



**READING 3** Evaluate the changes in sound, form, figurative language, graphics, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods.  
**RC-12(A)** Reflect on understanding to monitor comprehension.

# The Frog Prince Not Waving but Drowning

Poetry by Stevie Smith

## Meet the Author

### Stevie Smith 1902–1971

The poetry of Stevie Smith is nothing like that of her contemporaries. Often taking inspiration from nursery rhymes and fairy tales, Smith’s poetry at first glance seems simple and almost childlike. However, her supposedly “light” verse takes on such weighty topics as life and death, offering shrewd insights tinged with dark humor.

**Family of Women** Stevie Smith was born Florence Margaret Smith in Hull, Yorkshire. When she was three, her father abandoned the family. Smith, her mother, her sister, and a favorite aunt (whom Smith affectionately called the Lion Aunt) then moved to Palmers Green, a northern suburb of London. Smith and the Lion Aunt lived together in the house in Palmers Green until the aunt died at 96.

**A Different Tune** At school, Smith was an indifferent student in all subjects except music. She participated enthusiastically in sing-alongs, although she often sang a different tune from her classmates, exasperating her teachers. In 1917, Smith took a secretarial course and became a secretary for a large London publishing house. She found the job tedious, but it afforded her free time to write stories and poems.

**From Rejection to Success** In 1934, Smith submitted some of her poems to an agent who rejected them, claiming that they were “entirely incoherent.” Later, a publisher suggested she write a novel. Typing on yellow scrap paper from her job, Smith wrote and published the autobiographical *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), which was an immediate success. Her first book of poetry followed in 1937. Although she kept her secretarial job, Smith enjoyed the admiration of London’s literary world and was often invited to give readings.

**Honored Eccentric** As Smith became established as a writer, she gave free rein to her eccentricities, dressing as a schoolgirl in white stockings and a pinafore and frequently bursting into song at poetry readings. Despite her seemingly childlike gaiety and her success as an author, Smith suffered bouts of deep depression. In 1953, she slashed her wrists while at work and was forced to retire. However, she went on to greater fame as a writer with the publication of *Not Waving but Drowning* (1957). In 1969 Queen Elizabeth II presented Smith with the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry. Less than two years later, Smith died of a brain tumor at the height of her popularity.

## DID YOU KNOW?

Stevie Smith . . .

- acquired the nickname “Stevie” after friends compared her to a famous jockey named Steve Donoghue.
- illustrated most of her poetry with little drawings she called “beastlies.”

A REVISED MODERN CLASSIC  
 STEVIE SMITH  
 NOVEL ON YELLOW PAPER



## Author Online

Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com). KEYWORD: HML12-1310



● **LITERARY ANALYSIS: VOICE**

**Voice** is that quality in writing that enables the reader to “hear” a personality behind the words. The term can refer to the poet’s own voice or the voice of a **persona** (fictional character) created by the poet. Stevie Smith’s poetry has a distinctive voice that has been called whimsical and darkly humorous. Read the first lines of “The Frog Prince.”

*I am a frog,  
I live under a spell,  
I live at the bottom  
Of a green well.*

Among the elements contributing to the voice are the childish diction, the short lines, the nursery-rhyme structure, and the fairy-tale subject. Later in the poem there is **irony** (the overturning of expectations) and **wordplay** (the intentional use of words with more than one meaning, or words that are **ambiguous**). As you read the following poems, notice what makes the voice so unusual.

● **READING SKILL: INTERPRET IDEAS IN POETRY**

The diction in these poems is quite simple, but still the poems are not so easy to understand. The first time you read each poem, break the work into sections and summarize the major **ideas** presented in each section. The second time, read through a magnifying lens, so to speak, to discover the larger meaning. Imagine, for example, that the main character in the poem represents any person. What, then, does the situation suggest about human life? Take notes on a chart like the one shown. On your second reading, pay special attention to repeated words and words with double meanings.

“The Frog Prince”		
Lines	Ideas on 1st Reading (Literal)	Ideas on 2nd Reading (Metaphorical)
1–9	Speaker is a prince-turned-frog waiting for a princess to kiss him and break spell.	
10–29		
30–42		
43–48		

## How do others SEE us?

Think back to your first day of high school. Surrounded by a sea of new faces, you probably formed first impressions about certain students based on their appearance or behavior. Perhaps you eventually got to know them and revised your initial impressions. “The Frog Prince” and “Not Waving but Drowning” are poems that question how reliable our impressions of others are.

