English poet and novelist Stevie Smith was one of the absolute originals of English literature, exhibiting an original personality that combined a lively wit with penetrating honesty and an absence of sentiment. In reviewing Smith’s *Not Waving but Drowning* as “the best collection of new poems to appear in 1957,” fellow poet David Wright called her “one of the most original women poets now writing.” She led an outwardly uneventful life behind the respectable curtains of suburbia while nurturing a highly individual imagination. Smith’s work fits into no neat category and shows none of the characteristic influences of her age, even though, as Linda Rahm Hallett noted in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Smith’s voice “is nevertheless very much that of what she once called the ‘age of unrest’ through which she lived.” Sometimes she is reminiscent of Blake, sometimes Ogden Nash, still other times Edward Lear, but her talent clearly exceeded the latter two and her voice is always her own; she read few contemporary poets in an attempt to keep it original and pure. Her seemingly light verse contains a sometimes disconcerting mixture of wit and seriousness, making her “at once one of the most consistent and most elusive of poets.” Her language is sometimes simple and matter-of-fact (even in the same poem with more deliberately “poetic” language) and sometimes deliberately archaic (where it is often suggestive of old ballads). Her verse movement ranges from free conversational rhythms to traditional verse patterns, occasionally becoming—deliberately, with ironic effect—almost doggerel. Whatever her language, her writing commonly demonstrates a fascination with death, exploring what Hallett described as “the mysterious, rather sinister reality which lurks behind appealing or innocent appearances.” Apart from death, common subjects in her writing include loneliness, myth and legend, absurd vignettes (usually drawn from middle-class British life), war, human cruelty, and religion.

Stevie Smith, born Florence Margaret Smith in Kingston-upon-Hull, Yorkshire, was the second daughter of Ethel and Charles Smith. Called “Peggy” within her family, she acquired the name “Stevie” as a young woman when she was riding in the park with a friend who said that, because of her small stature, she reminded him of the famous jockey Steve Donaghue (1884–1945, winner of the 1925 Epsom Derby, riding Manna). Her father was a shipping agent, a business that he had inherited from his father. But as the company and his marriage began to deteriorate, he join the North Sea Patrol when Smith was very young, and she saw very little of
him after that, except for occasional 24-hour shore leaves. At age 3 she went with her mother and sister to live with an aunt in Palmer’s Green, an unfashionable and out-of-the-way suburb in North London where Smith would live until her death in 1971.

When Smith was 5, she developed tubercular peritonitis—then incurable—which plagued her throughout her childhood and continually interrupted her education. She was sent to Yarrow Convalescent Home, a sanatorium near Broadstairs, Kent, and spent months at a time there off and on for 3 years. She developed her preoccupation with death when she was 7, at a time when she was very distressed at being sent away from her mother. Despite this, she was generally a happy child, with a penchant for amateur theatrics—the internationally famous actress Dame Flora Robson was a childhood companion. Later, when her mother became ill and died when Smith was 16, her spinster aunt Madge Spear, an inspiring figure whom Smith dubbed “The Lion,” came to live with them, raised Smith and her elder sister Molly, and became the most important person in Smith’s life and the person with whom she devotedly spent the remainder of her life. When her aunt grew old and feeble, Smith looked after her, although she herself was often in ill health. Spear was a feminist who claimed to have “no patience” with men, possibly in the same sense that she said she had “no patience” with Hitler. Smith and Molly were raised without men and thus became attached to their own independence, in contrast to what Smith described as the typical Victorian family atmosphere of “father knows best.”

Smith had a good education at Palmers Green High School, concentrating on French and the classics, and then attended North London Collegiate School for Girls. Her older sister Molly was able to go to university, but there was by then insufficient money for Smith to attend the London School of Journalism, as she wished, so she commuted daily to a central London secretarial school. After graduating, she began at Newnes Publishing Company in London as a secretary with the magazine publisher George Newnes and went on to be the private secretary to the two directors of the firm, Sir Neville Pearson and Sir Frank Newnes. She began writing poetry in her twenties while working at the firm from 1923 to 1953. Despite her secluded life, Smith managed to lead a lively social life in London and was known for the vividness and variety of her conversation at parties. She also corresponded and socialized widely with many other writers and creative artists. In 1953 she retired from Pearson’s service following a nervous breakdown and suicide attempt in her office (when she was in constant pain from an arthritic knee, in dispute with the Inland Revenue, and permanently tired at work). Having been pensioned off by Pearson, she was able to devote more time to her writing; she gave poetry readings and broadcasts on the BBC that gained her new friends and readers among a younger generation. Sylvia Plath became a fan of her poetry, describing herself as “a desperate Smith-addict”; she had asked Smith to meet with
her but, sadly and ironically, committed suicide before the meeting could occur. Smith herself suffered throughout her life from an acute nervousness, described as a mix of shyness and intense sensitivity. She also suffered all her life from depression, so it is not surprising that death, what she called her “gentle friend,” became perhaps her most popular subject. She once said that she was so consoled by the thought of death as a release that she had no need to commit suicide. She wrote that death was “the only god who must come when he is called.”

