

# Stuart Evans

# 'Blue Carnations'

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.)**

Stuart Evans was born in Swansea in 1934 and was the son of a local schoolmaster. He studied English Literature at Oxford University, winning the Newdigate Prize in 1955 for his poem ‘Elegy for the Death of a Clown’. Evans served in the Royal Navy and married an officer from the women’s section before becoming a lecturer at Brunel College of Advanced Technology in London. He then moved to the BBC where he produced radio programmes for use in school education.

Evans was more well-known in the twentieth century for his prose fiction than for his poetry, particularly the *Windmill Hill* sequence of five novels (1978–87), that dealt with ‘the themes of Britain’s contemporary social, moral and spiritual decline, intellectual shoddiness and political disillusion’. His writing was compared by one reviewer to that of the London–Welsh poet David Jones (1895–1974) for the way contemporary settings were linked to the historical past, and it was said that his best prose was informed by his ‘eclectic, poetic imagination’.<sup>1</sup>

He published two collections of poetry in his lifetime: *Imaginary Gardens with Real Toads* in 1972, and *The Function of the Fool* in 1977. Evans died in 1994.

(1) *The Times*, 29 December 1994, p. 19.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Title.

'**Blue Carnations**' do not exist in nature, so the poem's title suggests something unreal or unobtainable. However, blue flowers and carnations are common enough separately, so blue carnations are not on the fantastical level of, for instance, unicorn horns. This is an important distinction because the blue carnations of the title are a romantic quest object in the poem, and a sense of proportion keeps the speaker's professions of love, which he links to the image of the blue carnations, believable.

It is always a good idea to separate the speaker of a poem from the poet themselves, as poems are literary constructions and often not directly autobiographical records. However, in this poem the focus on the metaphorical map-reading skills of a long-term couple may reflect the experiences of the real-life Evanses, including perhaps their military service. The gender of the speaker and the person they are addressing is never directly stated in the poem and the reader is free to make their own decisions about this. In light of the poem's autobiographical dimensions and tongue-in-cheek usage of gendered markers to describe the couple, the reader may well decide that the speaker is male and the addressee female.

## Form.

The poem consists of three five-line stanzas (quintains), with lines ranging in length from ten to fifteen syllables. These stanzas give the poem a regular form and solid appearance on the page, indicating the deliberate literary decisions behind the poem's construction and reflecting the longstanding relationship at the poem's core, but rigid uniformity is softened somewhat by the varying line lengths. The poem is unrhymed, with a conversational tone that makes the poem's rhythm generally iambic, but this is not meticulously enforced throughout.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 1-5.

The poem begins in what seems to be the middle of a conversation; it is certainly a response to something said by the **'you'** of the second line. It appears that the **'you'** has just said that she has a sense of direction and the speaker is good with maps, and the speaker wishes to entirely disagree and switch these attributes around: **'Oh no, it is / who have the sense of direction, / And it is you who are good with maps.'** A contrast is established between the speaker and the person they are talking to, and the good-natured disagreement is followed by the speaker's assessment of the other person's character as **'patient'** and **'generous'**. The speaker downplays his own qualities by claiming that the other person is kinder, while he is the kind of person who makes **'loud assertions'**. While acting to foreground the (perhaps usually more reserved) addressee, the use of comparisons also shows how their individual identities are formed in relation to the other.

The differences between **'maps'** and a **'sense of direction'** symbolises the differences between the two characters in the poem: a sense of direction is often thought to be an innate ability, but is hard to actually measure. Maps, on the other hand, are representations of the world that can show physical data (altitude, etc) or sociological data (areas of wealth, population density, etc). While maps are selective and simplify the information they transmit, they are also linked to power – for instance, Ordnance Survey began as a military division – and knowledge: that is, they actually create the knowledge about space and society that they claim to represent.

