in a number of publications over the years; perhaps the most comprehensive is included in *In Her Own Voice: Women Talking Poetry and Wales*, by Alice Entwistle (Seren 2014). Treatments of her poetry are found in, among other places, *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women re-writing Contemporary Wales*, also by Alice Entwistle (University of Wales Press, 2013) and *Welsh Environments in Contemporary Poetry* by Matthew Jarvis (University of Wales Press, 2008).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-3.

The three-line stanza which opens 'The Fisherman' begins with a forcefully self-contained assertion, **'Land speaks to him'** (line 1). As ever, a statement which goes unexplained can be read in more than one way; these bold words might seem as likely to disturb as console. After all the speaking voice of the personified proper-sounding noun **'Land'** (free of any confining definite article) is powerful enough to reach the eponymous fisherman across some distance **'Out beyond the islands'** (line 2). The words which conclude this first dramatic stanza are likewise confidently, even imperiously, possessive: **'You belong to me.'** (line 3). If we can imagine feeling the pull of the land, we might as easily sense something menacing in the sense of entitlement which seems to load it.

Lines 4-11.

The poem's richly ambivalent opening reverberates through the text's unpicking of a conflict which its eponymous subject seems unable to escape, poised as he is – professionally and emotionally, we learn – between the twin but opposing attractions of land and sea. The first of the two longer central stanzas which provide the formal backbone of the poem homes in on a tension apparently only complicated by aging: **'As he grows older, its beckoning / Becomes insistent'** (lines 4-5). As if in protective or defensive response to the land's **'beckoning'** demands, the speaker notes the lightness with which the fisherman inhabits his terrestrial context, his steps literally dissolving in an environment which therefore seems actually to swallow his presence: **'Walking the shore / For his nets ... / He leaves no prints.'** (Lines 5-8.) Something close to evanescence is echoed in the airiness with which the speaker – a distinctly reticent presence in this text – invests an interlude which celebrates the transient beauties of the shoreline: **'the wet sand blue / And scudding white with winter sky'** (lines 6-7).

Throughout the poem, the caesura (a hiatus or pause caused when a line or utterance is broken by punctuation, phrasing or white space) makes a significant impact on our sense of the fisherman's predicament, even though this solitary figure never speaks. Partly his silence is explained by the fact we never see him in company, but arguably it reflects a personality and habits shaped by a culture in which words have little currency. At just the moment when we are lifted into awareness of the many advantages afforded by living so close to nature, the poem makes the limits of human existence ironically stark: **'The gravestones at his back / Are the black wicks / Of his identity; the names on them / Outstare the tide.'** (Lines 9-12.) The imagery in these lines is suggestively compacted. The idea of a **'wick'** (the means by which fuel is drawn up towards the flame it feeds) which is **'black'** neatly darkens a conceit more traditionally used to conjure the cheer of light, warmth and/or energy. Thus the family graves which anchor the fisherman to this locality, and will presumably one day bear his name (etching his **'identity'** into the history they stand for), disturb rather than console. This equivocal moment deepens our sense of this silent, isolated figure's conflicted situation. The ancestry inscribed by the gravestones seems implacably opposed to the sea which, the arrangement of the words across a stanza break hints, they seem to expect to overmaster: **'Outstare the tide'** (line 12).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 12-20.

The poem's central stanza elaborates on the fisherman's ambivalent feelings about the sea, focussing on the element, wind, which seems its most remorseless and violent feature. With the help of the personification which the text puts to effective use throughout, the wind is depicted as a ravaging antagonist (**'howl[ing]'**): **'its open mouth / Pressed against the window where he sits / To weld his lobster pots / Or coiling ropes'** (lines 13-16). The relentlessness of the assault prompts our sympathy for the protagonist's inclination to refuse the aggressor, **'sure / His feet demand the firm horizons.'** (Lines 16-17.) There is a moment of swift and subtle pathetic fallacy in the **'certaint[y]'** with which the **'firm horizons'** of the land seem physically to repudiate the endless, wearisome, pulsing pressure of wind and tide. In a poem replete with caesurae, note how the same line (i.e. 17) is confined (firmly) within, and delivered without interruption across, its single cohering line.

