THE THEMES OF GOD AND DEATH IN THE POETRY OF STEVIE SMITH

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the North Texas State University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Susan E. Thurman, B. A.,

Denton, Texas

December, 1978

Stevie Smith's treatment of her two major themes of God and death reveals her seriousness as a poet; although she earned a reputation as a writer of comic verse, she is rather a serious writer employing a comic mask. This thesis explores her two dominant themes, which reveal her inability to synthesize her views about both subjects. In religion, she proved to be a doubter, an atheist, and a believer. Her attitude toward death, though more consistent, is nonetheless ambiguous, particularly regarding suicide. Smith always considered death as a god, and her examination of both the gods of Christianity and of Death was exhaustive. She never developed a single view of either theme but proved to believe in several conflicting ideas at once.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE THEME OF GOD IN SMITH'S POETRY</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE THEME OF DEATH IN SMITH'S POETRY</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary poetry, Stevie Smith is one of the few English women consistently anthologized. Her most celebrated poem, "Not Waving but Drowning," is a popular inclusion in literature textbooks; but in spite of the fact that she is often represented in anthologies and has won two prestigious British poetry awards, her work has been almost entirely neglected by critics. There are numerous reviews of her eleven volumes of verse and three novels, but only two essays in critical surveys deal with her work and only a few critical articles about her have been published in scholarly journals. Although she began publishing poetry in 1937, none of her books appeared in the United States until 1962, with her sixth volume, Selected Poems. The lack of critical attention accorded Smith has been decried by several critics, including Philip Larkin, who has called for her poetry to be assessed and examined in a full-length study.

Perhaps Smith's work is largely ignored by critics because it often appears to be children's verse or clever adult comic verse. Despite her wit, her Thurberesque
line-drawings which often accompany the poems, the perverse off-rhymes, and the epigrams, she is indeed a serious poet and a careful craftsman. Admittedly, some of her poems are light and frivolous, but for the most part, she is a writer of depth.

After all, to delight in the condition of childhood, as Blake did, is not necessarily to write children's verse. And Smith's poetry, like that of Randall Jarrell, is often peopled with the creatures of fairy tales--witches, princesses, and talking animals. Her poems, however, are not for children at all. For example, "The Frog Prince," ostensibly about an enchanted frog, proves to be a comment on Christianity. Other poems may appear to be merely comic verse for adults because of the style and the clever drawings which Smith sometimes adds. The poet herself maintains, though, that her drawings, which she calls her "higher doodling," are not necessary to an understanding of the poems.\(^5\) In fact, many of the poems were originally published in periodicals without the drawings.

The dominant style of Smith's poetry is whimsical; the meaning is conveyed by a childlike narrator who cleverly reveals her sophistication. Of course, not all her poems are written in such a mode--many are sober from beginning to end--but most of them wear a witty, apparently naive mask behind which lies legitimate poetry.
Calvin Bedient recognizes her flippancy as a defense against life's gravity, writing of Smith that "she is really too serious to be serious about some things."\(^6\) C. B. Cox sees this comic mask as a general characteristic of many contemporary writers, maintaining that Smith, like so many modern writers, uses her wit "with desperation like a magic incantation to avert disaster."\(^7\) For Smith, however, this "magic incantation" was insufficient to neutralize the pain in her poetry, as she writes in "Was He Married?: "Learn too that being comical does not ameliorate the desperation."\(^8\)

Smith's subject matter proves her to be a poet worth critical attention. This study examines the two dominant and persistent themes in her poetry—God and death.\(^9\) The novels are touched on only as they shed light on these two subjects. Although James MacGibbon, who compiled Smith's posthumous *Collected Poems* (1976), concludes that the principal themes of nearly all her work are love and death,\(^10\) the majority of her poems are preoccupied with God and death. It may be that MacGibbon considers these two subjects as one, but Smith's treatment of them precludes such a classification. And the poems about love actually make up only a small portion of Smith's work.
Smith's attitude toward God is ambiguous; the second chapter of this study explores her religious poems, which reveal her to be an agnostic, an atheist, and a believer all at once. Describing Smith's views about God, a friend of hers once said, "One could say that she did not like the God of Christian orthodoxy, but she could not disregard Him or ever quite bring herself to disbelieve in Him." Her religious poems are of three major types: the poems of doubt, which express the poet's inability to make up her mind about God; the atheistic poems, which confidently reject God and Christianity as cruel "fairy tales"; and the poems of belief, which express faith in a Christian God whom Smith does like—a humane, merciful, loving God of her own creation.

