

Dickinson and Smith: Years Apart But Not So Different

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Even though there were sixteen years separating them, Stevie Smith and Emily Dickinson had much in common. They both use death as a theme to explore and mock life. Their small poems have a lot to say about life and death.

In their poems “Drowning is not so pitiful” and “Not Waving but Drowning,” Emily Dickinson and Stevie Smith respectively discuss how death is not something to be afraid of. In “Drowning is not so pitiful,” Dickinson says that to drown and getting to meet God, whom many people want to avoid meeting, is far better than trying to struggle to live. Smith’s poem, “Not Waving but Drowning,” asserts that people do not listen to those in need of help, people also tend to ignore those who live outside the bounds of society, and that being ignored can lead to death. Only sixteen years passed from the time of Dickinson’s death to the year Smith was born; however they cover many of the same topics, like death and how to deal with it. Dickinson influences Smith in her style, language, and themes. Smith also picks up on Dickinson’s idea that death is something to look forward to and not something that we should be afraid of. I will start by engaging with Dickinson and her poem first, as that way it should be easier to see what Smith is doing.

“Drowning is not so pitiful” by Emily Dickinson is short, only twelve lines long. However, it says a lot for being so small; the poem talks about death and how many people fear it. People try to avoid death at every turn. The first two lines of the poem are, “Drowning is not so pitiful / As the attempt to rise” (Dickinson 54). To drown, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), is to suffer death by submersion in water. Death is at the very start of the poem, this is important since the whole poem is about dying. The two lines mean that Dickinson feels it is pitiful to try and live when dying will bring you closer to God, whom she mentions later. She feels that having a place in heaven, next to God, is better than living down on earth. In the next six lines of the poem, she writes

Three times, 't is said, a sinking man / 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. (Dickinson 54)

According to the OED, to decline is the process of sinking to a weaker or inferior condition, this could be a physical sinking as with drowning or mental sinking as with depression. The sinking man faces the skies above the sea three times, which could be read as he faces heaven three times before actually going there. Not only is the drowning man sinking into the water, but his body is declining as well, since the struggling is making him weak and unable to stay above the water. His mind is also sinking because he is becoming more and more distraught at the thought of dying. The next line, “To that abhorred abode”, can be seen in two ways; one is that to the sinking man and others who try to avoid God the “abode” is heaven. The other is that Dickinson sees the “abhorred abode” as the sea, which takes peoples lives in a violent manner. Both can fit into the context and theme of the poem. The OED defines abhorred as regarded with horror or disgust, detested and abode as a place of ordinary residence. Ordinary is the key word. Dickinson sees heaven as an ordinary home that people live in, not a place that needs to be hated. To her, it is not a place to be avoided or feared, it is a place where people need to go when they die. In line seven, “Where hope and he part company,” Dickinson is saying that the man has given up hope of living because he knows he cannot keep going. The man realizes he will get to meet God, which is something he does not want. The final line in this stanza, “For he is grasped of God,” can mean many things. To grasp, as defined by the OED, is to seize and hold firmly with the hand or to comprehend with the mind. God grasps the drowning man by the hand and by the mind, so the man can feel him and finally recognize him. This also means that he may have died, so God now

holds him in heaven. The last four lines of the poem are “The Maker’s cordial visage, / However good to see, / Is shunned, we must it, / Like an adversity” (Dickinson 54). The Maker in line nine is God who has a “cordial visage”. The OED states that cordial means to have a warm and friendly manner and that a visage is the face or features as expressive of feeling or temperament. The face of God, according to Dickinson, is warm and friendly and whose face expresses this kindly manner. The OED defines shun as something that people avoid from fear and defines an adversity as a trial. She states that God’s face is good to see, since people know they are in Heaven, but that many shun it much like they would an adversity in their life. They would rather ignore God than face up to their fears and meet him. Dickinson wonders why people do not want to be near God when he is warm and caring. She also wonders why they would want to continue living in a cold and harsh world, when being closer to God is something that everyone should look forward too. To her this means that death is also something that people should look forward too. Smith picks up this idea from Dickinson and uses it in many of her poems.

