Çankaya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
2025, Vol. 19, no. 1, 199-211
https://doi.org/10.47777/cankujhss.1646961

ÇANKAYA UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Literary Studies | research article

Not Drowning But Drawing: The Defiant Vision Of Stevie Smith

Boğulmuyor, Çiziyor: Stevie Smith'in Direnişçi Vizyonu

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ABSTRACT
This article aims to provide an analysis of how English poet and novelist Stevie Smith's poetry and simple sketches oscillate between despair and creative survival, intricately navigating the theme of death, as most notably seen in poems such as "Not Waving but Drowning," "The River Deben", "Oblivion," "Black March," "Come, Death (2)" and "Tender Only to the One." This work also argues that Smith's treatment of death as a gentle friend rather than a feared, ominous entity and even reframing it as a figure of god reveals a gradual transition from a misunderstood force, obscured by alienation and miscommunication to a desirable oblivion, liberated from suffering and constraints of life. Finally, a dimension of reverent, solemn acceptance and eager anticipation offer eternal and genuine relief from the unbearable burdens and turbulences of life. In that sense, Smith's configurations of death and evocative drawings accompanying some of her poems mirror a sense of existential solitude while simultaneously resisting despair through creative expression.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 26 Feb 2025
Accepted 29 Mar 2025

KEYWORDS
Stevie Smith, poetry, death, drawing, defiance

Introduction

Most notably known for her poetry collections and only novel, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), English writer Stevie Smith (1902-1971) has surprisingly been an overlooked figure in critical enquiries. Her childlike verses and ostensibly amateurish sketches have often been dismissed, however her unique appreciation of death which is a persistent theme in her oeuvre is projected into constructing her own 'god' amplifying how the creative impetus is not limited with drawing skills but also literary vision which turns into a defiance and survival for her in grappling with the tragedies of her own life as "her mother died when [she] was in her teens and for the rest of her life [she] lived, unmarried with her aunt" (Masud and White, 2018, p. 291). Having suffered from tuberculosis and subsequent health issues at a young age might have fuelled, at least in part, the dominance of mortality as a motif in her poetry. Lee Upton's *Stevie Smith and the Anxiety of Intimacy* delves deeply into these aspects of Smith's life, highlighting how they influenced her poetic expressions of isolation, abandonment, and existential uncertainty. Upton discusses the key events in Smith's early years that contributed to her emotional landscape, noting: "The separations within Smith's own life have been rehearsed frequently: a father who abandoned the family during Smith's

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CUJHSS (e-ISSN 3062-0112) Published by Çankaya University.

infancy; Smith's hospitalization at the age of five for nearly three years in a home for the tubercular; her mother's early death while Smith was still a teenager" (1991, p. 25). It is observed that, Stevie's interaction with death, without a chronological order, embodies shifting perspectives from ambiguous, humorous detachment to a comforting isolation in conjuring her own god and in doing so; in spite of not offering direct and explicit interpretations, Smith's doodles shape the reading experience becoming an integral and idiosyncratic part of her poetic vision. In that regard, the death wish that permeates her poems is not merely an end or elusive, distant, fearsome phenomenon but a reassuring, intimate, pervasive presence.

Death and Drawing

When it comes to the scholarly approach to Stevie Smith's poetry, Jihyun Yun highlights a crucial oversight, pinpointing how critics have traditionally prioritized textual interpretation while treating the drawings as secondary elements. Although early evaluations like the one made by Philip Larkin dismissed them as whimsical and amateurish, Larkin's description of the drawings as "cute" and "crazy", there has also been alternative readings as by their sheer placement and presence on the page, demand immediate attention and shape the reader's experience before the words are even processed:

> In approaching Smith's poetry as a composite of image and language, previous scholars have, almost without exception, tried to seek a possible relation between the drawings and the words *only after* interpreting the words first. That is, the drawings have always been considered as secondary to words. I propose a different approach from this established method of reading: I suggest that we close-read the drawings first and then move on to reading the words. (Yun, 2021, p. 1129)