Having been raised by her aunt as both a spoiled child and a resolutely autonomous woman, Smith was described by her friends as being naive and selfish in some ways and formidably intelligent in others. Likewise, her political views vacillated between her aunt’s Toryism and her friends’ left-wing tendencies. Smith was celibate for most of her life, although she rejected the idea that she was lonely as a result, alleging that she had a number of intimate relationships with friends and family that kept her fulfilled. Smith illustrated many of her poems with quaint drawings (“doodles” as she called them) which have the same kind of oddity as the poetry. She was a religious skeptic who was at the same time fascinated by theological speculation, the language of the Bible, and religious experience. She never entirely accepted or abandoned the Anglican faith of her childhood, describing herself as a “lapsed atheist”—her volatile attachment to the Church of England is evident in her poetry. Much of her inspiration came from theology and the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, and she often wrote sensitively about theological matters.

Smith first appeared as a novelist with *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), which was soon followed by 2 further novels and 9 volumes of poetry. It was *Novel on Yellow Paper* and her first volume of poetry *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937) that established her reputation, and her poems began to appear frequently in newspapers and periodicals. *Novel on Yellow Paper*, drawing heavily on her own life experience and structured as the random typings of a bored secretary, deals with the unrest in England during WWI. Smith herself dismissed her 2nd novel *Over the Frontier* (1938)—which deals with militarism and asks how the necessary fight against fascism can be achieved without descending into the nationalism and dehumanization that fascism represents—as a failed experiment, but its attempt to parody popular genre fiction in order to explore profound political issues now seems to anticipate post-modern fiction. Her 3rd and last novel *The Holiday* (1949), concerned with personal and political malaise in the immediate post-WWII period, was her personal favorite and probably the most fully realized. It describes a series of hopeless but intractable relationships mirroring the novel’s political concerns. Smith admitted that 2 of the male characters in the book are different aspects of George Orwell, who was close to Smith. There were rumors that they were lovers, although he was married to his first wife at the time. All her novels are lightly fictionalized accounts of her own life, which got her into
trouble at times as people recognized themselves. Their style is often very dark; her characters are ever bidding “goodbye” to their friends or welcoming death. Even so, her work also is very funny, having an eerie levity though neither light nor whimsical. Never sentimental, Smith constantly undercut any potentially pathetic effects with humor that was ruthlessly honest.

Her first volume of verse *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937) established the combination of “caprice and doom” that remained characteristic of both her poems and the quirky line drawings which often accompanied them. The jaunty tone of the title is also pure Smith, whose work thrives on co-existing contradictions—jokey and serious, colloquial and formal, sophisticated and child-like. Though her poems were remarkably consistent in tone and quality throughout her life, their subject matter changed over time, with less of the outrageous wit of her youth and more reflection on suffering, faith, and the end of life. Nursery-rhyme motifs, puns, and seemingly light-hearted verse structures are all used to explore unsettling depths. The startling disjunctions in tone in “Not Waving But Drowning,” which was inspired by a newspaper story about a drowning man whose friends thought he was waving to them, or the innocent narrative voice of “The Frog Prince” who looks forward to being “disenchanted,” display Smith’s sensibility at its unnerving best. Her rendition of these classic poems is just as mischievous, playful, although like the playfulness of a cat—charming and elegant but concealing very sharp claws.

In the 1960s Smith built a popular reputation as a performer of her own work, playing up her eccentricity and ceremonially half-singing some of her poems in a quavering voice. She also made a number of broadcasts and recordings, her skillful and extensive use of personae lending itself particularly well to reading aloud. She was awarded the Cholmondeley Award for Poets in 1966 and won the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry in 1969. Stevie Smith died of a brain tumor in 1971, only three years after her indomitable aunt. Her last collection *Scorpion and other Poems* was published posthumously in 1972, and the *Collected Poems* followed in 1975. Three novels were republished, and a successful play, *Stevie*, written by Hugh Whitemore, was based on her life and was filmed in 1978, starring Glenda Jackson and Mona Washbourne.

Stevie Smith’s highly individualistic poetic style was particularly vulnerable to shifts in critical taste and to the charges of eccentricity. Her language, which the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer termed her “most distinctive achievement,” perhaps contributed most to the deceptive quality of her work, with its combination of seemingly prosaic statements, variety of voices,
playful meter, and deep sense of irony: “The cliches, the excesses, the crabbed formalities of this speech are given weight by the chillingly amusing or disquieting elements; by the sense of a refined, ironic unhappiness underlying the poems; and by the variety of topics embraced by the poet’s three or four basic and serious themes.” Below the surface oddness, her personal voice evinces something questing, discomfiting, compassionate. Smith once noted that what prompted her to write were the “pressures” of both despair and joy. As poet Wright observed, “the apparent geniality of many of her poems is in fact more frightening than the solemn keening and sentimental despair of other poets, for it is based on a clear-sighted acceptance, by a mind neither obtuse nor unimaginative, but sharp and serious, innocent but far from naive, and . . . having a bias towards life and survival.” As the TLS critic remarked, by combining a deceptively simple form and mannered language with serious themes, Smith was able “both to compass the pity and terror of her themes and to respond to them with rueful courage and humour.” Or as Jerome McGann explained in Poetry, she offers us “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.”