Not Waving but Drowning

SUMMARY

The speaker opens by declaring that no one could hear the dead man, who was still, paradoxically, lying there and crying out in pain. A first person speaker, perhaps the dead man himself (the poem is deliberately ambiguous), then interjects: "I was always a lot further away than people realized—and I wasn't waving at people back on land; I was moving my arms about because I was drowning."

The crowd then talks about the dead man, saying how unfortunate he was to die while playing about in the water—and how he had a such a playful nature while he was alive. These people theorize that he died from the cold, his heart simply too weak to stand it.

The first person speaker interjects again, saying that it *definitely* wasn't the cold that did it—because, in fact, it was always too cold. (In a parenthetical aside, it's revealed that the dead man is still lying out in the water and crying out in pain.) The speaker (again, perhaps meant to be paradoxically taken as this dead man himself) restates that he'd always been far away from everyone else, for his entire life—and that all this time his movements hadn't been him waving to people, but rather the sign of him drowning.

THEMES

COMMUNICATION AND MISUNDERSTANDING

A playful and light-hearted tone masks a serious subject in "Not Waving but Drowning." On the surface the poem is about a man who drowns because his movements are mistaken for friendly waving by people ostensibly back on shore. Taken less literally, however, the poem speaks to the pain of being misunderstood and the frequent failure of communication between human beings.

The poem begins by drawing the reader's attention to "the dead man," who has just drowned. But strangely—even paradoxically—he is *still* "moaning," or crying out in pain, though no one (except, of course, for the reader) can hear him. Immediately, then, the poem sets up a breakdown in communication.

The poem also moves between pronouns throughout—referring to the dead man in the third person, before switching over to the first person "I" and back again. The "I" could refer to the dead man; a separate speaker; or even the poet herself. It's hard to know for sure who the speaker is, there are no quotation marks to clarify who is speaking when, and nobody can hear the man—who's dead, and thus shouldn't be speaking, anyway! The poem is intentionally ambiguous and unreliable, underscoring its argument about the way communication works—or, more accurately, *doesn't* work.

If this "I" is taken as the dead man himself, then he is somehow commenting on his life from beyond the grave. And he explains that his own death was, in part, caused by this kind of failure to be understood. He was far "out" in the water and, accordingly, people mistook his flailing arms—a call for help—for "waving." Because they thought he was playing around, no one tried to save him. There's a total disconnect between the message that the man *intended* to send and the one that people actually *received*.

After this initial set-up, the poem presents two different takes on what happened to the man—what the crowd on the shore thinks, and what the man says himself. The disparity between these takes is stark: the crowd thinks the water must have been too cold for the man's heart to handle, but the man denies this theory, insisting that, in fact, the water had "always" been too cold (meaning this time was no different).

Instead, it was the *distance* between himself and the nearest help that actually killed him. "I was much too far out all my life," the man says, and this distance led to his being fatally misunderstood in his moment of need.

Of course, this can be read allegorically as representing emotional distance; the man isn't *literally* swimming all the time. If the man had been *emotionally* closer to others, they might have understood him better, and he wouldn't have died in this way. The crowd had a certain idea of who this man was, and such assumptions blinded them to the reality of what was actually happening.

That is, this man might have seemed totally happy from the outside—after all, he supposedly "always loved larking"—but inside he actually felt completely disconnected from those in his life. Communication failed to bridge this gap—his actions made people think he was happy, when actually he was close to death. There is an implicit argument here that people should *strive* to listen to others more intently, because the poem seems to suggest that this kind of disconnect is common—perhaps even that failing to be understood by others is, sadly, a central part of being alive.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

MENTAL ILLNESS AND ISOLATION

Closely related to the poem's thematic treatment of communication and misunderstanding is its potential allusion to mental illness. That is, the poem can be taken as an extended metaphor or allegory for the specific pain and isolation of diseases like depression—which make the man feel like he is "drowning" yet unable to effectively ask for help. It's worth noting here that Smith herself struggled with depression for much of her life, and her own experiences likely informed the poem. The man's mistaken gestures, in this reading, suggest the divide between appearances and reality, between how people dealing with such illnesses are feeling internally and how the world sees them and/or how they present themselves to the world.