Men have stereotypically been seen as more adept at reading maps, and women allocated a more intuitive **'sense'** of space and place – assumptions that have been robustly challenged by sociologists, feminists and scientists in recent years. This poem arguably invokes so as to muddy and, ultimately, challenge the gendered categorisations that have traditionally associated men with maps, knowledge and power. Calling attention to the limitations of his own **'masculine'** performance, the speaker points to an alternative mode of knowledge and understanding, represented by his partner's **'maps'**.

The extent to which gender roles are truly being challenged in this stanza is however unclear: the speaker's effusive praise for his partner's patience would hardly seem to depart from the idealising tendencies of earlier male poets. However, by insisting that **'it is / who have the sense of direction'** and **'you who are good with maps'**, he certainly reverses – and unsettles – the tired portrayal of women as followers and men as leaders and readers of maps. Gender and spatial politics are enclosed in a moment of levity and humour, suggested by the partner's **'laugh'**; it is ironic that, even while complementing his partner, the speaker is stepping in to contradict her – a moment reminiscent of the row over directions that seems to befall almost all couples at some point.

## LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

### Lines 6-10.

The speaker thinks more deeply about maps and having a sense of direction in connection with the relationship. The reader may have assumed that the **'you'** was good at *reading* maps, but the speaker now reveals that she creates the maps. Maps provide an overview of the bigger picture and enable planning ahead, but it should also be noted that these maps are informally constructed (**'sketched'**) rather than accurately measured and professionally printed. This indicates a certain level of improvisation, which may in turn suggest that relationships have to respond in real time to changing terrain and unfamiliar locations. The combination of the speaker's sense of direction and the maps tell him only one thing, which is **'how to find you'**. A map with only one destination sounds like a treasure map, in which case the **'you'** is the treasure it leads to, but this is a very faint allusion as there is little other language of treasure-hunting in the poem. The partner is seemingly identified not only as an end-point or goal, but as a mode of orientation enabling the speaker's flourishing and development in the world.

The speaker portrays himself as a follower and admiringly talks of his partner's capabilities: **'it is always you / Who really know where we are and how not to be lost.'** A key word here is **'really'**, suggesting that the speaker often claims he knows where he is, when he doesn't. The stanza ends with the strange construction **'how not to be lost'**. It seems that rather than knowing exactly where you are, the most you can hope for is not being lost, which is a rather negative outcome from having a map. Perhaps this is the best you can expect from **'sketched'** maps, but the idea emphasises the wider tensions between communication and misconception, certainty and confusion, that inform the poem as a whole.

### Lines 11-15.

The speaker's **'blustering'** (talking loudly and without effect) seems a performance intended to amuse his partner, whom he also **'teas[es]'** when she **'pretend[s] to be careless'**. There is a double meaning to **'careless'**, suggesting either that the **'you'** is carefree and relaxed, perhaps when sketching the map, or that she doesn't care for the speaker. In either case, pretence and performance seem to be important factors for both characters and their relationship in this poem. The partner's ability to create maps that **'make sense and meaning of our world'** means the speaker doesn't have to work out why the world is as it is – rather than creating his own path in life, he only has to follow what is laid out before him. The use of both **'sense and meaning'** suggests they signify different things: 'sense' relates to navigating a physical environment through our five senses and/or through common sense, while 'meaning' suggests a more cerebral order of interpretation. The partner's **'maps'** combine these two poles and the speaker shares in the process, as suggested by the plural **'our world'**. The speaker says that he is willing to continue accompanying his partner on this exploration until they find **'Blue carnations'**. This is to say that he will happily spend his whole life with her, looking for a **'token of loving you'** that doesn't really exist, because it is the journey together that matters, not what might be found at the destination.

# COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'**Blue Carnations**' presents a good-natured but personal situation, in a conversational style. The first-person narrative gives us access to the speaker's thoughts and, in addressing his partner in the second-person ('**you**'), the speaker also addresses us as readers of the poem, pulling us into the middle of the discussion. The regular form shows the poem's deliberate construction, but the variable line lengths, in which the poet prioritises what he wants each line to say, stop the poem from rigidly adhering to an unchanging pattern. This can be linked to the confusion in the poem regarding who has which particular qualities, and its representation of the efforts needed to communicate clearly. The key images, despite the poem's title, are maps, and the significance attached to the making of maps and their interpretation drives the emotional heart of the narrative. The speaker credits himself initially with having a good '**sense of direction**'. This suggests inborn, intuitive skills. He asserts his partner is '**good with maps**', and this suggests acquired, logical and mental abilities. That his partner '**sketches**' the maps shows the active role she plays in ordering and navigating the world they both inhabit, although it also suggests that these maps are informal and perhaps not always accurate. Maps are, of course, always re-presentations and abstractions. They straddle the boundaries between art and empiricism. Historically, maps are connected with spiritual quests (e.g. the Mappa Mundi), conquest and control (the name Ordnance Survey belies the military origin of the agency created to map Scotland at the time of the Jacobite rebellions in 1745), but they can also be creative, imaginative, inventive (e.g. maps of fictional worlds).

Another important word in this poem is 'and' – it starts many of the lines and clauses within the poem. Its recurrence conveys the speaker adding and adding to his case, rather than this being a poem of 'buts' and argument: '**And it is you**', '**And it occurs to me**', '**and it is always you**', '**And I am happy**', and so on. 'And' is a conjunction, and its frequency in this poem enforces the positive joining, in the speaker's mind at least, of the two different characters. The speaker does have a certain sense of direction as he knows which way the poem is going, and each 'and' adds another layer to his profession of love for his partner.

In the end, the blue carnations, rather than being the object of the quest, are entirely unimportant in themselves. They are grouped with '**any other token of loving you**' that the speaker may come across while following his partner's maps. The speaker understands these non-existent flowers to be unreal and insignificant images when compared to actual love. Perhaps we might say that love is presented here as an alternative, ultimately more resonant journey and cartography than the one laid out by power and officialdom.



# FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How simple or complicated is the language that the poem uses?

How does the form of the poem on the page play a part in the poem's meaning?

How reliable do you find the speaker's assessment of himself and his partner?

What are maps for and why are maps so important in the poem?

## PHOTOGRAPHS

The blue carnation, a flower that does not exist in nature:  
[www.floraqueen.com/blog/what-are-blue-carnations](http://www.floraqueen.com/blog/what-are-blue-carnations)

## SECTION 5 (links active May 2020)

All links are clickable



# LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Transcription of Evans's obituary in *The Times*, 29 December 1994:

**[archive.org/stream/NewsUK1994UKEnglish/Dec%2029%201994%2C%20The%20Times%2C%20%2365150%2C%20UK%20%28en%29\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/NewsUK1994UKEnglish/Dec%2029%201994%2C%20The%20Times%2C%20%2365150%2C%20UK%20%28en%29_djvu.txt)**

Evans's page at Parthian Press website:

**[parthianbooks.com/products/the-caves-of-alienation](https://parthianbooks.com/products/the-caves-of-alienation)**

On cartography, power and the problems of representation, see this article entitled 'How Maps Lie':

**[surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1245&context=sumagazine](https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1245&context=sumagazine)**

*Guardian* articles on (and images from) the British Library's Exhibition 'Magnificent Maps: Power, Propaganda And Art':

**[theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2010/jan/26/british-library-map](https://theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2010/jan/26/british-library-map)**

**[theguardian.com/culture/picture/2010/may/10/british-library-fra-mauro-map](https://theguardian.com/culture/picture/2010/may/10/british-library-fra-mauro-map)**

Maps of Welsh writing in English at:

**[literaryatlas.wales](https://literaryatlas.wales)**

# FURTHER READING

Evans, Stuart, *The Function of the Fool* (London: Hutchinson, 1977).

Evans, Stuart, *The Caves of Alienation* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2009).

<https://www.literarygeographies.net/index.php/LitGeogs>

(Journal articles on the theme of 'Literary Geographies'.)

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