Despite the fact that Smith was strongly anti-Catholic, one of her staunchest defenders is Michael Tatham, a Catholic who describes her as "one of the very few religious poets of our time." She saw in the Church, he says, a terrible cruelty and dishonesty, so she turned away; he nevertheless maintains that Smith is a "profoundly religious poet" who sustains a dialogue with God, fully aware that no comforting answer exists.

Labelling Smith a religious poet is perhaps too restrictive; she has far too many poems which do not fit such a category—poems of unrequited love, of man's
isolation in society ("Not Waving but Drowning"), poems of romance, myth and fairy tales, and her satirical portraits of English manners. Smith's subjects cover a wide range, but the majority of her poems are religious ones.

Smith's preoccupation with God is linked to her other dominant concern—death—which the third chapter of this study discusses. She rejects Christian doctrine as a basis for her views about death, ignoring the Christian concepts of heaven and hell. She always personifies death as a god in her poetry, a kinder god than the Christian one about whom she writes. Death offers to man a wonderful gift; Smith's poems about death reveal an acceptance and eager anticipation of her own death. She writes three major types of poems dealing with death: she expresses a longing for a natural death because life is too unbearable; she writes many poems about suicide; and she occasionally writes poems expressing sorrow in the face of death. Smith is fascinated with the idea that Death is man's servant who cannot refuse to come if man summons him by suicide. She is ambiguous, however, about whether man does have the right to commit suicide. Her poems lamenting death are few in number; these are only about the deaths of others. Smith sometimes scolds
the god Death for taking her loved ones and those whom the world will greatly miss.

Smith's obsession with both God and death invites a comparison with Emily Dickinson, who, like Smith, communicated personally with both of these gods in her poetry. Neither poet was a supporter of organized Christianity, but advocated a personal religion, and both were drawn to the subject of death in their poems.

Tatham concludes that Smith's appreciation of the certainty of death reinforces her position as a religious poet;¹ her absorption with both subjects, though not necessarily making her a religious poet, indeed qualifies her as much more than a writer of children's and comic verse. Smith spent her entire career trying to come to grips with God and with death; she early solidified her opinions; her poetry reveals no chronological development or change in her attitudes toward these subjects. Her ambiguity reveals that she never became complacent in her views, however, for she was ever grappling with the gods of Christianity and of death.
NOTES

1 Few modern British female poets have been antholo-
gized until recently, but Smith is usually included. The
Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, ed. Richard Ellmann and
Robert O'Clair (New York: Norton, 1973), includes only Edith
Sitwell and Stevie Smith in this category; The Norton
Anthology of Poetry, ed. Alexander W. Allison et al. (New
York: Norton, 1975), adds to these two Elizabeth Jennings.
However, Philip Larkin, in editing The New Oxford Book of
Twentieth Century English Verse (London: Clarendon Press,
1973), includes, with Smith, an unprecedented twenty-three
women.

2 Smith won the Cholmondeley Award for Poets in 1966
and The Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1969. She is the
only woman to have won either of these awards.

3 Calvin Bedient includes an article on Smith, "Stevie
Press, 1974), pp. 139-58; and D. J. Enright devotes an
essay to Smith, "Did Nobody Teach You?" in Man Is an Onion:
Reviews and Essays (New York: The Library Press, 1973),

4 Philip Larkin, "Frivolous and Vulnerable," rev. of
Selected Poems, by Stevie Smith, New Statesman, 28 Sept.
of Selected Poems, The Nation, 7 Sept. 1964, p. 97, and
Howard Sergeant, "Individual Talent," rev. of The Frog

5 Stevie Smith, quoted in The Poet Speaks, ed. Peter

6 Bedient, Eight Contemporary Poets, p. 140.

7 C. B. Cox, "Scots and English," rev. of The Frog

8 Smith, "Was He Married?" The Collected Poems of
Ian Hamilton has first pointed out that Smith's most common themes are God and death, maintaining that "her most absorbing quarrels were with God and his (almost identical) twin, Death," in "Goodness Me, A Poem!" rev. of The Collected Poems, by Smith, New Statesman, 8 Aug. 1975, p. 172.