Drowning—with its insinuation of suffocation and crushing pressure—is often used to metaphorically represent the weight of mental illness. The man's disease makes him feel as though he is drowning, and the fact that he is "much further out than" people think implies that those around him have no idea how much he is struggling, how deeply depressed—and how close to the figurative edge—he really is.

Indeed, the crowd theorizes that the "cold" simply caused the man's heart to give out, but the man then adamantly insists that "it was too cold always." Taken metaphorically, he's saying that he *always* felt alone, discomforted; emotional warmth was *never* part of his experience. That the crowd believes the man to have "always loved larking" is thus tragically ironic, a testament to others' total inability (or, interpreted less generously, refusal) to understand the inner emotional turmoil of another human being.

In this interpretation of the poem, the man's distance from the world is the direct result of his internal anguish, as his illness has prevented him from emotionally connecting with those around him even if he wanted to do so. The poem thus suggests that part of the horror and pain of mental illness is feeling so distant and isolated from other people that even one's cries for help go unheard.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Nobody heard him, ...
... he lay moaning:

"Not Waving but Drowning" opens in deadpan style, with Smith immediately introducing both the poem's main theme (about communication and misunderstanding) and its main character (the "dead man"). Readers don't yet know where exactly this "dead man" is, though the poem's title suggests that he is in a body of water.

This first line also sets up the poem's central paradox—the attempt (in vain) by the dead man to explain his situation. The tense here is striking: the man is already presented as "dead," yet he is "still ... moaning." On the one hand, the use of the word "still" suggests that maybe the man *still could* be saved, if only someone were listening. The finality of the man being dead, however, contrasts with the urgency of "still" and creates an uneasy sense of futility. Even though the man is "still" moaning, it is too late to do anything about it; he will moan and moan, and nothing will change.

The word "still" can also be thought of as linking the dead man's moaning across different points in time—between his death and this weird, limbo-like afterlife he seems to now inhabit, and then also between the poem's present moment and this man's his entire life (as referred to in line 11 with "I was waving much too far out all my life"). In other words, perhaps the man has *always* been "moaning."

Moaning can mean two different things here, and Smith allows for both definitions. It can refer to complaining, which is certainly relevant to the dead man's frustrations with being misunderstood, but it also relates to sounds made in pain. The seeming contradiction between being "dead" and "moaning" can be understood as representative of the unheard expressions of pain from people who are suffering and in need of help. These cries are of no use because no one can hear them, but the doomed cry out anyway.

Alliteration in the first phrase—"Nobody heard him"—gives the line the sound of breathlessness and of exasperation, both of which are relevant to the dead man's situation (breathlessness because he drowned, and exasperation because he is/was frustrated at people's inability to understand him). There's also some consonance on the /m/ sound in these first lines, which links "him," "man," and "moaning"—essentially connecting the man directly to his agony.

Finally, the opening also puts the reader in a kind of privileged position in the sense that they *can* understand what the dead man is trying to communicate—while the gathered crowd within the poem itself are none-the-wiser.

LINES 3-4

I was much ...
... waving but drowning.

Taken literally, this stanza depicts a harrowing scene: a person is struggling to stay afloat in deep water very far from shore. "Nobody"—the people back on shore—can hear this person's moans of pain, and they also mistake this person's frantic arm movements for friendly waving until it's too late and the person drowns.

Of course, the scene is not really meant to be read as a literal account of a disastrous beach day. Instead, it can be taken as a commentary on misunderstanding, miscommunication, and the isolating struggle against mental illness.

The use of punctuation in this poem is important in establishing these more metaphorical readings of the poem. The colon at the end of line 2, after "moaning," suggests that these next two lines, which have a sudden shift into first-person, are spoken by the dead man *himself* (which is, of course, a paradox; dead people can't speak).

But the poem doesn't employ quotation marks. This introduces an element of unreliability into the reader's experience of the poem, and places the reader in a complex network of potential miscommunication between the dead man, the crowd, and perhaps even the poet herself. Basically, it's not clear who the "I" is here, and that's part of the poem's point; this "I" is unable to communicate effectively with the world.

Further destabilizing the poem is the second pronoun in line 3: "you." This probably applies to the gathered crowd alluded to by the "Nobody" in line 1. This crown, in turn, might stand in for everyone that ever knew this "dead man"—but it also subtly accuses the *reader* of failing to understand too. This builds the poem's case that human communication is inherently unreliable—or, at least, that much of what people might want to communicate goes unspoken or misunderstood.