Stevie Smith's poetry reveals a dynamic fusion of the verbal and the visual, where imagery is not merely descriptive but functions as a process of self-construction and meaning-making. Her work frequently dissolves the boundaries between the textual and the pictorial, demonstrating a profound engagement with visual thinking and iconic projection. Smith's distinctive hand-drawn illustrations alongside her poetry reinforce this intermedial approach, transforming her poems into aesthetic structures engaging with the visual as an essential mode of poetic expression. In his work "The Relevance of Stevie Smith's Drawings" Jack Barbera mentions while researching a biography of Stevie Smith with William McBrien how he discovered that drawing was "one of Stevie's constant delights as a child" (1985, p. 222). Despite lacking formal training and doubting her drawing skills, Stevie Smith was deeply committed to publishing her artwork, which, though not primarily intended as poem illustrations, appeared in every poetry collection. Scholars have noted that Stevie Smith's drawings are not merely decorative but actively shape the reading experience. As Stewart observes:

> Drawings, then, often enter into a gap in the text and force us to read between the lines. In addition, they serve as perhaps Smith's most playful and subversive "construction site," the place where we literally see – that is, receive a visual representation of – the carnivalesque banter of traditions, languages, and cultural scripts that reverberate in her work. The words of the poem most often do not simply tell the story of the pictures. Instead, the drawings supply yet another marker in the play of difference. (1998, p. 71)

Accordingly, in Kay Dick's interview from the book *Ivy&Stevie* (1971), Smith herself admitted that her drawings "have nothing to do with the poems" (p. 70) and described keeping them in a playbox, suggesting that they emerged independently rather than as direct illustrations of her literary work. On the other hand, in her critical biography Spalding notes that "Stevie was insistent that the drawings were a part of the verse and must be published" (1990, p. 221). Stevie Smith's relationship with her own artistic abilities was marked by a characteristic ambivalence, particularly in regard to

her drawings as her visual art, much like her verse, operates within a space of contradiction – crafted with deliberation yet seemingly spontaneous, whimsical yet deeply evocative. This duality mirrors the thematic tensions in her poetry, where irony and sincerity, detachment and deep emotional resonance, coexist. The whimsical juxtaposition of her drawings with her poems highlights her resistance to rigid artistic categories, creating an interplay between word and image that enlightens the layered ambiguity central to her work.

Early analyses of Stevie Smith's drawings often regard them as seamless extensions of her poetry, echoing its tone and thematic concerns. However, a closer look uncovers a stark tension between image and text. While her poetry delves into profound themes of death, alienation, and despair, her deceptively simple, childlike drawings create an ironic or dissonant contrast, unsettling the reader's expectations and complicating the relationship between visual and verbal expression. This visual naïveté, juxtaposed with the weight of her poetic subjects, creates a tension that complicates interpretation. She doodles spontaneously – on the backs of envelopes, memo pads, and scraps of paper – and keeps the ones she likes, without necessarily connecting them to specific poems. Yet, despite this professed separation there are instances where the two forms seem to complete each other, reinforcing or deepening meaning. In Kristen Marangoni's words the doodled drawings function as "creative evoking of the 'spirit of the poem' in her pairings of texts and images" (2018, p. 378). In that sense, Stevie Smith's drawings intervene in the text, encouraging readers to look beyond the written words. They act as a playful and subversive space where visual elements reflect the interplay of traditions, languages, and cultural influences in her work. Rather than directly illustrating the poems, the drawings create a new dimension of meaning, adding to the richness and complexity of her artistic expression.

Smith's doodles or simple sketches accompanying her poems not only add a unique whimsical touch but they also mirror and exemplify how illustrations interact with written words which inevitably leads to comparisons with another visual poet William Blake. What these two comparative figures share as thematic preoccupations and artistic styles like fairy tale aesthetics can be enriched through certain poems. Although Smith's sketches lack the elaborate details of Blake's illumination, in terms of evoking imagery they share the same function. Smith's sketches do not merely provide visual counterpoints, they could also make the poems more accessible to interpret steering the readers into thematic depts. Blake's works brim with color, intricate patterns, and interwoven text, creating a visual and textual simultaneity that reinforces his poetic vision. Smith, on the other hand, adopts an intentionally sparse and minimalist approach, her line drawings exuding a stark loneliness that mirrors the emotional landscape of her poetry. Yet, in both cases, illustration becomes an essential part of poetic expression, guiding interpretation and deepening thematic resonance.

