

# Not Waving but Drowning, Stevie Smith

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCnDgBre-k8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCnDgBre-k8)

Nobody heard him, the dead man,  
But still he lay moaning:  
I was much further out than you thought  
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking  
And now he's dead  
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,  
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always  
(Still the dead one lay moaning)  
I was much too far out all my life  
And not waving but drowning.

## Biography

Florence Margaret "Stevie" Smith was born on September 20, 1902 in Yorkshire, England. Her father left the family to join the North Sea Patrol when she was very young. At age three she moved with her sister and mother to the northern London suburb Palmers Green. This was her home until her death in 1971. Her mother died when she was a teenager and she and her sister lived with their spinster aunt, an important figure throughout her life, known as "The Lion."

After high school she attended North London Collegiate School for Girls. She began as a secretary with the magazine publisher George Newnes and went on to be the private secretary to Sir Nevill Pearson and Sir Frank Newnes. She began writing poetry in her twenties while working at George Newnes. Her first book, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, was published in 1936 and drew heavily on her own life experience, examining the unrest in England during World War I. Her first collection of verse, *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937), also contained rough sketches or doodles, which became characteristic of her work. These drawings have both a feeling of caprice

and doom, and the poetry in the collection is stylistically typical of Smith as it conveys serious themes in a nursery rhyme structure.

While Smith's volatile attachment to the Church of England is evident in her poetry, death, her "gentle friend," is perhaps her most popular subject. Much of her inspiration came from theology and the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm. Her style is unique in its combination of seemingly prosaic statements, variety of voices, playful meter, and deep sense of irony. Smith was officially recognized with the Chomondeley Award for Poetry in 1966 and the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1969. Smith died of a brain tumor on March 7, 1971.

## Background

**"Not Waving but Drowning"** comes straight out of the longest, darkest night of the British poet Stevie Smith's soul. That's really saying something, too, because Smith is well known for a career's worth of gloomy and morbid lines.

She wrote the poem in 1953, during a period of deep depression. Even though she had gained some fame in the late 1930s and had recently performed her poems on three separate BBC programmes, she was having trouble finding anyone to publish her new work. On top of that, she felt imprisoned by the secretarial job she had held for twenty years. Only a few months after writing "Not Waving but Drowning," she slashed her wrists in her office. Put in that context, this poem sure sounds like a cry for help.

But her depression isn't the only story of her life or writings. Smith has a childish and playful streak, too, which can give any topic a cheery or wickedly funny twist. The dead man of "Not Waving but Drowning" comes across a little like a whiner, and the oblivious friends seem like insensitive buffoons, making their inane comments over the man's corpse. We're given both perspectives, and invited to laugh a bit at each one, even as we sympathize with the dead man's complaint and the sadness of his death. Smith teaches us that everything—life and death—has a touch of the ridiculous.

The poem also echoes another quality of Smith's life: persistence. Just as the dead man keeps explaining his suffering, even when no one can hear him, she continued writing, even without an audience. In 1957, her new collection of poems also titled *Not Waving but Drowning* was finally published, and in the decade that followed she became more famous than ever as a reader (and sometimes singer) of her work. This poem remains the most popular of her writings, and she lived (unhealthy, but not unhappy) for another fourteen years.

## Summary

**"Not Waving but Drowning"** gives an account of a drowned man whose distressed thrashing in the water had been mistaken for waving. The poem was accompanied by one of Smith's drawings, as was common in her work.

The image that Smith attached to the poem shows the form of a girl from the waist up with her wet hair hanging over her face. This, however, contrasts the poem's image of a man drowning.

While Ingrid Hotz-Davies suggests that the "drowning man" is Smith herself, she also states that there are problems with reading the poem as a cry for help due to the humorous tone of the poem yet at the same time she also notes that the representational form of the poem "may easily be misread as a friendly wave of the hand".

## Title

"Not Waving but Drowning" is spoken twice, in lines that are exact copies of each other. This refrain is important as it immediately sets up the poem's strong opposition between what appears to have happened (waving) and what actually did go down (drowning). This opposition is later echoed in the perspective of the useless friends versus the point of view of the dead man.

It also hands us a possible scenario right away as to why the dead man introduced in the first line is dead. At first the poem's actually inviting us to think literally about the situation — that a man drowned in the ocean and his acquaintances are chatting over his corpse — before showing us in the last stanza that we might have to take the drowning as metaphorical.

## Rhyme scheme

There are four-line stanzas, a quatrain. The rhyme scheme is ABCB. (Feminine rhyme).

## Meter

Focus on the stressed syllables of the first two lines:

"**N**obody **h**eard him the **d**ead **m**an, / but **s**till he **l**ay **m**oaning."

The first line has four stresses, and the second has three. You'll find that lines 3-4 repeat this alternation of four and three.

## Form

This poem is a ballad because it has an ABCB – rhyme scheme and three and four stressed syllables. A ballad is a popular verse form used in songs and closely related to the form of religious hymns. Usually a ballad tells a story, as is the case here.

# Speakers

## Speaker 1: The Narrator

The first is the speaker of lines 1-2 and the parenthesis of line 7. We don't know a lot about this person except he or she sets the stage and appears to hear both the dead man and the other people (even though the first thing the speaker says is "Nobody heard him").

## Speaker 2: The Dead Guy

The second speaker is the dead man himself, as we find out when he says, "I was much further out than you thought" (3).

## Speaker 3: The Living

The third speaker may actually be more than one person, as "they said" suggests. They chatter about the dead man's character and his final moments, apparently getting everything wrong. They could be friends or work acquaintances, but the poem doesn't really tell us their identities. They remain a general "they," those frustrating other people who never quite understood the man.