The specific contrast between "waving" and "drowning" is also essential to the poem's core message. These two actions are selected because, from afar at least, they look pretty much identical. Looking out from shore, it will have been hard for anyone to have known that the man was waving for help—rather than merely saying "hello." If the poem is read as a kind of allegory for mental illness, this might speak to the tendency of people to keep negative feelings to themselves, to put on a brave face.

LINES 5-8

Poor chap, he ...
... They said.

Blink and you'll miss it, but the voice changes once again in the second stanza. Whereas lines 3 and 4 are attributed to a vague "I"—maybe the dead man, maybe the speaker of the poem—this stanza seems to be spoken by the crowd. It's worth pointing out that this crowd isn't really in one exact point in space and time—it's kind of on the shore near where the man drowns (which is probably an overly literal reading), but also could be at the man's funeral or just a record of general chit-chat. This switch in perspective is made clear in line 8 ("They said.").

In this stanza, then, members of the crowd offer their commentary on both the man's death and his life/personality. "Poor chap" in line 5 is glib and flippant, its throwaway sound emphasized by the comma caesura that immediately follows.

Smith draws a contrast between what the crowd thinks of the man and what the man himself actually thinks—and there is a huge disparity between the two. The crowd mistook the man's flailing for a waving, and this misunderstanding extends to their perspective on his character too. They think he "love larking" about, which means something like playing the fool. The alliteration of the two /l/ sounds makes the phrase extra playful—but, of course, this opinion is wrong. The man *wasn't* larking; he was drowning. Once again, then, the poem foregrounds the chaotic confusion and misunderstanding that arises in human communication, and the difference between what someone *seems* to be communicating and what they actually feel inside.

The lack of end punctuation in this stanza also creates an air of flippancy, as though the members of the crowd don't *really* care that much about the man's death. Indeed, their own communication seems to happen just for the sake of it, rather than being especially meaningful—they're just saying the kind of things people tend to say when someone distant dies, rather than responding emotionally.

In line 7, the crowd members theorize that it was the "cold" that caused the dead man to die—but the man later says to the reader that it was "too cold always." This line is the poem's longest, building a kind of tension that represents the final fearful moments before death (and the calm that comes after). This tension is released in the two-syllable line 8 ("They said."). As with the /h/ alliteration in line 1, "him his heart" in line 7 creates a sense of breathlessness that also fits with the description of death by drowning. This phrase also uses asyndeton—technically speaking, there should be an "and" between "him" and "his"—which quickens the line's pace and sense of panic.

LINES 9-10

Oh, no no ...
... one lay moaning)

With little signal, the poem switches voice again at the start of the third stanza. As with lines 3 and 4, these four lines are spoken in the first person, and perhaps by the dead man in the first person. This represents a kind of complaint or assessment made from beyond the grave, in which the man is allowed to fully comprehend both his entire life *and*, in particular, the way he was misunderstood by people throughout that life.

Line 9 starts with "Oh." This little syllable is in part a poetic cliché (think of someone doing an impression of a poet, and it usually starts with "Oh!"). But it's also a regular item in everyday speech, and used for all sorts of meanings. To name two, "oh" can express exasperation and also realization—as in, "Oh, now I understand." On top of all of this, though, "oh" is hardly thought of as a real word—it's not used in writing half as much as in speech. So placing it here foregrounds the poem's focus on communication and mis/understanding, while also

gently playing with poetic conventions.

After the "Oh," the dead man utters "no" three times in a row. This is a technique known as epizeuxis, and it helps the dead man express exasperation and frustration. The repetition also emphasizes the *extent* to which the gathered crowd are (and were) wrong about the dead man and his personality—those people aren't just wrong, they are wrong to the power of three!

The dead man refutes the crowd's theory about why he died, saying that it wasn't from the cold as it had "always" been "too cold." It's probably around this point that the subtext of the poem becomes most apparent, with a reading along the lines of emotional warmth/coldness seeming increasingly appropriate. In other words, this man, perhaps, *always* felt distant from others—but because of the gap between immediate communication and inner feeling, no-one really knew.