Stevie Smith’s poem, “Not Waving but Drowning”, is also twelve lines long and like Dickinson’s has a lot to say in such a small package. It also could mean that she has a “haste to be gone” (Bedient 143) and away from the poem. She starts off with the line “Nobody heard him, the dead man,” (Smith 710). Death is mentioned at the very beginning and permeates the rest of the poem. The line seems innocuous at first, but it is really saying that there is no one to listen to the dead man. He received no help in life and he will not get any help in death. The next line, “But still he lay moaning:” (Smith 710), means that even though no one could hear him, the dead man moaned anyway, searching for attention. According to the OED, to moan is to make a long, low, inarticulate sound indicative of mental or physical

suffering. The dead man is not only suffering physically, but mentally because no one was there in his time of need. The lines three through four state, “I was much further out than you thought / And not waving but drowning” (Smith 710). To drown as defined by the OED is to suffer death by submersion in water. The two lines can be read in two ways: one way is that this is what the dead man is moaning and the other way is that this is the narrator speaking and connecting with the dead man. In the next stanza, the scene shifts a little from the dead man to those who are supposed to be mourning him. The stanza says “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” (Smith 710). The OED states that a chap is a fellow, a lad, a man and that lark is a frolicsome adventure, a spree or to have fun. The mourners do not seem too sympathetic in the way that he died. They say that the man was making a joke about drowning when he actually was drowning. They did not take his call for help seriously, so they put the blame on the ocean. They all say that “his heart gave way”, which means that he had heart failure, because the shock of the cold water. They are the ones who did not recognize his drowning so they shift his death to the man for “larking”. The next line, “Oh, no no no, it was too cold always” (Smith 710), has the triple “no” to emphasize how wrong they are. The sea was always cold, so it could not have been “too cold” for the dead man’s heart to fail him. Line ten, “(Still the dead one lay moaning)” (Smith 710), is an interesting line because it is in parentheses. It is still part of the poem, but it is also outside of it. It could be the narrator bring the poem back to the dead one and having him moan the line nine and lines eleven through twelve. It could also be the narrator shifting focus from the dead man to the “I” in the next line, which could be the narrator. Also, it is interesting to note that the dead man is not called him anymore, but the dead one. The dead one could be anyone,

including the narrator. This connects with the next line, “I was much too far out all my life” (Smith 710). Too far out can mean many things; too far out in the water and it can also mean that the dead man, the narrator, or anyone who lives outside the box and are considered different and not worth saving. The second “I” can be the dead man at the beginning echoing his words or, once again, the narrator. The final line “And not waving but drowning” (Smith 710) echoes line four. The dead man is telling those who are supposed to be mourning him and blaming him that the water was always that cold and that he was drowning and asking for help. He was ignored, as “they” thought he was having fun, and died as a result. The last two lines can be seen as stating that anyone who is outside the box, will be ignored even when they need help. However, after they die, they go to a better place and do not need to worry about being ignored. That is one of the things that Dickinson and Smith have in common, they both believe that death is an improvement upon a person.

Besides thinking that death makes a person better, both Dickinson and Smith use death as a theme in many poems. Dickinson mentions death or heaven in many of her poems. The poem, “I went to heaven, –” shows how Dickinson views heaven in her mind. She calls it “Beautiful as pictures / No man drew” (Dickinson 215), meaning that no one could ever paint heaven as beautiful as Dickinson thinks it is. Dickinson describes heaven in soft, light terms, which make it seem as if that is where she wants to be. In “Because I could not stop for Death,” she describes Death as a “kindly” entity (Dickinson 200). He drives her slowly through her life and brings her to her new house, her grave. In this poem, death is something that one should wait for because it is painful and leads you to a new home. Deppman says that “Because I could not stop for Death,” symbolizes “the activities of playing, dy(e)ing, and bowing to God” and that they “amount to a kind of summarizing

digest” of a person’s life (143). This is not only true of that poem, but also “Drowning is not so pitiful” and many of her other poems. Dickinson likes showing the regular life of a person, and this includes their death as well. M.L. Rosenthal states that “Drowning is not so pitiful” resembles Alexander Pope’s “polished couplets” and that it “has an adult elegance” (814). Dickinson uses humor to get people to really see the meaning of the poem and what she is trying to get at. Stevie Smith also uses a type of humor to get the readers to acknowledge her message. She, like Dickinson, sees death as something good. She believed that death was the only good thing about life and that once you died, the real journey began.