Tatham, p. 320.

Tatham, p. 326.
CHAPTER II

THE THEME OF GOD IN SMITH'S POETRY

Although Stevie Smith was obsessed with God and Christianity, she never succeeded in maintaining a consistent religious philosophy. Her poetry expresses her ambivalence—she had the ability to be a believer, a non-believer, and an agnostic, often simultaneously. Comfortable neither in belief nor in unbelief, she said describing her religion, "I'm supposed to be an agnostic, but I'm sort of a backslider as a believer, too. I mean I'm a backslider as a non-believer."¹ In her work, she continually probes questions of Christianity; in truth, she simply could not leave God alone—in her poems, her novels, her reviewing. Because of this running quarrel with God, Patric Dickinson compares her to Emily Dickinson; for both, he writes, "God could seldom get in even an edgewise word."²

Smith's poetry reveals three major attitudes toward religion, which sometimes overlap: first, she is the agnostic who cannot make up her mind—she has faith in a god in whom she does not want to believe, yet she loses faith in a god in whom she does want to believe. Second,
she often writes poems which confidently reject God; she is the atheist expressing approval of the decline of organized religion, strongly attacking both the Catholic and Anglican Churches. She vehemently rejects God and Christianity in such atheistic poems as being untrue, but if possibly true, then cruelly unfair. Third, however, she is a believer who replaces the Christian God of eternal damnation with what she views as a more merciful God of her own making. She tries desperately to create a God for herself in whom she can believe. As Ian Hamilton suggests, this god in whom she does want to believe is a "truer, more just, less dogma-ridden presence" than the god of her High Anglican upbringing.  

Smith's religious thinking shows little change or development over the years--her early and later poems reveal a fairly constant inability to synthesize her views. She herself said that she did not think that her attitudes had changed much throughout her life;" her inconsistency remained consistent, her struggle with her religious position occupying her through her entire career.

The poet's religious confusion and her failure to come to a firm belief are apparent in several agnostic poems, particularly in "Why do you rage?" Like many of Smith's religious poems, it is a dialogue between two
speakers who argue points of religion. The second speaker, as is usual for Smith in such dialogue poems, decides the point. "Why do you rage?" is a debate seemingly between two parts of the poet herself as she asks herself why she continually rages against Christ, "Before Whom angel brightness grows dark, heaven dim." The initial voice wonders at the other's boldness and foolishness in defying a God before whom higher beings than she tremble. The first reminds the second that God is Love, and that God is calling to her; she pleads with the latter to answer "yes" to God:

Say, Yes; yes, He did; say, Yes; call Him this: Truth, Beauty, Love, Wonder, Holiness.
(p. 418)

The first begs the second not to keep rejecting faith:

Say Yes. Do not always say, No.
(p. 418)

But the second speaker rejects faith, wishing that she could accept Christianity. The last speaker seems to have the final say in the poem, replying:

Oh I would if I thought it were so,
Oh I know that you think it is so.
(p. 418)

The former self only thinks that Christianity is true; the latter cannot believe, although she wants to. The poem makes clear Smith's divided self, her divided thinking about God.
Her indecision is again reflected in "The Reason," which sums up well her confusion—a potential suicide contemplates taking his life but cannot bring it off:

It is because I can't make up my mind
If God is good, impotent or unkind.

(p. 52)

These lines indicate that God exists for the poet; however, characteristically, she says in a later poem, "God the Eater," that

There is a god in whom I do not believe
Yet to this god my love stretches,
This god whom I do not believe in is
My whole life, my life and I am his.

(p. 339)

God both does and does not exist for the poet in this poem. Smith is drawn to God even though she has difficulty accepting God as real.

Smith as a nonbeliever is, however, more sure of her stand, although she is still ambivalent. She writes many atheistic poems approving of the rejection of Christianity by the modern world, viewing Christianity as productive of much harm. Yet occasionally she seems wistful, perhaps even sad, at the decline of religion. The lyrically beautiful "Fallen, Fallen" seems to lament the loss of Christianity's force and grandeur for modern man. The poem expresses the present impotence of the Christian religion, which has become a mechanical repetition of biblical stories:
The angel that rebellion raised
In moment of ecstatic rage
Is fallen, is fallen; his power is gauged.