Death naturally occupies a central position in Smith's thoughts, shaping much of her poetic imagination. Throughout her work, she repeatedly flirts with the idea of suicide, portraying life as burdensome and death as a longed-for release. In her article "Fear, Melancholy and Loss in the Poetry of Stevie Smith," Ruth Baumert (2007) pleads that unlike other women writers like Virginia Woolf or Anne Sexton, Smith "seems to have found her coping style" (p. 216) and "the most important factor was that she learned to accept her marginality and even make a virtue out of it" (p. 216). In a way, Smith's "coping style" could be seen making death a recurring theme in her poetry and framing it on her own terms. In the same interview made by Kay Dick, Smith confesses "I love death, I think it's the most exciting thing" (1971, p. 71). She says "one has the power to summon God, because death is a god…" (1971, p. 71). Stevie Smith's lifelong argument with the Christian God

of her childhood and her preoccupation with Thanatos[1], the servant-god of death, are central themes in her poetry. Her distinctive treatment of death as a comforting presence or companion rather than a tragic mood of mortality has always been considered a hallmark of her poetry. Although Stevie Smith frequently rejects Christian doctrine in her meditations on death, her poetry also reveals an ongoing engagement with religious themes, suggesting that her agnosticism was, at times, a site of inner tension. As noted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Smith is described as "a religious skeptic" whose work is nonetheless deeply invested in "theological speculation, the language of the Bible, and religious experience" (Ramazani & Stallworthy, 2012, p. 2599). Rather than adhering to traditional Christian belief, her poetry often replaces institutionalized religion with a distinctive, personal spirituality. This is particularly evident in her reflections on death, where God is frequently supplanted by Death itself – a figure that emerges as both an inevitable force and, at times, a source of solace. In this way, Smith's work does not simply reject religious frameworks but reshapes them, transforming death into a metaphysical presence that occupies the space traditionally reserved for the divine.

To fully grasp Smith's complex perspective on death, it is crucial to consider the historical backdrop of her time. Born just before World War I, she lived through Europe's descent into World War II, an era defined by widespread devastation and loss. However, despite the turbulent political landscape of her time, Smith's poetry remains strikingly apolitical. Rather than engaging directly with political themes, she adopts a fairy-tale style, often employing a childlike voice that paradoxically deepens the impact of her reflections on mortality. Philip Larkin, in his article "Frivolous and Vulnerable", expands on this aspect of Smith's work, remarking:

> I am not aware that Stevie Smith's poems have ever received serious critical assessment, though recently I have seen signs that this may not be far off. They are certainly presented with that hallmark of frivolity, drawings and if my friends had been asked to replace Miss Smith they would no doubt have put her somewhere in the uneasy marches between humorous and children's. (1991, p.75)

Therefore, Smith's preoccupation with death can be juxtaposed with a childlike treatment, as seen in her use of fairy-tale motifs and deceptively simple language. This contrast between innocence and existential depth complicates the reading of her poetry, making death not merely an end but a space of transformation and release. Romana Huk, in her article "Poetic Subject and Voice as Sites of Struggle: Toward A Post-Revisionist Reading of Stevie Smith's Fairy-Tale Poems", interprets this tension as a means of negotiating identity and language itself. She argues that:

> Death becomes the as yet unimaginable possibility beyond imprisoning language, the space against which words and identities take definition, symbolic and imaginary words collide, it is the night or blankness into which Smith's speakers often run or ride as they attempt to escape from their own discursively constructed selves in her fairy tale poems. (1997, p. 154)