Line 10 reminds the reader that the man is dead and, paradoxically, is still talking. The parenthesis in the line sets it up as a kind of aside, a secret that only the dead man, the reader, and perhaps the poet are in on. It's a darkly comic moment, with the suggestion being that even in death the dead is *still* misunderstood. All in all, it's an absurd situation which expresses little faith in the ability of people to truly understand one another.

LINES 11-12

I was much ...
... waving but drowning.

Lines 11 and 12 continue on from the rest of the stanza through enjambment, suggesting a kind of continuation of thought. This is more important than it seems, because it suggests that the dead man's "moaning" remains uninterrupted—that is, unheard. That, of course, is precisely his complaint about his life: that people didn't really l listen to him!

Line 11, then picks up on line 3 and extends it further. Not only was the dead man "further out" than everybody thought, but he was "much too far out all my life." This, of course, isn't about his drowning—he hasn't been swimming all his life. This is about a different kind of distance— between an individual's private world and the people around them.

Line 12 is also a restatement: "And not waving but drowning." This phrase appears in line 4 *and* in the title of the poem itself. The dead man *really* wants this to be understood, then. He wasn't gleefully "waving" at people all his life, but slowly "drowning." People didn't see his sorrow because it was masked by appearances. The fact that this is said three times in the poem shows how important it is overall.

Furthermore, it's worth noting that the deliberate omission of punctuation marks, including quotation marks, has destabilized the poem's voice throughout. So, though this all *seems* to be said by "the dead man" of line 1, it *could* be a more general voice, or the poet herself (as some readings suggest).

The point is, this isn't really a poem about one particular individual, or about an actual drowning. It's about the way people drift through their lives feeling things that aren't obvious on the surface—or, more accurately, from far away. Looked at most bleakly, this speaks to a fundamental distance between one human and another that can never truly be crossed. Even when people say what they think, it's impossible to know for sure that they're saying everything. This poem, then, highlights the ease with which deep and important feelings can be hidden—and how these feelings can accumulate inside an individual to the point of overwhelming them.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Not Waving but Drowning" uses alliteration sparingly throughout. The first example is in line 1:

> Nobody heard him, the dead man,

These two /h/ sounds have an exasperated, breathy quality to them. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, it relates to the frustration felt by the dead man at how he's always been misunderstood, even in death. Secondly, with the focus on breath, it also relates to the way to the mention of drowning (and death as taking the final breath).

The next example is line 5:

> Poor chap, he always loved larking

This line is spoken by the crowd gathered around the dead man—the people who misunderstand both his death *and* the way he was during his lifetime. The playfulness of the two alliterating /l/ sounds (further supported by the consonance of "always") is ironic, because elsewhere in the poem the dead man desperately tries to communicate how he *never* "loved larking" (playing about)—or, at least, that his desperation was mistaken for friendliness and playfulness. In other words, he was "not waving but drowning" all his life.

In line 7, the poem returns to the /h/ sound mentioned above. This carries the same meaning, but is intensified: "him his heart gave way[.]" These /h/ sounds here are panicked and frantic, like the final moments before death.

Line 9 uses epizeuxis in the repeated "no," but this also creates an alliterative effect that emphasizes the word—and, in turn, stresses just *how* wrong everybody was about the man and his character.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "heard him"

- **Line 5:** "loved larking"
- **Line 7:** "him his heart"
- **Line 9:** "no no no"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton is used just once in "Not Waving but Drowning." It occurs in line 7, when the "they" of the poem—the gathered crowd and/or the people that knew the dead man—theorize about how and why he died:

> It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
> They said.

To make the sentence grammatically correct, there should be a punctuation mark (full stop, comma, colon etc.) or an "and" between "him" and "his." Asyndeton, which is the deliberate omission of a conjunction like "and," has the effect of hurrying the line along. This helps create a sense of panic that fits with the discussion of someone's dying moments—their heart "giving way"—but also implies that the words being spoken are somewhat hurried too. That is, these words are like gossip—they're not the considered thoughts of people who *really* knew the man, but more the throwaway comments of those who knew *of* him. The dead man then refutes this theorizing about how he died in the next stanza.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "him his"

CAESURA

There are four caesurae in "Not Waving but Drowning." Overall, the caesurae help with the flow and tone of the poem, which is remarkably and intentionally casual (as is the case with much of Smith's poetry).

