

Christine Evans

'Callers'

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 1-8.

The opening stanza of '**Callers**' strikes the half-amused, half-affectionate tone which prevails for much of the poem, and serves at different moments to lighten, and even complicate, the seriousness of its largest themes. In the normal run of affairs, the removal of a visitor's headwear on entering a building might be taken as a traditional gesture of respect or deference in a domestic setting, probably made to a woman or social superior.

There seems more than a hint of old-fashioned cap-doffing in the scene with which the poem opens. The deference seems quietly both to entertain and mildly alarm its apparently female speaker; on the other hand, '**shock**' seems perhaps an overreaction to a conventional gesture of respect (line 1). The remark playfully courts our attention, partly because the situation is evidently recurrent: '**Those neighbouring farmers**' (line 2) – the tone of this description seems both resigned and somehow affectionate – would seem to be in the habit of '**call[ing] at our house**' (line 2) on a reasonably regular basis, if perhaps not quite frequently enough to seem a nuisance. In fact the way the visitors are described is palpably sympathetic to their awkward self-consciousness; for all the amusement we might detect in the speaker's portrayal of the scene, she is plainly a perceptive hostess, more than capable of spotting in her callers a collective need to get through a social situation they have themselves engineered: '**of course, to have something to roll / Or to press or twist in their blunt, nervous hands**' (lines 3-4).

The speaker's compassion for her visitors notwithstanding, their deference catalyses the poem's deft and deliberate play on the culturally-freighted and often gendered relationship between clothing, nakedness, modesty and social convention. These are the time-honoured ingredients of farce, and there is a hint of mischief-making in the (almost salacious-seeming) suggestion that the exposure of these middle-aged farmers' heads, '**With their soft bald spots or thinning forelocks**' (line 6) seems –ironically – almost indecent (cap-doffing was always a gesture of respect, a marker of decent behaviour). Interestingly, if their transformation makes the eponymous '**callers**' seem '**vulnerable**' (line 5) and '**at once smaller**' (line 7), it is also credited with making them seem '**much more vivid**' (line 7). The adjective '**vivid**' carries with it a sense of the visual, in being associated with intensity and depth of colour; however the word's usage here subtly confers on the visitors a vitality it draws from the Latin root that it shares with words like 'revive' and 'revivify' (that is, the verb 'vivare', meaning 'to live'). That energy is confirmed in the image on which the stanza closes, which captures the callers '**Leaping out of type to personality**' (line 8).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 9-15.

Interestingly, we learn no more about the visitors as individuals, the speaker returning in the second, slightly shorter stanza to the generalized study which the poem's title prepares us for. Lines 9-15 both fill out and ground the teasing sketches of the opening stanza, by acknowledging the routines (and of course the economic necessities) of the callers' working lives. Here, now, they are defined by **'The smell of their beasts'** (line 9), which:

**...comes in with them,
Faint as the breath of growing things in summer,
Rich, as the days draw in, with cake and hay and dung.** (Lines 9-11.)

The lyricism of these lines, laced through with aural echoes (**'in ... / growing things in / Rich ... in'**; **'Faint ... days ... cake and hay'**) which twine in and out of each other, almost literally freshens the poem's atmosphere, lifting the callers out of the confines of the domestic world we've watched them enter, and away from the danger of ridicule, however gentle. In moving them (and us) outside, towards the world of beasts and **'growing things in summer'** which they inhabit and oversee, the farmers are accorded a kind of romantic, even exotic (if earthy), allure and power: the world we scent in the **'smell of their beasts'** (line 9) is their birthright as well as the seat of their knowledge, and exclusive in its privileges.

In the second half of this stanza, the poem returns us to the house, able now to image the visitors as a version of their **'beasts'** in their inclination, sensed by the speaker, **'to stamp and snort / Looking sideways'** (lines 13-14), with less risk of seeming to mock or trivialize their discomfort. Bestialized, it is true, these men are seeming now more wild than foolish, and thus the more worthy of our respect and admiration for their toleration of the routine niceties, like **'leaving mucky boots beside the door'** (line 15), which domestication demands of them.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 16-20.