Interestingly, the predictability with which the land (**'Warm with certainties'**) counters its quixotic-seeming opponent seems both to prompt and resonate in the certainty on which stanza and fisherman together come resolvingly to rest:

**One more season: then the farm
Can home and enfold him,
Warm with certainties.** (Lines 18-20.)

Lines 21-27.

Presented almost as an afterthought (**'Only ...'** line 21), the poem's closing stanza swiftly shifts to the man's relationship with the sea. As if deliberately to counter the consolations of domestic care and comfort which land offers (because it **'Can home him and enfold him'**, line 19), sea and fisher are constructed (mischievously?) as lovers. With a tidal and palpably erotic charge the sea turns temptress, her explicit desirousness less unsatisfied than insatiable: **'the sea longs / To lick / And lick him smooth.'** (Lines 21-23.) Even the mostly self-steadying free verse mode of the poem is thrown off-balance by these repeated, thus all the more urgent-seeming, sexualised imprecations: the two-word line **'To lick'** is the shortest of a poem which never wastes words.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Resuming the gravely sympathetic tone with which it began, the poem closes down these moments of undisciplined passion with the image of the fishing boat dutifully **'turned / For harbour,'** the final word enshrining all the stability of the context and circumstances that location represents. A reluctance discreetly signalled in the line break (which disrupts and delays the phrasing) is dramatized by the poem's last lines. With suggestive belatedness, the sea's extraordinary power over the fisherman (base, in both senses of the word) is here made clearer – partly thanks to the caesurae which underscore it – than anywhere else in an endlessly equivocal text: **'all day, inland, / He tastes the salt / That tightens on his mouth.'** If **'mouth'** fleetingly recovers the eroticism of the stanza, **'tightens'** perhaps also gestures at the man's constricted position, trapped between his twin, obliquely feminized, worlds. Where one is conjured as stern but caring mother/wife, the other seems irresistible seductress, only more desirable for the menace which **'Land'** (the black gravestones hint, not unjustifiably) suspects and fears of her.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'**The Fisherman**' appeared in Christine Evans's first collection *Looking Inland*, published by Seren Books in 1983. The poem's loosely entwined stanzas meditate on the ambivalence which (they suggest) more or less by definition qualifies this ancient, equivocal but implicitly irresistible occupation. The study draws into a sympathetic portrait timeless issues of historical and cultural identity and affiliation, and the deeply-woven relationship between the central, definitively gendered, figure and his more surreptitiously gendered geo-cultural environs and practices, represented by land (and '**farm**') and sea (thus fishing) alike. The two domains are presented as contesting each other for the right to his life and future; both simultaneously enshrine but also arguably threaten his right to forge his own future as he might choose. Both land and sea are shown to exert a kind of implacable pull/push effect on a skilled and knowledgeable professional who depends on them equally. In this way, a fluid-seeming but self-disciplined text positions its eponymous ageless subject between the competing traditions and demands of his shared but opposing worlds. His isolated but not unhappy figure stands between the safe respectability of family/farm, and the thrilling unpredictable risks of sea, tide and winds.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What sort of person do you think the fisherman is? Why?

Do you think the fisherman seems most at home on land or at sea? Why?

Who seems to speak this poem? How far do you think they sympathize with either the land, or the sea, or the fisherman himself?

What impression does this poem give of the realities of living, and making a living, in a rural area, or one which is close to the coast? Which way of life do you think you might choose, were you the fisherman in the poem? For what reasons?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

Author photograph:

<http://www.academi.org/list-of-writers/i/130004/>

Bardsey Island (Ynys Enlli):

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bardsey-island.jpg>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Christine Evans's author page at Gomer Press:

<https://www.gomer.co.uk/authors/christineevans.html>

A description of Evans's *Selected Poems*:

<https://www.serenbooks.com/productdisplay/selected-poems-3>

A travel article discussing the literary heritage and geography of Aberdaron:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/united-kingdom/wales/articles/The-Llyn-Peninsula-A-poets-wild-corner-of-Wales/>



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*University of South Wales
August, 2019*

*We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University,
The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh
Writing in English.*