# Imagery

## Alliteration

In line 1 the repetition of "h" sounds at the beginning of "heard" and "him," and in line 7: "have" and "him his heart." Most of these repetitions of initial letters happen within the lines, giving the sound of each line more unity.

## Assonance

Repeated vowel sounds are used throughout the poem to link one line to another. For example, the first word of line 1, "Nobody," links to the last word of line 2, "moaning" through the same long "o" sound. In fact, you'll find this long "o" throughout the poem. Look, too, at the "ow" sound in "out" and "drowning". They're tied together by what sounds like a cry of pain, right at the moment the dead man describes his suffering.

## Internal Rhyme

Finally, in a few places the sound repetitions come together to give the poem more exact rhymes. Since the ballad only gives two end rhymes per stanza and this poem makes two of the three rhyming pairs feminine rhymes, we have to look inside the lines to find the cleverly hidden precise echoes.

See, for example, the way the end of line 3 ("thought") rhymes with "not," the second word of the next line. Or line 7's "way" chiming with line 8's "They." As with the

assonance, internal rhyme works to connect lines to each other in a more subtle way than the usual end rhymes would.

## Contrast

The central contrast of the poem is in the contrast of existence (life vs death). Everything revolves around these two states in the poem, whether they're described literally or undercover as metaphors. As readers, we're left uneasy that life and death can coexist so close to each other; in fact one can even look like the other if we're too far out.

## Analysis

**Line 1:** The very first thing we learn in the poem is that somebody is dead and that nobody hears him, which means he speaks five out of the poem's twelve lines in vain. And he doesn't even get a name.

**Line 2:** The dead man is "still" and he "lay"; both descriptions sound like a corpse. Yet, he's also moaning.

**Line 3:** Even before he died, the others didn't understand the danger he was in. Being "much further out" suggests that the setting is some potentially dangerous body of water. The "you" addressed by the dead man suggests there were others swimming, or at least near the shore. Of course, figuratively speaking, this could mean those other people go on living their lives, while the poor guy is struggling.

**Line 4:** This refrain calls up an image of a fatal swimming accident, suggesting how the dead man got that way. "Waving," though, sounds very lively. He tried to signal his distress, but the others thought he was waving at them, possibly because they thought of him as a guy who liked to fool around.

**Line 5:** The living people seem to remember him as the guy who would be waving. They thought he liked to have fun. As readers, we already know this isn't a terribly accurate profile of the dead man.

**Line 6:** The blunt, obvious nature of this statement leaves us without any doubt: talking or not, the dead man is really dead.

**Line 7:** "They" try to find a medical reason for the death. They think the water could have been too cold or his heart too weak. Whatever the cause, they're thinking just about the moment of his death, not what led up to it. They're missing the point because the dead man is trying to tell them it was isolation that really killed him. So, it was more an emotional cause of a death than a physical one.

**Lines 9-12:** The entire last stanza is an attempt to correct the other people's misunderstanding of the dead man. At least he can hear what they are saying, even though he's much more caught up in his own misery. But

we know from the beginning of the poem that nobody heard him: This is an example of dramatic irony, which means the readers know more about the real situation than do some of the characters. Being dead apparently doesn't stop him from trying to be heard. This stanza further confuses the difference between life and death, as well as the cause of his misfortune. Instead of a single, fatal accident, the dead man describes a lifetime of drowning. It's as if life and death weren't separate states.

**Line 9:** The dead man tries to correct them by saying the water was always too cold. It's likely that he's telling them that his death was a long time coming. It's not just one moment of being too cold, it's a lifetime of it.

**Line 11:** As with line 9, this line suggests a metaphorical take on swimming and drowning. He was always too far from the other swimmers or the shore, always out of the reach of help. It definitely sounds like he's talking less about a final accident and more about the long-standing isolation of his life.

**Line 12:** Once the refrain comes back, we realize the dead man was trying to explain something about his life from the beginning, but we — like the people in stanza 2 — thought it was only an actual drowning. Now we've heard enough to know the metaphorical truth: no one ever really heard him or could assist him, so eventually he died.

## Message

All these missed connections come together to show how you can be lonely in a crowd or dying in the middle of a bunch of people who would help you if they knew. It also shows how hard it is to see when someone needs help. Everyone in the poem seems to have their own needs and interests that keep them from really communicating with each other, which — it's undeniable — contributes to tragedy.

When you get past the swimming metaphor of the poem, you'll find that the kind of isolation it describes is eerily familiar. After all, the world of social media works the same way. You have to put up a front to interact with friends, carefully selecting your profile information and status updates to make the best impression and keep people thinking that you're doing all right, that you aren't a total wacko, that you're *cool*.

But what if you're not all right? You either have to keep lying, or you risk reaching out with a sincere message, dreading that someone will think you're joking or that things can't be all that bad. What's worse than an LOL in response to your heartfelt cry for help? This poem is about that disconnection between what you feel and what you express, as well as what you express and what other people hear. But, more than that, it's also about the even worse fate of waiting to speak your mind until it's too late.

## Macabre Humour

Stevie Smith is obsessed with death but if you're reading a morbid poem that makes you giggle, chances are you're reading a Smith poem. She often uses verse forms from nursery rhymes or plays with rhythm and slant rhyme to steal a smile; she also loves to use deliberately inappropriate diction to puncture the overly serious subject of mortality. Here she pokes fun at both the dead man's self-centered melancholy and the onlookers' insensitivity. She's the poet most likely to make her neighbors laugh at a boring funeral. Even if it's her own.

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