Only five lines long, the poem's final stanza is also the shortest; this tapering discreetly mirrors its sharpening focus on the visitors, depicted now as **'Only small, swarthy men with the friendly smell on them'** (line 16). Belatedly, here the speaker herself takes the centre-stage in a world which seems - contagiously - somehow reduced and constrictive in the presence of these only half-domesticated callers: **'walls press close and the room seems cluttered. / I am glad to go and make obligatory tea'** (line 17). In this context, the almost ritual gendering of the home offers everyone release from a tension arguably catalysed - all unknowingly - by her presence from the start. Making the tea affords her a distance from which to reflect on a conversation seemingly soothed, and that becomes soothing, as **'their voices sway, slow with the seasons'** (line 19), and no less interesting for the deliberate, unhurried way in which (**'ponderously'**, much like the poem's own last line) the callers reach their conclusion. In this context, **'ponderously'** retains the weight of thoughtfulness (to **'ponder'** something is of course reflect on it) as well as a deliberation we can now respect as well as enjoy.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'**Callers**' is a deceptively succinct study of colliding cultural practices, behaviours and languages, represented by both the visitors and the visited. It takes a particular, at times gently humorous, interest in the experiential gulf which opens as the poem's awkward subjects step over the threshold of the house on which they have chosen (regularly? sporadically? It is hard to be sure) to call. In this way we are introduced to the contrasts – polarities, even – which divide and yet also seem to cross over between the figures framed in the text: between male and female ways of talking and behaving; between the habits and expectations of older and younger generations; between local 'visitor' and the couple on whom they call. If the speaker's voice is female (she makes the tea, after all, in a plainly traditional society), her surprise, and amused observation of what seems to be something of a social ritual, hint at her difference; she seems more incomer than insider. In this way, the poem layers other kinds of contrast: between the known and accepted, and the strange and unfamiliar, which both parties in different ways represent to each other. But in some ways the poem is above all interested in the gulf it teases open between talking – language – and its (arguably, often silent) counterpart: *doing*.

Having exposed this rich and tension-filled social space between its different protagonists, the poem – or the voice of its implicitly young, implicitly female speaker – obliquely ponders the reasons for its existence and, to some extent, both calls it into question and seeks to excuse it, in a mood which seems to come much closer to sympathetic affection than judgement or reproach. In one early account of her work, the poet wonders whether her writing might be read as a response 'to the non-verbalized way I was living, at home on a small-holding with infant son and fisherman husband in a small community that is one of the last toeholds of a traditional culture'.

In this way, '**Callers**' perhaps confirms that it is the nature of life on Pen Llŷn, its arguably unique culture and very ancient history, that anchors this poet's work, rather than the larger and no less complex cultural geography of Wales per se. Pertinently for our understanding of '**Callers**', Evans has identified the poem as among 'the first poems I wrote within this context', and she explains of her unusual social situation: 'I was struck most by its patterns, the invisible web of relationships and deferential conventions that held the community together...'.¹

(1) Christine Evans, in *The Bright Field*, ed. Meic Stephens (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), p. 86.

THREE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What sort of person seems to speak this poem? How do you imagine him or her? How has he or she come to be in the scene the poem depicts? How do they feel about the callers?

Note down some of the ways in which the callers seem to differ from the speaker. How far do they seem similar? How and why might these similarities and/or differences seem significant?

What impression does the poem leave of the rural community and its way of life? Does it make that world seem appealing to you or not? Where and how?

PHOTOGRAPHS

Author photograph:

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

Bardsey Island (Ynys Enlli):

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

Historical images of a farmer's market at Dolgellau:

<http://search.digido.org.uk/?id=llgc-id%3A1460495>

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

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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**PROFESSOR
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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.*