Noted, by rote is had, the word is spoken.
Nothing remains but a falling star for a token,
A tale told by the fireside, a sword that is broken.

Christianity is viewed as nothing now but a legend from
a grander past; the poem is similar in feeling to Hopkins'
"Sheperd's Brow," which also laments that the epic glory
of man belongs to the past. According to Smith's poem,
Christianity is today merely doctrine learned by "rote";
she sees no real power left in religion. In this case,
the thought brings sadness to the poet.

Again deviating from her usual approval of Christ-
tianity's decline, Smith sees Christianity as having been
beneficial to man in "A Man I Am." The poem describes the
nature of man before Christianity as savage and bestial;
a representational early man is the speaker in the poem,
comparing himself to a wolf:

    I ran into the forest wild
    I seized a little new born child,
    I tore his throat, I licked my fang,
    Just like a wolf. A wolf I am.

    (p. 202)

The primitive says that he "ran wild for centuries" until
he finally tasted the "primordial curse" of original sin;
then man turned to God:

    Until at last I cried on Him,
    Before whom angel faces dim,
To take the burden of my sin  
And break my head beneath his wing.  
(p. 202)

Falling upon God and looking toward death, uncivilized  
man became human:

Upon the silt of death I swam  
And as I wept my joy began  
Just like a man. A man I am.  
(p. 202)

Man's faith in God makes man become human, which offers  
a very different attitude toward Christianity than Smith  
normally expresses.

Smith likewise views belief in God as beneficial to  
man in "Away, Melancholy," but in this poem she adds that  
such belief is still an illusion. Life is presented as  
good--man must suffer much but is to be commended for  
striving to be good and for creating a god of love. Man  
is the best of all creatures because he alone has invented  
a god:

Man of all creatures  
Is superlative  
(Away melancholy)  
He of all creatures alone  
Raiseth a stone  
(Away melancholy)  
Into the stone, the god  
Pours what he knows of good  
Calling, good, God.  
Away, melancholy, let it go.  
(p. 329)

Man reaches for good, which he calls God; even though God  
is in man's mind, the striving for good is the important
point. Smith exhorts man not to question whether God can exist in such an evil world (which she herself often does question) but to accept the fact that man considers God to be good as a comfort:

Speak not to me of tears,
Tyranny, pox, wars,
Saying, Can God
Stone of man's thought, be good?

Say rather it is enough
That the stuffed
Stone of man's good, growing,
By man's called God.
Away, melancholy, let it go.

According to Smith in this poem, even though God is a "stuffed Stone," the concept of God as good proves that man himself is basically good. Smith concludes that man's aspiration to good and to love should be applauded and wondered at:

It is his virtue needs explaining,
Not his failing.

The poem presents belief in God as an illusion, but the belief itself is seen as evidence of man's goodness; the fact of its being an illusion is unimportant.

The attitude that belief in an illusion proves man's goodness is unusual for Smith. Normally, her poems dealing with the disappearance of religion express approval, sometimes even mocking approval. In "Where are you going?" a voice asks the human race where it is headed now that
the "old world preacher" has vanished. The last stanza describes the disappearing preacher:

This tedious old person who asked such questions
As drove everybody to exasperation.
No wonder they all of them cried, Good riddance!

(p. 168)

The poet, along with the rest of the world, cries "Good riddance!" to Christianity in the poem.

In a similar vein, Smith mockingly approves of Christianity's decline in a biting statement of the history of the Church in "The Past":

People who are always praising the past
And especially the times of faith as best
Ought to go and live in the Middle Ages
And be burnt at the stake as witches and sages.

(p. 366)

The poem provides an ironic comment on the "times of faith," which the poet views as times of persecution; she concludes that the world should be pleased to see such times vanish.