**QUIZ** Create a quiz to find out how well someone *really* knows you. Write four true statements about yourself and one plausible but false statement. Then have a classmate take your quiz. Does he or she know you well enough to recognize the false statement? If not, what led to the faulty impression?

### How Well Do You Know Me?

1. I am shy in large groups.  
T F
2. I love jazz.  
T F
3. I am allergic to peanuts.  
T F
4. I am the youngest child in my family.  
T F



Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

# The Frog Prince

Stevie Smith

I am a frog,  
I live under a spell,  
I live at the bottom  
Of a green well.

5 And here I must wait  
Until a maiden places me  
On her royal pillow,  
And kisses me,  
In her father's palace.

10 The story is familiar,  
Everybody knows it well,  
But do other enchanted people feel as nervous  
As I do? The stories do not tell,

Ask if they will be happier  
15 When the changes come,  
As already they are fairly happy  
In a frog's doom? **A**

I have been a frog now  
For a hundred years  
20 And in all this time  
I have not shed many tears,

I am happy, I like the life,  
Can swim for many a mile  
(When I have hopped to the river)  
25 And am for ever agile.

And the quietness,  
Yes, I like to be quiet  
I am habituated  
To a quiet life, **B**

**A VOICE**

Describe the frog's personality. What is **ironic** about the questions he asks in lines 10–17?

**B IDEAS**

How does the frog feel about his life? Think about people who feel similar to the frog.



*Pine Barrens Tree Frog* from the *Endangered Species Series* (1983), Andy Warhol. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. © 2007 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © Corbis.

30 But always when I think these thoughts  
 As I sit in my well  
 Another thought comes to me and says:  
 It is part of the spell

To be happy  
 35 To work up contentment  
 To make much of being a frog  
 To fear disenchantment

Says, It will be *heavenly*  
 To be set free,  
 40 Cries, *Heavenly* the girl who disenchants  
 And the royal times, *heavenly*,  
 And I think it will be. **C**

Come, then, royal girl and royal times,  
 Come quickly,  
 45 I can be happy until you come  
 But I cannot be heavenly,  
 Only disenchanted people  
 Can be heavenly.

**C VOICE**

Notice the **wordplay** in lines 37–42. What are different meanings of *disenchantment* and *heavenly*?



# Not Waving but Drowning

Stevie Smith

Nobody heard him, the dead man,  
But still he lay moaning:  
I was much further out than you thought  
And not waving but drowning.

5 Poor chap, he always loved larking  
And now he's dead  
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way, **D**  
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always  
10 (Still the dead one lay moaning)  
I was much too far out all my life  
And not waving but drowning. **E**

**D VOICE**  
Who is speaking in lines 5–7? What emotion do you imagine behind the words?

**E INTERPRET IDEAS**  
Line 12 repeats line 4 and the title. What does it mean in the context of swimming? in the context of living?



*Bathers-Rescue* (1975), Sir Sidney Nolan.  
Oil on board, 132 cm × 100 cm. Private  
collection. © Bridgeman Art Library.

## Comprehension

1. **Recall** What is the frog in “The Frog Prince” waiting for?
2. **Clarify** What are his feelings as he waits?
3. **Clarify** Identify the different speakers in “Not Waving but Drowning” and the lines they speak.
4. **Paraphrase** What is meant by the statement “I was much too far out all my life”?



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## Literary Analysis

5. **Examine Word Choice** In “The Frog Prince,” what do the following words mean? Which words are cast as positive, and which are cast as negative?
  - “enchanted”                      • “happy”
  - “disenchanted”                • “heavenly”
6. **Examine Author’s Perspective** Stevie Smith once commented that “The Frog Prince” was “a religious poem.” What religious ideas could be read into it?
7. **Interpret Ideas in Poetry** Review your chart of major ideas in “Not Waving but Drowning.” What situation is presented in the poem? How does this situation apply to human life in general? Discuss the following phrases:
  - “too far out”                      • “his heart gave way”
  - “too cold”                        • “not waving but drowning”
8. **Analyze Voice** In what way is the voice in these poems whimsical? In what way is it dark? Describe the effects of **irony** and **wordplay** on the voice. Be specific.

## Literary Criticism

9. **Biographical Context** Stevie Smith once said, “Being alive is like being in enemy territory.” How is this belief reflected in these two poems?

*How do others **SEE** us?*

What do these two poems suggest about initial impressions? Support your answer with details from each poem.