In the first example (line 1), the caesura also helps introduce paradox and surprise using Smith's characteristically deadpan style:

> Nobody heard him, the dead man,

This could easily be the kind of grammatical construction found in a novel or story, but what *follows* the caesura is intentionally jarring. That is, the poem completely underplays the fact that this is a dead man speaking (for much of the poem), and the caesura helps achieve this sense of nonchalance.

The caesura in line 5 works a little differently:

> Poor chap, he always loved larking

This line is spoken by the murky mass of people that has gathered near to the dead man (whether literally or metaphorically). This caesura has a more throwaway sound, conveying the way that the people don't really know or care about the dead man. Indeed, they are totally wrong about him "lov[ing] larking"!

The other two caesurae are both in line 9:

> Oh, no no no, it was too cold always

This line returns the poem's voice to the dead man. The caesurae help emphasize the repeated "no" (and this immediate repetition is known as epizeuxis), creating a little space around it. This serves to emphasize the extent to which the dead man feels that people have got him wrong—and are still getting him wrong even after he's dead!

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "him, the"
- **Line 5:** "chap, he"
- **Line 9:** "Oh, no," "no, it"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout "Not Waving but Drowning," appearing in all three stanzas. The main function of the enjambment is a tonal one. The poem's lack of distinct punctuation, combined with the enjambment, creates a quick, breezy flow that is intentionally at odds with the tragic and sorrowful subject matter.

Enjambment also serves more specific functions in individual instances throughout the poem. The white space at the end of line 3 gives visual representation to the dead man's statement that he has *always* been "further out than you thought."

Later, the enjambment at the end of line 5 ("larking / and") makes the second stanza sound gossipy and throwaway. This makes perfect sense, because the people talking about the dead man don't really seem to know anything about him—that's what he himself thinks, at least.

Some lines in the poem that don't have punctuation are not really enjambed. Instead, lines such as line 6 contain complete units of thought:

> And now he's dead

This phrase itself isn't made complete by the following line, which begins a new sentence:

> It must have been ...

As such, this moment is not really enjambment. Arguably, even the lines we've highlighted above might be considered end-stopped by various readers. What's more important to

understand is how the poem's frequent lack of end punctuation adds to its overall tone. The enjambment and more general absence of punctuation, taken altogether, make much of the poem flow down the page completely uninterrupted. This is important because it helps to isolate the dead man and emphasizes the way that there is no one to understand him or respond—he is alone with his "moaning" (just like he was alone in life).

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** " thought / And"
- **Lines 5-6:** "larking / And"
- **Lines 11-12:** "life / And"

EPIZEUXIS

Epizeuxis is used once in "Not Waving but Drowning." It appears at the start of the third stanza, when the poem's voice returns to the "dead man" of line 1:

> Oh, no no no, it was too cold always

This line is said in response to lines 7 and 8:

> It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
> They said.

Basically, the people on the shore have just theorized that the man died because of the cold. The epizeuxis in the repeated "no" stresses the dead man's disagreement with the crowd, emphasizing just *how* wrong he thinks they are about him. He didn't die from the literal cold, because "it was too cold" for him "always." Here the dead man seems to take the crowd's word and widen its meaning to include a kind of emotional distance. He found it difficult to connect with others because of the unreliability of human communication—making the repetition of "no" here all the more poignant.

Think about why people repeat the same word when they speak. It's usually because they want to get something across clearly, to make their meaning entirely unambiguous. The repetition here, then, feeds into the poem's discussion of communication and misunderstanding. The speaker could hardly be more clear, yet *still* no-one hears or understands him.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "no no no"

PARADOX

It's fair to say that "Not Waving but Drowning" is paradoxical from start to finish. The central paradox is this: a man is dead, yet still he tries to communicate.

This is set up right from the start. Nobody can hear "the dead man"—which doesn't really seem unusual. Obviously, dead people tend not to be heard because they are no longer capable of making sound! But the poem presents this as though the *actual* unusual thing happening is the fact that nobody can *hear* the dead man—not the fact that he is trying to *speak*.