This view of Christianity as an instrument of evil, rather than good, is particularly evident when Smith criticizes such organized religions as the Catholic Church. Her quarrel with Catholicism lies in what she sees as its inhumanity. Explaining her anti-Catholicism in an interview, she said:

The Catholic Church are always saying how villainous the cruelty of the Nazis, but after all the Nazis—though God knew they were hell—only lasted thirteen years. The Inquisition went on for 700 years. I never can understand why the Catholics are so modest about their performance in the field of persecution.
Smith scolds the Catholic Church in her poetry; in "Sunt Leones" she is critical of the Church for glorifying the early Christian martyrs. She points out the ironically indispensable role of the lions in helping the Christians to become martyrs. The lions become symbols of persecution; the title, translated "They Are Lions," indicates that the Christians themselves became lions, or martyr-makers. In verse sounding similar to that of Ogden Nash, the poet writes that the lions played a

Not entirely negligible part
In consolidating at the very start
The position of the Early Church.
(p. 56)

She dismisses the horror of Christian martyrdom lightly: "And if the Christians felt a little blue-- / Well people being eaten often do" (p. 56). She points out the Christian debt to "lionhood," or persecution, in establishing the Church--the Church which she sees as ironically perpetuating itself through similar persecution:

My point which up to this has been obscured
Is that it was the lions who procured
By chewing up blood gristle flesh and bone
The martyrdoms on which the Church has grown.
(p. 56)

The Church has grown both on the bones of its martyrs and on the bones of those whom it has martyred. The poet
offers the serious criticism that the Church is born in persecution and becomes the persecutor.

Smith continues to criticize Christianity as wicked in "Was it not curious?," taking St. Augustine and Pope Gregory sharply to task for their not questioning the presence of British slaves in the Roman slave markets. In quatrains sounding like tunes which children might sing in Vacation Bible School, she scolds the Pope:

He said he must send the gospel, the gospel,  
At once to them over the waves  
He never said he thought it was wicked  
To steal them away for slaves.  
(p. 392)

Smith bitterly concludes that it was not so much curious of Augustine and Gregory not to condemn slavery as it was wicked of them.

Not only does Smith criticize the past history of the Catholic Church, but she also continues to chastise present-day Catholicism, pointing out her opinions of its weaknesses. She scolds in "How do you see?" that

The Roman Catholic hierarchy should be endlessly discussing at this moment  
Their shifty theology of birth control.  
(p. 520)

The Church, she says, upon close examination, is not particularly beautiful; however, she grudgingly concludes that it is better today than it has been in the past:
On the whole Christianity I suppose is kinder than it was
Helped to it, I fear, by the power of the Civil Arm.
(p. 521)

Thus she admits that the Church is not as bad as it could
be and has been, although it has improved only because of
the prodding of civil authority. She nonetheless still
advocates its disappearance.

Although Smith denounces the Catholic Church and
dismisses its martyrs lightly, she does include a poem
which offers an opposite view, "The Roman Road." The
voice of a Christian martyr narrates the poem, which seems
to applaud the courage of the martyr who, though losing
the world, gains his soul:

Oh Lion in a peculiar guise,
Sharp Roman road to Paradise,
Come eat me up, I'll pay thy toll
With all my flesh, and keep my soul.
(p. 227)

Therefore, Smith is not always antagonistic toward the
Catholic Church, although she does often malign it.

Smith prefers the Anglican Church of her upbringing
to the Catholic Church; she does not see the Church of
England as being quite so harmful. She claims that "the
R. C.'s have to swallow themselves whole, and the perse-
cuting clauses are still on their books, although in-
operative," but she says that "the C. of E. is free to
keep the good and discard the bad." She both hated and
loved the Church of her childhood; as Philip Larkin points
out, "the language and history of the Church of England was in her blood, but so was doubt." Her preference for the Church of England seems to lie in her familiarity with it and her love for its style. She rails against the Anglican clergy for changing the wording in the *Book of Common Prayer*, speaking of a certain alteration as "A particularly ripe piece of idiocy" ("Why are the Clergy . . . ?" p. 335). And, she writes in "Admire Cranmer!" that Cranmer should be admired more for his genius than for his martyrdom (p. 398). She does see some hope, however, for the Church of England:

I think soon we shall be saying: Really, some of the people who go to church are just as good as those who stay away.