The fairy tale framework and its simplistic structure allows Smith to subvert expectations to amalgamate complex inquiries through childlike lens and wonder with a playful tone steering readers into existential reflections. For that matter, Stevie Smith's poetic style is often characterized by a *fausse-naïve* quality, a term coined by Philip Larkin to describe her distinctive blend of childlike simplicity and deep philosophical inquiry. Christopher Ricks further emphasizes this notion stating "Fausse-naive: an odd turn, but the right route into the world of Stevie Smith" (1981, p. 147). This phrase, with its Anglo-French origins and paradoxical nature, aptly captures the complexities of Smith's work. While her poetry may appear whimsical or naïve on the surface, it frequently grapples

[1] "The Death instinct described by Freud as 'Thanatos' is a death drive manifested as a desire to return to the previous state, lifelessness and stasis, and the state of none-existence in which individuals no longer experience anxiety, stress or tension" (Heidarzadegan & Shareef, 2021, p. 1628).

with profound and unsettling themes, particularly those of childhood and death. Her voice, often childlike and accompanied by whimsical drawings, has led to her work being frequently overlooked as serious poetry. Jane Dowson, in *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology*, notes that one of the reasons for the scarcity of serious analysis of Smith's poetry is its being unclassifiable (1996, p. 139). At first glance, the juxtaposition of children and death in Smith's work may seem incongruous. However, both themes reflect her fascination with the tension between innocence and knowledge, playfulness and existential dread. In poems like "Not Waving but Drowning", Smith intertwines a seemingly playful tone with profound tragedy, a hallmark of her distinctive style. Her work thrives on contradictions, blending the peculiar, the paradoxical, and an unsettlingly childlike perspective to explore life's most somber themes. In doing this, one can place Smith within a realm of contradictions, resisting easy categorization, questioning religious dictates, embodying both playfulness and profound existential inquiry, which defies conventional norms and ultimately strengthens her poetic legacy.

Representations of Death in Poems

Whether it represents a peaceful release, a passage to the eternal, or a reconciliation with the inevitable, the theme of death has been a central preoccupation for poets, spanning from the metaphysical inquiries of John Donne to the modernist and postmodernist contemplations of Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, and Stevie Smith. Stevie Smith's exploration of death diverges significantly from that of Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson, particularly in the approach to the concept of mortality and suicidal tendencies. As Lawson observes "…death was never for Stevie Smith what it became for Sylvia Plath, a terrible solution to an intolerable existence, an action of despair, anger and outrage" (1983, p. 95). Unlike Plath's harrowing depiction of death as a means to resolve the conflict between life and suffering, Smith's death is often viewed as an opportunity for peace, even though it is sometimes accompanied by a sense of resignation or ambivalence. On the other hand, like Emily Dickinson, Smith incorporates a philosophical and introspective approach to death. Like Smith, Dickinson approaches death not with despair but with curiosity and contemplation. Her perspective is deeply spiritual and philosophical, delving into its inevitability and mystery while often reflecting on the metaphysical dimensions of mortality. She portrays death as an inevitable meeting with God, presenting it as a release from the suffering of life rather than a feared end. Dickinson's twelve-line poem "Drowning is not so pitiful" not only resonates with Smith's most famous poem in terms of title, it also encapsulates the notion that eternal life in heaven is preferable to the hardships of earthly existence.

"Drowning is not so pitiful
As the attempt to rise.
Comes up to face the skies,
And then declines forever
To that abhorred abode
Where hope and he part company
For he is grasped of God.
The Maker's cordial visage,
However good to see,
Is shunned we must admit it,
Like an adversity" (Dickinson, 1994, p. 25)

Dickinson's "Drowning is Not So Pitiful" and Smith's "Not Waving but Drowning", albeit years apart, both use drowning as a central metaphor for death. While for Dickinson death, symbolized by drowning could be a more desirable fate than the painful struggle to survive, it equals to a tragic consequence of miscommunication and isolation for Smith.

This theme of misinterpretation and alienation is at the heart of Smith's most famous poem, "Not Waving but Drowning", first published in her 1953 collection of the same name – the same year she attempted suicide at her workplace. The poem encapsulates Smith's persistent preoccupation with death, drawing on personal experiences from both her childhood and adult life. At the same time, it challenges the notion of romanticized suicide, a recurring yet complex theme woven throughout her body of work. Through its portrayal of death, the dying, and the deceased, the poem raises profound existential questions that challenge conventional perceptions of mortality.