Essentially, this sets up an uncrossable distance between the dead man and the "they" that make up the gathered crowd (who also stand in for those that knew the man throughout his life). The dead man was "too far out all [his] life" to such an extend that he was, in a way, dead already. The inability of the man to communicate with the crowd from the world of the dead mirrors his frustration at human communication when he was actually alive. Overall, this paradox is deeply unsettling for the reader—because it's the reader that *can* hear and understand the dead man.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

VOCABULARY

Moaning (Line 2, Line 10) - Moaning primarily means one of two things: complaining, or making noises to express suffering. Its use here works with both main definitions of the word. The dead man's words are a kind of complaint, but also a noise made in pain.

Larking (Line 5) - To lark is to joke around in a playful way—something the man is definitely not doing!

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As with most of Stevie Smith's poetry, "Not Waving but Drowning" masks complex and dark subject matter with an apparently simplistic form. The poem consists of twelve lines divided equally into three four-line stanzas (quatrains), a common and recognizable stanza form.

This apparent mismatch between the subject—miscommunication and death—and form actually helps establish the poem's main theme. That is, the easy, clear form seems almost *wrong* for what is being discussed. The poem's form thus reflects the poem's thematic treatment of communication and misunderstanding, as it opens the poem *itself* up to being oversimplified and misunderstood.

It's also notable the way that the lines 4 and 12 are exactly the same—and that they also repeat the title:

> And not waving but drowning.

This repetition gives the poem a kind of circular, inescapable logic—as though the reader is also trapped inside the dead man's predicament.

Finally, the stanza form also approximates the sound of the ballad stanza; this aspect of the poem is covered in the "Rhyme Scheme" section of this guide.

METER

The meter in "Not Waving but Drowning" is mixed, never quite settling into a regular rhythm. It can thus be thought of as free verse, with the lack of strict meter reflecting the poem's conversational, casual tone—a tone that is distinctly at odds with the dark subject matter at hand.

The poem thus plays with a tension between the breezy sound of light verse (e.g., the kind used by Lewis Carrol and Edward Lear) while also disrupting that sense of flow in a few key moments. Generally speaking, most metrical feet in the poem are either iambic (da-DUM) or anapestic (da-da-DUM).

Both types of feet play an important role in the poem. Take the mostly anapaestic speech from the dead man in lines 3 and 4:

> I was much | further out | than you thought |
> And not wav- | ing but drown- | ing.

The sound of the anapests here is intentionally playful, which is at odds with the serious point that the dead man is trying to make. In this way, the poem subtly builds its argument about the unreliability of communication by creating this tension between what is said and the vehicle for saying it.

In terms of iambs, line 7 is probably the most significant example (quoted with line 8):

> It must | have been | too cold | for him | his heart |
> gave way,
> They said.

Line 7 is by far the longest in the poem, and is technically a line of iambic hexameter (meaning there are six iambic feet in the line). The main effect is to render the sound of a heartbeat, each da-DUM helping to represent the dead man's final moments. The single-footed line 8 is a kind of release of tension, but also makes the previous line feel less serious—perhaps reflecting that the members of the crowd who speak line 7 don't *really* care that deeply about the dead man.

RHYME SCHEME

"Not Waving but Drowning" roughly follows the rhyme scheme of a ballad stanza: ABCB. This gives the poem a playful sound that works in tension with the serious and dark subject matter. The way that the rhymes chime together is, in itself, a kind of "larking"—of playing around in a carefree manner. This love of larking, of course, is something that the dead man strongly denies—he feels he was misunderstood all his life, and is even misunderstood still in death.

Take the first stanza:

> ... man, A
> ... moaning: B
> ... thought C
> ... drowning. B

"Moaning" and "drowning" are not full rhymes, of course, but the way they appear in stanza 1 *and* stanza 3 lends them extra emphasis. This helps heighten the bleakness of the poem, putting weight on the word "drowning" especially. The "dead" and "said" rhyme in the second stanza is extremely simple, which helps make the man's deadness all-the-more matter of fact.

SPEAKER

The question of who is speaking is one of the most interesting aspects of "Not Waving but Drowning." The poem opens with a third-person description of the scene: a dead man lies moaning and unheard. But the colon at the end of line 2 suggests that lines 3 and 4 are spoken by the dead man *himself*—that the "I" is in fact his voice.

Then, without warning, the poem switches voice back to a "he" in line 5:

> Poor chap, he always loved larking

And then to a "they" in line 8—a reference to a gathering of people who are perhaps on the shore where the man died, or at his funeral, or just a kind of mix of people he knew through his life. The poem then returns to the first-person in the final stanza, though the parenthetical line 10—"Still the dead one lay moaning"—represents *another* third-person interjection.