Smith is pleased to see established Christianity vanish, then, because she views its history as one of persecution; she also rejects God and Christian doctrine in general as untrue. In many poems, she confidently dismisses Christianity as "fairy tales," using this description numerous times to refer to Christian beliefs, even outside her poetry. In an essay on *Murder in the Cathedral*, she cannot resist a stab at Christianity, criticizing the doctrine of the fortunate fall as a "fairy comment on a fairy story."

The fairy tale themes and characters so often treated in Smith's poems often reveal themselves to be
comments on Christianity; she finds fairy stories beautiful, but cruel if believed in. For example, in "Will Man Ever Face Fact and not Feel Flat?" the wind sneers at man and his religion:

It is wonderful how he can
Invent fairy stories about everything, pit pat,
Will he ever face fact and not feel flat?
(p. 341)

These lines indicate that man needs his invented fairy tales of religion in order to survive; unlike the poet's approval of man's belief in an illusion in "Away, Melancholy," she here disapproves of such beliefs.

Likewise, Christianity is presented as a fiction in "I Was so Full . . . ." Man is the creator of both God and the Devil, as the poet writes of these two that

These persons have worked very much in my mind
And by being not true, have made me unkind,
So now I say: Away with them, away; we should
Not believe fairy stories if we wish to be good.

Think of them as persons from the fairy wood.
(p. 401)

For the poet, belief in Christian fairy tales can be dangerous, making people unkind rather than standing as evidence of man's goodness.

Smith again stresses this belief that Christianity is a beautiful but dangerous lie in one of her longest and most serious poems, "How do you see?" Expanded from another poem, "Oh Christianity, Christianity," it presents
most of her religious attitudes, but especially the idea that religion is a fairy story. Although she admits that Christianity can produce good, she condemns Christian beliefs as "a beautiful cruel lie":

But must we allow good to be hitched to a lie,  
A beautiful cruel lie, a beautiful fairy story,  
A beautiful idea, made up in a loving moment?  
(p. 516)

In this poem, she would like to believe in Christianity--particularly in the thought of the Holy Ghost's brooding on chaos and giving birth to form--but she cannot believe it can be accepted as true; therefore, it is dangerous to offer the belief as fact:

It can only be beautiful if told as a fairy story,  
Told as a fact it is harmful, for it is not a fact.  
(p. 517)

She insists that man should be good without requiring beautiful lies to make him so; he must become "disenchanted" by giving up his fairy tales:

Oh I know we must put away the beautiful fairy stories  
And learn to be good in a dull way without enchantment.  
(p. 517)

The last stanza of the poem reveals her fears for the world if man does not put away belief in "fairy tales":

I do not think we shall be able to bear much longer the dishonesty  
Of clinging for comfort to beliefs we do not believe in,  
For comfort, and to be comfortably free of the fear  
Of diminishing good, as if truth were a convenience.  
I think if we do not learn quickly, and learn to teach children,  
To be good without enchantment, without the help
Of beautiful painted fairy stories pretending to be true, 
Then I think it will be too much for us, the dishonesty, 
And, armed as we are now, we shall kill everybody, 
It will be too much for us, we shall kill everybody. 
(p. 521)

The poet fears that continued reliance on beliefs no longer accepted will prove dangerous for mankind.

"How do you see?" provides useful comments on another poem dealing with fairy tales, "The Frog Prince," a religious poem which may not seem to be one when read outside the context of Smith's other poetry. In the light of her numerous designations of Christianity as "fairy tales," the meaning of "The Frog Prince" becomes clear: the only truly spiritual or good people (the "heavenly") are those who give up the fairy tales of Christianity (become "disenchanted").

The frog begins his familiar tale, awaiting the maiden's kiss which will turn him into a prince:

I am a frog
I live under a spell
I live at the bottom
Of a green well.
(p. 406)

The second stanza, however, reveals that the apparent children's poem is more than a simple fairy story transformation. The frog asks, "But do other enchanted people feel as nervous / As I do?" (p. 406). He worries that he might not be happy when the spell is broken--he has had a rather pleasant time as a frog: he is "fairly happy /
In a frog's doom" (p. 406). People under the spell of Christianity, the "frogs," live quiet, pleasant, ordered lives. Like the frog prince, they are "for ever agile"; they can skirt issues and leap over thought-provoking questions about their "enchantment." And like the frog prince, they, too, live in "doom." The frog describes his enchanted life thus:

And the quietness,
Yes I like to be quiet
I am habituated
To a quiet life.  
(p. 407)

But this frog is a thinking one who soon realizes that it is part of the spell for him to believe that he is content as a frog and to fear becoming a prince. He decides that being set free will be "heavenly," longing to be rid of the spell because "only disenchanted people / Can be heavenly." Punning on the word "disenchanted," the poet reveals that only those who are free of the spell of fairy stories can be spiritual, those who have become "disenchanted" with the doctrines of Christianity. Thus, an apparent children's poem about a frog prince is unmasked as a comment on Christianity.

Another apparently playful poem which proves to be a rejection of Christianity as untrue is "Our Bog is Dood." The poem criticizes those Christians who accept their religion blindly without considering its doctrines
intelligently. The vicious, though humorous, attack presents such Christians as ignorant children. A dialogue between the children and the narrator, the poem is begun by the transposing of "our God is good" (and perhaps "our God is dead") to an infantile, lisping "Our Bog is dood":

Our Bog is dood, our Bog is dood,
They lisped in accents mild.
(p. 265)

When asked by the narrator how they know, the children reply, "We know because we wish it so," and bristle at the questioner: "And if you do not think it so / You shall be crucified," which recalls Smith's poems that treat persecution by Christians. The narrator then asks the children what "dood" (good) means; they decide it means "just what we think it is." Like the characters in Alice in Wonderland, they fall to bickering among themselves about just what their terms mean:

Each one upon each other glared
In pride and misery
For what was dood, and what their Bog
They never could agree.
(p. 265)

The narrator leaves them quarreling, the silly Christians who cannot agree on doctrine, and walks away alone, perhaps casting aspersions on Matthew Arnold's sea of faith in "Dover Beach":

And sweetest of all to walk alone
Beside the encroaching sea,
The sea that soon should drown them all,
That never yet drowned me.

Welcoming the withdrawal of the sea of faith in which the Christians will drown, the poet will not be entrapped by what she sees as religious nonsense.

Besides rejecting Christianity as untrue, Smith also rejects it as unfair, even if it could be true. She finds specific doctrines and the condition of man unfair, ultimately accusing God of injustice. She cannot accept what she believes to be inhumane tenets of Christianity, whether true or not, especially despising the doctrine of eternal punishment. She expresses her disdain in "Thoughts about the Christian Doctrine of Eternal Hell," in which she writes that Christians try to avoid believing in hell, but since God commands eternal punishment for the damned, Christians are forced to believe in it:

Is it not interesting to see
How the Christians continually
Try to separate themselves in vain
From the doctrine of eternal pain.

(p. 387)

Christians are "committed" to a belief in hell, but she cries for the belief to be rejected; such a religion should be discarded:

The religion of Christianity
Is mixed of sweetness and cruelty
Reject this Sweetness, for she wears
A smoky dress out of hell fires.

(p. 387)
She denies that Christians can accept the humane parts of their religion and reject those doctrines which do not appeal to them, although Smith sometimes does just that herself. In this poem, however, she insists that Christians must either accept all or deny all of their religion; she advocates in these particular lines a denial of all of Christianity.

Smith blames God for this "unjust" Christian doctrine as well as for the cruelty she finds in man's fate. In a humorous dialogue between God and man, "Nature and Free Animals," God scolds man because of his corruption of nature and animals, his mistreatment of them both. Man replies to God that man should not have been created imperfect if God wanted him to be better:

Well all I can say is
If you wanted it like that
You shouldn't have created me
Not that I like it very much
And now that I'm on the subject I'll say
What with Nature and Free Animals on one side
And you on the other,
I hardly know I'm alive.

(p. 42)

The narrator protests man's dilemma of having been created weak but nevertheless being expected to strive for perfection, a dilemma of which the poet strongly disapproves.