Calvin Bedient says of Smith that, “her colloquial line often insists on it’s plain truth-telling” (143). Smith did not see death as something to fear or something to beat around the bush in talking about. Bedient also says that “Death stood in for Smith’s father; she looked up to it, ran to it when she was hurt, needed its love” (139). Death was an important theme in Smith’s poems, as it seemed to be everything to her. Her biography in the Norton Anthology states that she “calmly welcomes death as tame, sweet, and gentle, even resulting in a possible improvement of character” (705). This can be seen in one of her other poems, “Our Bog is Dood”. It connects to “Not Waving by Drowning” as they both have drowning as a theme. The last four lines of the last stanza say, “And sweetest of all to walk alone / Beside the encroaching sea, / The sea that soon should drown them all, / That never yet drowned me” (Smith 709). In these lines the narrator says that everyone but them will drown. The narrator has not given up to the sea yet. The narrator seems happy to walk by the sea and think of all the other people that will die; they also think that it might make the others better than they are now. Smith’s use of humor, which was unintentional on her part, is in the fact

that the dead man's friends did not see his trouble. Jack Barbera says that the poem has "black humor" because the speaker's "friends never saw his frolicking for what it was" and when the "speaker tries to correct them, they do not hear" (234). They only see him as "a merry fellow, larking to the end" (Barbera 234). This connects to what Smith is saying about people ignoring those in need of help. Something else that is slightly humorous is the drawing that accompanies "Not Waving but Drowning". The drawing is a picture of a woman with long, stringy hair, while the main character is a man. Two interesting things that are in the picture are that it looks as if the person has a halo around their head, as if they are already dead, and that it also looks like the person is walking into or out of the sea. The person does not seem scared about drowning, but slightly happy, as the person has a small smile on their face (Barbera 234). This picture, like the poem, connects to some of Smith's other poems, in that they seem to be happy about death coming. It also helps her readers, as Sheryl Stevenson says, she is "working for another audience—for visual rather than aural effects" (25). Smith wants to appeal to everyone, so they understand her message in the poem and that "the poems present their dark subjects" with the help of the pictures that accompany them (Stevenson 25). Smith is able to make the sea feel scarier than it already is with her use of images. Something that "Not Waving but Drowning" and "Drowning is not so pitiful" have in common, is that both poems use the sea and drowning as a theme. Even today, the sea is seen as mysterious and unknown. Many people go missing while boating or flying over the ocean. Many people have a fear of drowning. By using the ocean as a setting, Dickinson and Smith, can grab the readers attention much quicker. Drowning is not the nicest or easiest way to die, it is violent and scary. Smith writes about how being ignored, specifically at the ocean, can lead to death. She also talks about even in death; no

one will listen to you. Dickinson uses drowning as a route to God. Many people do not want to meet him, but she says that many do not have a choice.

Both Dickinson and Smith agree that death is inevitable and that it cannot be avoided. They just go about saying the same thing in different ways. Emily Dickinson lived from 1830 to 1886. Stevie Smith lived from 1902 to 1971. Dickinson was from Amherst, Massachusetts, while Smith was from England. Each woman had different messages in their poems. Death was a big part of both women's lives and they expressed that in their poems. At times they used different ways to express those ideas. However, they occasionally had the same message and seemed to go about it in the same way. Their short, and at times, choppy poems helped to drive the messages home as they were easy to remember and think of later. Neither woman conformed to what was expected of them and that is what makes them great poets.

Works Cited: Annotated Bibliography

Bedient, Calvin. "Stevie Smith". *Eight Contemporary Poets*. London, Oxford University Press, 1974. Print.