Confused? That's part of the point. All in all, the poem toys with the reader's understanding of the speaker, switching it up with very little warning or ceremony. This speaks to the poem's focus on the inherently unstable nature of communication in general.

Some critics also draw a link between the first-person speaker in the poem and Stevie Smith herself. That is, the "I" throughout the poem might be taken as the poet speaking, rather than the dead man talking from beyond the grave.

Furthermore, there is something that feels quite general about the final stanza—as though these are words that apply more widely than to one specific individual. In other words, the poem deals with a more general feeling common to the human experience: the disconnect between inner feeling and outer

expression.

SETTING

"Not Waving but Drowning" spends very little time on drawing out its setting. The main clue to the setting is "drowning," which suggests some kind of coastline environment (when coupled with the fact that people seem to be close enough to comment on what has happened). Essentially, on a literal level, the poem seems to take place on aa coast; out in the deep water is the drowning man, while other people remain on shore.

But the setting is intentionally ambiguous and mysterious in this poem, mixing up a possible literal reading with the more allegorical discussion of emotional coldness and social distance. That is, this physical setting can be taken as a representation of the way individuals may feel isolated from and unable to communicate with other people. The man in the water represents the isolated individual, while the crowd on the shore represents the rest of society.

It's also worth noting that the time period of the poem is ambiguous too. While on one level the poem seems to be about a specific moment in time, the dead man's words in the third stanza broaden the discussion to include his entire life. The difficulty that the reader has in establishing a secure sense of time and place is part of the poem's general exploration of miscommunication.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Stevie Smith was a British poet who lived from 1902 to 1971. Her verse is often characterized by an unsettling mixture of lightness and darkness: while her subject matter is often bleak and hard-hitting, most of her poems have a breezy, whimsical kind of sound. That is certainly the case with this particular poem.

"Not Waving but Drowning" was published in the collection of the same name in 1957, and is by far the most well-known of Smith's poems. Like a number of her other poems, this one mixes a vision of death with dark humor. Likewise, the poem as it was published in the collection was more ambiguous about its central character than a first reading might suggest. Smith often accompanied her poems with simple line drawings, and the drawing that goes with "Not Waving but Drowning" shows a woman with a vague expression (not dissimilar, though much simpler, to the Mona Lisa). In its focus on the disparity between inner feeling and outer appearance, "Not Waving but Drowning" can also be compared to Smith's "Deeply Morbid."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In truth, "Not Waving but Drowning" doesn't have much of a historical context—it talks in quite general terms about its subject matter, and doesn't have any specific ties to a particular time or place (apart from "chap," which makes the poem seem like its located in England).

The disconnect between how someone feels inside and how others perceive them is an age-old subject for literature and philosophy. This links in with the philosophical concept of solipsism, which suggests that the only thing someone can truly verify is their own mind. The concealment of emotion is nothing new, and the poem gives a sense that the "dead man" has been putting on a brave face throughout his life. This has a historical precursor in the Victorian concept of the "stiff upper lip"—a resolute lack of emotional outburst when faced with difficult circumstances. While there is more of a drive in the 21st century to encourage people to speak about their emotions, suffering in silence remains extremely common too.

Given the poem's possible interpretation as being about the pain and isolation of mental illness, it's worth noting that Smith herself suffered from depression and had a morbid fascination with death for much of her life.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Smith's Illustrations — The line drawing that accompanies the poem. (https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/506443920596727006/)
- Playing Smith — An interview with actress Glenda Jackson, who played Stevie Smith on stage. (https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/mar/17/glenda-jackson-poet-stevie-smith-interview-1977)
- Smith's Life and Work — More information about Smith's biography and poetry from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/stevie-smith#tab-poems)
- Smith Reads Her Poem — Listen to Smith recite "Not Waving but Drowning." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKHWEWOrL9s)
- "Making It New" — A documentary clip featuring Smith discussing her poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXvYv6_kaps)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*Not Waving but Drowning*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Jan 2020. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Not Waving but Drowning*." LitCharts LLC, January 7, 2020. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/stevie-smith/not-waving-but-drowning.