"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 is 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" (Smith, 1983, p. 303)

Stevie Smith, "Not Waving but Drowning", *Collected Poems* (Smith, 1983, p. 303)

Jack Barbera and McBrien's biography of the poet suggests that Smith was likely inspired by a newspaper story about a drowning man who was mistaken for waving (1985, p. 186). The poem also arouses an immediate sense of misunderstanding, isolation and ignorance offering a paradoxical act of moaning for a dead man probably implying the lingering emotional or mental pain beyond physical death. This could also enact waving as a mental anguish or desperate plea illustrating how signs of distress go unnoticed. On the other hand, "Not Waving but Drowning" epitomizes what water imagery in many of her poems symbolises like death and isolation often suggesting a transition, fluidity rather than negativity. Although the quiet, undisturbed nature of water contrasts with the violence of drowning, it can also be eerily calm, aligning with her view of death as a comforting, almost welcoming presence. Although the first stanza offers an observer's perspective with third person narrator suggesting lack of recognition for the dead man, the shift to first person in the third stanza makes the poem deeply personal paralleling Smith's own feelings of emotional alienation.

Stevie Smith's accompanying sketch which has an androgynous, even feminine quality with long hair and slightly rounded features in contrast with the masculine identity of the poem's subject further reinforces the idea that the speaker's voice and the dead man's voice are intertwined. The ambiguity in the sketch might reflect her personal identification with the drowned figure – perhaps mirroring the shift in perspective within the poem, where the voice of the dead man merges with the speaker's own emotions. The poem's protagonist, a drowning man whose cries for help are

mistaken for mere gestures of playfulness, mirrors Smith's own sense of being unheard and misread by society. Her resignation is evident in the transition from struggling against isolation to surrendering to it – there is no longer an effort to be understood, only the quiet acceptance of drowning. The tragi-comic quality of the poem heightens its impact; the absurdity of the misinterpretation is both darkly humorous and deeply unsettling. In this way, Smith blends irony with existential despair, reinforcing her recurring motif of death not as an end but as a return to an earlier, perhaps more peaceful state.

In examining Stevie Smith's artistic and literary approach, the poem not only serves as a powerful lens in suggesting a transformation of how Smith channels her own struggles into artistic expression, but it also mirrors how her work often navigates themes of isolation and existential crisis through both poetry and illustration. The title of the poem, which reinforces the sense of an unheard plea, echoes Smith's drawings that often accompany her poetry, serving as a second voice that demands to be seen and interpreted rather than dismissed. Her art is not just an echo of suffering but an active means of reinterpreting and reframing it. As Steward suggests: "The poem stands as a kind of analogy for the drawings in all of Smith's poems. Nobody may "hear" them, but they continue to speak, almost "too far out" from body of the text, but not quite. As extra-discursive components, they dramatize play within language and the possibilities of deconstructing meaning so that there are always meanings thrashing about in the sea of textuality" (1998, p. 79). The description of drawings as "extra-discursive components" suggests that they exist outside conventional linguistic structures, offering an alternative mode of communication that destabilizes fixed interpretations. Their presence creates a visual dialogue with the text, much like figures "thrashing about in the sea," struggling to be seen and understood.

"The River Deben," like "Not Waving but Drowning," uses water as a metaphor for death. However, while "Not Waving but Drowning" portrays a tragic and unnoticed passing, "The River Deben" presents death with a sense of spiritual acceptance, embracing its inevitability rather than resisting it.

