

Context: Stevie Smith and 'Come On, Come Back'

Stevie Smith (1902–1971)

Stevie Smith was born Florence Margaret Smith in 1902 in Kingston upon Hull. She was always called Peggy at home, but became known by others as Stevie after riding in the park with a friend who said that she reminded him of Steve Donaghue, a jockey who was famous at the time.

When she was three, her father left home and she moved with her mother, two aunts and sister to Palmer's Green in London. Smith was educated at Palmer's Green High School and then North London Collegiate School for Girls. She began writing poetry while working as a private secretary to Sir Neville Pearson at Newnes Publishing Company in London, where she worked for 30 years, until she suffered a breakdown, which led to her retirement in her early 1950s.

Stevie Smith's first volume of poetry, *A Good Time Was Had By All*, was well received and she went on to write a further eight volumes of poetry. She also wrote three novels based loosely on her own life. The first of these, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, was published in 1936. She also drew quirky pictures to accompany her poetry, but struggled to find a publisher willing to include them. In this she was like William Blake, a poet whose work she admired.

By the 1960s Smith had built a reputation as a popular but eccentric performer, by reading her poems and often chanting them off-key while dressed in school-girlish outfits.

Her poetry is distinctive, unconventional and individualistic, and has been called 'darkly comic' – both amusing but also eerily unnerving. Recurrent themes in Smith's work include war, loneliness, religion and loss of faith. Many of Smith's poems also draw on myth, legend and fairytale. Her best-known poem is 'Not Waving but Drowning'. Watch a video recording of Smith reading the poem at:

bbc.co.uk/poetryseason/poets/stevie_smith.shtml

Many of her poems also explore death, a subject she became preoccupied with as a child. At the age of five she was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which meant that she was separated from her mother and sent to a sanatorium in Kent several times over the subsequent years, an experience she inevitably found very distressing. This may also have led to the depression she suffered from all her life. She thought of death as a release from what she called, in a BBC interview, the 'pressure of despair'.

She was awarded the Cholmondeley Award for Poets in 1966 and won the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry in 1969. Smith died of a brain tumour in 1971. Her last collection, *Scorpion and other Poems*, was published after her death, and the *Collected Poems* in 1975. A popular play based on her life, *Stevie*, was written by Hugh Whitemore and filmed in 1978.

‘Come on, Come Back’

Although this dramatic poem is set in a future war, some of the references in the poem seem to point to previous wars, including the Napoleonic Wars and World Wars One and Two.

- Austerlitz, now a part of the Czech Republic, was officially under Austrian control in 1805 when Napoleon’s troops, in what became one of his greatest victories, defeated the Russian and Austrian armies at the Battle of Austerlitz.
- The town of Memel (now Klaipėda) came under German rule after the Napoleonic war, although it is a coastal town in Lithuania. After World War One, control of the area was disputed, but eventually settled in 1923 after the Memel Convention was signed there by Britain among others, and an autonomous region called Memelland was created. In 1939, the territory was seized back by Hitler’s German forces and became increasingly anti-semitic, leading to its 1300 Jewish inhabitants being expelled.
- In the poem, Stevie Smith imagines that the ‘Memel Conference’ has graded ‘M.L.5’ as the ‘first/Of all human exterminators’. Smith leaves the language deliberately ambiguous, but there are arguably reminders of the extermination camps used by the Nazis in World War Two.

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