Bedient's chapter on Stevie Smith is nineteen pages and he covers everything from her stories, like *Novel on Yellow Paper*, to her poems. He talks about how Death was a big part of Smith's life, and how she used it as a form of comfort. Bedient also says that she mocks life and the daily routines people had. He talks very briefly about Smith's poem "Not Waving but Drowning," it gets less than a paragraph in all. However, what he does say is very helpful. Bedient states that Smith's "chattering manner" lets the poem pick up steam and really hit home with the readers.

Barbera, Jack. "The Relevance of Stevie Smith's Drawings". *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Jul., 1985), pp. 221-236. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press. Web.

Barbera talks about how even though Smith's poems are considered wonderful, many people are still unsure of her drawings. Some critics call them "cute", "amateur", or "childlike". Barbera attempts to explain each drawing that went with a poem and why that drawing is important in the context of the poem and outside the context. He goes into detail about the picture that accompanies "Not Waving but Drowning". He talks about how the picture is of a woman, while the poem is about a man. Barbera also mentions how the picture moved around and it was with another of Smith's poems, "The Frozen Lake". The picture might not always help readers understand the poem, but it does show Smith's dark humor, as the picture does not compliment the poem much like the dead man's friends do not compliment the dead man.

Deppman, Jed. *Trying To Think With Emily Dickinson*. Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008. Print.

In his book, Deppman considers that Dickinson had a far-reaching effect in her poems, especially in the 21st century. She was not understood in her own time, but we can better understand her now. He uses many of Dickinson's poems, just not "Drowning is not so pitiful". I used "Because I could not stop for Death," as an example and Deppman talked about that poem quite a bit. He states that "Because I could not stop for Death," uses symbolism to explain the daily life of a person and how they would experience death. Even though Deppman did not include the poem I used, by using other poems to bolster my argument really helped me gain an insight into "Drowning is not so pitiful".

Dickinson, Emily. "Drowning is not so pitiful". *The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

Ed. George Stade. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003. Page 54. Print.

The book is just a collection of Emily Dickinson's poems. It is not a complete collection, but it is a good starting point for those who want to read them. It is broken up into five parts, has a section on those inspired by Dickinson's poetry, and a section for comments made from after she died.

Rosenthal, M.L. "Volatile Matter: Humor in Our Poetry". *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol.

22, No. 4 (Winter, 1981), pp. 807-817. Amherst, MA: The Massachusetts Review, Inc. Web.

Rosenthal writes about humor in modern poetry, specifically American humor. He mentions ee cummings, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and of course, Emily Dickinson. Rosenthal says that Dickinson uses a "sly irony" in her poem, "Drowning is not so pitiful". He says Dickinson mocked everyone including herself in the final stanza of that poem. He mentions two more of her poems and says that Dickinson is good at blending the tragic and the comic. Rosenthal's essay was helpful because with it I could juxtapose the way Smith used humor and the way Dickinson did as well.

Smith, Stevie. "Not Waving but Drowning". *The Norton Anthology of Modern and*

Contemporary Poetry: Vol. 1 Modern Poetry. 3rd ed. Ed. Jahan Ramazani, et al.

New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003. Page 710. Print.

This book is a collection of poets from all over the world and from all different times. For Smith, there is a biography that gives a little information about her poems, but not too much. The biography of Smith helped a little while I was writing this paper, it helped me have a greater of how Smith viewed death.

Stevenson, Sheryl. "Stevie Smith's Voices". *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 33, No. 1

(Spring, 1992), pp. 24-45. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. Web.

Stevenson starts off by saying that it was Smith's voice that caught the attention of everyone, it was "hilarious and haunting, powerful and unsettling" at the same time. Smith grabbed your attention and held throughout her whole poem. Stevenson then goes on to talk about "Not Waving but Drowning". She not only talks about the poem, but the picture that goes with it as well. She calls it a visual aspect of the poem, and that it enhances the poem. This essay was helpful for me because, even though it said things I had heard before, it gave me a different perspective on the poem. This article also helped me further connect Smith to Dickinson.