

NOT WAVING BUT DROWNING

INTRODUCTION

In A Nutshell

"**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 programs, 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 ([source](#)). 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.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

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.

So if you've ever felt lonely at a party or despaired because even your best friends don't really understand you, then this is the poem for you. And if you've ever had to pretend to be happy for other people's sake, then [Stevie Smith](#) is your gal. We just hope you can learn from her example.

NOT WAVING BUT DROWNING SUMMARY

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A dead man complains that he was further out than anyone thought and not waving at them, but instead drowning. Well that's tough luck, because nobody hears him.

Other people remark that it's too bad he's dead, especially since he was a bit of a goodtime guy. They think of reasons that he might have died, including the coldness of the water and heart failure.

But the dead guy ain't havin' that. He tells them (not that they're listening or anything) that he was struggling all his life—not just at the moment of his death.

STANZA 1 SUMMARY

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Get out the microscope, because we're going through this poem line-by-line.

Line 1

Nobody heard him, the dead man,

- Welcome, gentle Shmoop reader, to a Stevie Smith poem. Nothing's here to greet you, except a dead man. Well, that's festive.
- Okay, the speaker is here, too. Who is the speaker? It's too soon to tell, but we're putting feelers out.
- Right away, we learn the dead man must have made a noise that no one heard. Did he call for help?
- What did he die from anyway? Is he talking after death? Or did no one hear him *before* he died? Sorry to bombard you with questions, but we're just not sure yet. Hey, Shmoop doesn't know *everything*.
- "Heard" is past tense, so maybe the speaker is about to detail the events of the man's death.
- Let's stay tuned.

Line 2

But still he lay moaning:

- Okay, now this is just weird. The dead man continues making noise, "moaning" in fact—all zombie-like.
- "Still" could mean "not moving," though, so that rules out the walking dead. Unless you take "still" to mean that he continues moaning, even though no one's listening. The word's tricky like that, what with the double meanings and all.
- Often when a word has two meanings, a poet wants you to think of both. Let's do that: the dead guy is moaning continually but not moving. At least he got being dead half right.
- There's also a suggestion that his moaning isn't a new thing. Maybe he was like this when he was alive, too.
- Not only is he still, but this line says he "lay." Where would you imagine the dead man lying? At the scene of an accident? On a table in the morgue? In his coffin? We don't really know yet, but at least he's not running around

after anyone's brains.

- The colon at the end of the line suggests something closely related to this line is about to happen. *Phew*. That's good news because there's a lot of basic information we still need about this situation.

Line 3

I was much further out than you thought

- Now there's an "I" in the poem for the first time. Is it the same voice that spoke lines 1-2? Dead man talkin'.
- Remember the colon from the previous line could signal that a list, an explanation, or even dialogue is about to occur, so this line could be what the dead man says.
- He's not just making a moaning noise, he's complaining.
- That sounds a little judgmental. Is the speaker of lines 1-2 giving us a peek at how he or she feels about the dead man? Maybe the speaker thinks the guy's a bit whiny. Then again, maybe not. What do you think the speaker's tone is here?
- The dead dude's speaking about a past event, when he was much further out. We're not sure about what this event was, specifically, but we'll roll with it.
- Look, there's someone else in this poem! The dead man speaks to "you"; he seems to have someone in mind. Is it us readers? Is it the speaker of lines 1-2?
- Whoever it is didn't know how far out he was. So they were either oblivious or really bad at measuring.
- Poor guy. He's dead and he doesn't know that nobody's listening to his complaints. On top of that, his intended listeners were already clueless about where he was when he was alive.

Line 4

And not waving but drowning.

- Ah, we're finally getting down to it. Here's the line that becomes the title. We now have enough information to infer a scene: this guy swims too far out in a body of water, signals for help, other people think he's waving, and then he drowns.
- This is why you always use the buddy system, folks.
- Note that the poem itself doesn't directly mention water. We're guessing because of the drowning. We mean, it's not like you can drown in maple syrup. Strictly speaking.

- We've also seen enough to know something about the poem's meter and rhyme. Take a look at our "[Form and Meter](#)" section to learn more about how strange they are. For now, it's enough to know right now that this [stanza](#) is what's known as a [ballad](#) stanza. Sort of.
- Ballads are songs (but they can also be poems) that tell a story. They tend to rhyme the second and fourth lines of every [quatrain](#) (a four-line stanza) and alternate lines of four stresses and three stresses.
- But wait a second. The ends of lines 2 and 4 don't rhyme exactly. Not to worry. Technically they do. Although "moan" and "drown" don't sound the same, they're pretty similar. And that "-ing" at the end of each of those totally *does* sound the same, it's just not the stressed syllable in the words. When an [end rhyme](#) lands on an unstressed syllable, we call that a feminine rhyme.
- Notice the contrast of moods between "waving" and "drowning." One is merry, and the other pretty grim. Why couldn't the mysterious "you" see what was really going on? Shmoop would like to think we could tell the difference between the two.
- How specific is the setting so far? We don't exactly get the name of the beach or the sea involved, and water is never actually mentioned. That might mean that we're talking about a [metaphorical](#) setting here, rather than a real one.
- We're still curious what killed the man. Why did he drown? C'mon Stevie, let's get to the heart of this mystery.