> "All the waters of the River Deben
> Go over my head to the last wave even
> Such a death were sweet to seven times seven.
>
> Death sits in the boat with me
> His face is shrouded but he smiles I see
> The time is not yet, he will not come so readily" (Smith, 1983, p. 48)

Stevie Smith, "The River Deben", *Collected Poems* (Smith, 1983, p. 48)

According to Smith, in offering a sense of calm and relief, death and river bear explicit comparisons as Smith portrays death as a tranquil, natural occurrence, much like a river's steady flow. The smiling death imagery suggests a gentle surrender, emphasizing its inevitability and its peaceful embrace. The key tension in the poem is between the desire for the serenity of death and the understanding that it is not yet time. The line "*Thou comest unwished"* suggests that, despite moments of longing for rest, death is not something she actively seeks. Smith's sketch appears to depict two figures – a rower and a seated, possibly female figure representing Stevie Smith herself, contemplating death but not yet ready for it. Meanwhile, the male figure in the boat could symbolize Death, rowing steadily yet patiently, complying with Smith's frequent personification of Death as a quiet, almost companion-like presence – neither menacing nor immediate, but always near.

Stevie Smith's engagement with death is neither wholly despairing nor conventionally redemptive, but rather a paradoxical embrace of its finality as a form of liberation. While death is often portrayed as an end, in Smith's work it is also an ever-present possibility – one that, rather than inducing fear, can provide a means of coping with life's inherent suffering. Spalding (1990) observes that "in her attitude to death, Stevie is, it at first seems, at her most unchristian" (p. 242). Unlike traditional Christian narratives that frame death as a transition to eternal life, Smith saw it as "a scatterer," a force that dismantles the rigid structures of human existence and offers "a release that is absolute" (Spalding, 1990, p. 242). Though she rejected the Christian notion of death as a passage to divine realm, Smith's humanist perspective remained curiously buoyant. She likened death to "waiting for a train one really longs to take", suggesting an eager anticipation rather than dread (Spalding, 1990, p. 242). This outlook aligns with her broader philosophical stance – one that finds solace in the inevitability of death rather than in the promise of an afterlife. In this way, Smith does not simply dwell on mortality as a source of anguish, but rather, as a persistent undercurrent that tempers life's hardships, allowing for an ironic, at times even playful, engagement with the concept of oblivion.

In exemplary poems like "Oblivion", Smith's reflections on death deepen as she moves into creating a desirable space devoid of sufferings and constraints. Such an oblivion not only equals into state of independence but also spares one from the burdens of existence. Her belief that "one longs to die, because it would be more in control of everything … because being alive is like being in enemy territory" (Dick, 1971, p. 71) complies with broader critique of the human condition – her skepticism toward societal norms, her rejection of conventional religious belief, and her fascination with death as a form of escape. In "Oblivion," Stevie Smith encapsulates a poignant struggle between the peace of death and the pain of human connection.

"It was a human face in my oblivion
A human being and a human voice
That cried to me, Come back, come back, come back.
But I would not. I said I would not come back.
It was so sweet in my oblivion
There was a sweet mist wrapped me round about
And I trod in a sweet and milky sea, knee deep,
That was so pretty and so beautiful, growing deeper.
But still the voice cried out, Come back, come back,
Come back to me from sweet oblivion!
It was a human and related voice
That cried to me in pain. So I turned back.
I cannot help but like Oblivion better
Than being a human heart and human creature,
But I can wait for her, her gentle mist
And those sweet seas that deepen are my destiny

And must come even if not soon" (Smith, 1983, p. 562)

Stevie Smith, "Oblivion", *Collected Poems (*Smith, 1983, p. 562).

This sketch, with its simple yet haunting depiction of a face under a wide-brimmed hat, resonates strongly with the themes of "Oblivion". The figure's vacant expression, lack of detailed features, and almost detached gaze evoke a sense of isolation and detachment from the world – aligning with the poem's depiction of death as an alluring escape from reality. Geraldine Bell interprets the face "wearing an enigmatic smile, perhaps one of confidence or conviction" and the hat signifying "going away and also running away" quoting from Smith's poems (2016, p. 4). The speaker's journey into the "sweet oblivion" represents a desire to escape the burdens of life and the emotional tumult that accompany human existence. The repeated use of adjectives like "sweet," "gentle," and "milky" conveys a serene, almost childlike yearning for death, presenting it as a release – a blissful retreat from the harshness of life. Smith moves from depicting another's drowning in "Not Waving but Drowning" to embodying the experience herself, signaling a shift in her poetic engagement with death. Through recurring imagery of water, rivers, and boats, she constructs a liminal space between life and death, where oblivion appears serene and almost hypnotic rather than terrifying. This evolving perspective suggests a growing detachment from the physical world, as the poet resists return and instead surrenders to the irresistible pull of the unknown.

This idea of detachment in contemplating death is further underscored from the abstract erasure of "Oblivion" to the intimate conversation with death in "Black March". Rather than offering a straightforward reflection, "Black March" embodies a fluid and unpredictable creative process – one that oscillates between detachment and connection, allowing for interpretation and ambiguity.

"I have a friend
At the end
Of the world.
His name is breath

Of fresh air.
He is dressed in
Grey chiffon. At least
I think it is chiffon.
It has a
Peculiar look, like smoke.

It wraps him round
It blows out of place
It conceals him
I have not seen his face.

But I have seen his eyes, they are
As pretty and bright
As raindrops on black twigs
In March, and heard him say:
I am a breath
Of fresh air for you, a change
By and by.
Black March I call him" (Smith, 1983, p. 567-568)

The speaker in the poem expresses a deep conviction in the figure of the "black march," whose position at the end of the world suggests a god-like stature. Death is depicted as a breath clothed in grey chiffon, evoking both its spectral presence and ominous nature. However, the poet's attempt to reconcile with death is evident in the choice of the word "friend," signaling a paradoxical intimacy with the inevitable. Smith is not the first poet to personify death; her portrayal immediately recalls John Donne's "Death Be Not Proud", which similarly challenges and reimagines the nature of mortality. Smith personifies death as an ethereal figure dressed in "grey chiffon," an image that evokes both delicacy and elusiveness. The fabric, "like smoke," wraps around him, concealing his face, reinforcing the idea that death is an unknowable force, present but never fully revealed. Yet, she does not describe him in ominous or threatening terms. Instead, his eyes are "as pretty and bright / As raindrops on black twigs / In March," suggesting a quiet beauty in the transition from life to death.

Smith is engrossed with the idea of death to such an extent that, death becomes the only true source of freedom while life is intolerable and fraught with pain, exhaustion and discontent. The poet's unwavering trust in Death's companionship is evident in "Come, Death (2)":

"I feel ill. What can the matter be?
I'd ask God to have pity on me,
But I turn to the one I know, and say:
Come, Death, and carry me away.
Ah me, sweet Death, you are the only god
Who comes as a servant when he is called, you
Listen then to this sound I make, it is sharp,
Come Death. Do not be slow" (Smith, 1983, p. 571)

Stevie Smith's poem "Come, Death (2)" is one of her last works, written as she was suffering from the brain tumor that would ultimately take her life. The repeated imperative "come, death" creates an intimate and almost urgent tone, as if she is calling on a long-awaited friend. This coincides with her frequent depiction of death as a source of relief rather than tragedy. In "Come, Death (2)," Stevie Smith personifies death as a benevolent deity – one that is more reliable, accessible, and merciful than the Christian God. The opening lines adhere to a conventional religious framework – "*I'd ask God to have pity on me"* – yet this plea is swiftly abandoned. Instead of seeking solace in the distant, unresponsive Christian God, the speaker turns to a more immediate and reliable force: "*But I turn to the one I know, and say: / Come, Death, and carry me away."* Unlike a divine figure that demands devotion while remaining distant, death is portrayed as both obedient and reliable – arriving promptly when called. This depiction underscores the speaker's authority over death, presenting it not as a mysterious or fearsome force, but as something entirely within human grasp. Unlike religious interpretations that require faith or suffering in exchange for salvation, Smith's vision of death is free from judgment, offering immediate and unconditional release. This perspective corresponds to her broader skepticism toward religious doctrine, rejecting the notion of death as a passage to the divine and instead framing it as an ultimate and absolute reprieve. The shift from tentative inquiry to resolute certainty mirrors a growing acceptance of mortality, culminating in the

final, commanding invocation, "*Come Death. Do not be slow."* This quiet confidence – rooted in the inevitability of death rather than despair – distinguishes Smith's reflections on mortality from the rhetoric of resignation or desperation. The urgency in the closing lines reinforces the poem's central argument: life has become intolerable, and death should not delay its arrival.

Likewise, in the final lines of "Tender Only to the One," Stevie Smith portrays death as both intimate and inevitable.

> "Tender only to one,
> Last petal's latest breath
> Cries out aloud
> From the icy shroud
> His name, his name is Death" (Smith, 1983, p. 93)

The phrase "Tender only to one" suggests a deep, personal connection, emphasizing a relationship with death as a companion. The "last petal's latest breath" evokes fragility and the fleeting nature of life, while the cry "cries out aloud" underscores the urgency of this final moment. Death is not met in silence or reluctance but with a desperate call, mirroring the plea in "Come, Death (2)": *"Listen then to this sound I make, it is sharp."* The speaker does not passively await death but deliberately summons it, emphasizing the crushing weight of existence. This urgent plea reinforces Smith's perception of death not as a tragic loss but as a means of escape – a release from relentless suffering. The "icy shroud" evokes death's cold and unyielding grasp, while the repeated invocation of *"his name is Death"* transforms it into a distinct and almost intimate presence. These lines reflect both acceptance and resignation, presenting death not as a feared adversary but as an inevitable force, met with quiet determination. Smith's exploration of death becomes increasingly intimate, shifting from a mere servant responding to her call "Come, Death (2)" to a lover – perhaps the only entity deserving of true affection. This transition imbues her relationship with death with a personal, even romantic quality, highlighting the profound despair that makes life intolerable. The final lines, much like those in "Come, Death (2)" convey an intense longing for the finality that death offers, yet they do so with a tone of mournful devotion. Across her poetry, Smith's engagement with death extends beyond fascination; it becomes an all-encompassing fixation. Whether portrayed as a deity who answers her summons or as the sole recipient of tenderness, death emerges as the dominant force in her work – the ultimate resolution to life's unbearable weight. Her engagement with death is not linear but navigates between detachment, humor, and an almost devotional esteem, ultimately constructing a personal mythology drawing from personal losses, solitude but eliciting a defiant vision that withstands classification.

Conclusion

It is an undeniable fact that, like many poets, death is also in the territory of Stevie Smith; however, she chooses to glorify it, even crafting a counterpart to it. Smith not only personifies death as a divine presence, but she also assigns a god-like status to it as an extension of her existential yearning and perception that death is preferable to life. Her thematic engagement follows such a gradual trajectory that, death is not just a peaceful release and soothing presence but also a form of oblivion culminating in a rejection of life inviting readers to reconsider its role in the human experience. A crucial aspect of understanding Smith's vision lies in recognizing her habit of illustrating some of her works. These doodles and hand-drawn sketches serve as fleeting expressions of creative outpouring, aligning with the sense of release she seeks in her exploration of death and God, ultimately contributing to her poetic emancipation. The sense of an unheard, unrecognized plea, most famously portrayed in "Not Waving but Drowning", project Smith's drawings that often accompany her poetry, serving as a parallel voice that demands to be seen and reckoned rather than being dismissed. These illustrations, often deceptively simple, reveal a tension between playfulness

and despair, reinforcing the underlying contradictions in her work. In transforming despondency into a visual and literary dialogue, Smith draws on the interplay between death and river in order to convey a sense of tranquility, relief and in particular the flow of the river emerging as a natural passage. While creating a threshold between life and death, oblivion becomes almost mesmerizing rather than terrifying reflecting a detachment from the world. Death's spectral and enigmatic nature, always near but never fully grasped, does not preclude the poet from looking forward to it with urgency, even summoning it so that she can eventually embrace her benevolent deity – one that is more reliable, accessible, and merciful than the Christian God who demands suffering for salvation. Smith's depiction of death seems to border on reverence, not as an adversary to life but as a steadfast companion – an ever-present, intimate force that is both inescapable and familiar. For Smith, death is an unwavering source of solace and liberation, offering an affection so absolute that it renders life, with all its burdens, unbearable in comparison.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

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