Smith similarly protests the unfairness of God in another dialogue, this time between God and the Devil.
Recalling the beginning of the book of Job, "God and the Devil" portrays a serious subject in a chatty style:

God and the Devil
Were talking one day
Ages and ages of years ago.
God said: Suppose
Things were fashioned this way,
Well then, so and so.
The Devil said no: No,
Prove it if you can.
So God created Man
And that is how it all began.
(p. 34)

The creation of man is treated as a prideful contest between God and the Devil; man exists to prove a point to Satan—the poem bemoans the unfairness of man's having to endure pain and suffering only to prove a point in a fairy tale:

It has continued now for many a year
And sometimes it seems more than we can bear.
But why should bowels yearn and cheeks grow pale?
We're here to point a moral and adorn a tale.
(p. 34)

Continuing to deny the seriousness of man's place in the creation is "Egocentric," a half-joking but still serious rejection of the awesomeness and grandeur of creation. What good is the beauty of creation, the poet asks, if life is not fair for man?

What care I if good God be
If he be not good to me.
If he will not hear my cry
Nor heed my melancholy midnight sigh?
(p. 18)
In contrast to Blake, the poet cares not that God made both the lamb and the lion, the tiger and the clam—she cannot revel in the creation because the rest of creation, unlike man, is "Unquickened by the questing conscious flame / That is my glory and my bitter bane" (p. 18). The constant quest for answers is both grand and bitter—man can never be as satisfied in God's creation as nature is. The particular speaker chooses to remain bitter, responding to the opening couplet with a comic touch:

What care I if skies are blue,
If God created Gnat and Gnu,
What care I if good God be
If he be not good to me?

(p. 18)

The poem seems to mock God, but it also mocks man for being so egocentric.

Smith's disapproval of man's being the plaything of God reappears in "The Man Saul," a portrait of the Old Testament Jewish king. Smith expresses compassion for Saul, who like the poet herself, is both "God haunted" and "God daunted":

Shadowed Saul, I am sorry for him
He is the victim of a God's whim

(p. 13)

Even more bitter is "Dear Child of God," in which the speaker answers God's question of why the human race
is sad and angry. The speaker tells God that men are sorrowful and hateful because God in the beginning

\[
\begin{align*}
\ldots & \text{ made the terms of our survival} \\
& \text{That we should use our intelligence} \\
& \text{To kill every rival.}
\end{align*}
\]

(p. 424)

This "ferocious poison" is part of human nature--planted there by God, and it "nourishes" His creatures. The poet blames God for man's violent and corrupt nature, deciding that he would give his life for man to become loving and kind--addressing God ironically as "Dear Father of peacefulness." Men, the narrator says, forget that God "put this poison in us"--most remain tearful and angry, "Faithful but unfortunate." The poet here sees all of man's problems as God's fault for having created man imperfectly.

God is once more the culprit in Smith's eyes for creating man imperfectly in "Was He Married?" which rejects Christianity but ends, however, optimistically. Another dialogue rejecting Christianity as unfair, the poem nonetheless admits that perhaps Christianity is improving. The poem asks and answers questions about Christ; every other stanza answers a question concerning Christ's nature. The first speaker tries to show that Christ, being perfect, could never suffer in the way that humans do--he never had to support a family or to suffer for being wrong. The questioner claims that Christ
cannot suffer as man does: "But there is no suffering like having made a mistake / Because of being of an inferior make" (p. 389), indicating, as the poet has argued previously, that man errs because God made him inferior. The second speaker replies that Christ was superior and therefore could not suffer for making mistakes. Only humans can suffer from the list of troubles which the poem provides; the human condition is presented as a severe trial--humans learn "that being comical / Does not ameliorate the desperation" (p. 390). Humans suffer "because they are so mixed"; however, Christ was perfect, not "mixed." The questioner decides then, in view of man's suffering, that "All human beings should have a medal, A god cannot carry it, he is not able" (p. 390). The poet decides that man should be rewarded for having to endure what a god does not have to endure. The answering voice insists that man made up this god whom they find so unfair:

A god is Man's doll, you ass,
He makes him up like this on purpose.

He might have made him up worse.

He often has, in the past.

To choose a god of love, as he did and does,
Is it a little move then?

Yes, it is.
A larger one will be when men
Love love and hate hate but do not deify them?

It will be a larger one.

(p. 391)

The second speaker, as usual in the poet's dialogue poems, offers the "right" answer, convincing the first speaker. The poem ends on an optimistic note; man has at least made the Christian God a god of love--man has in the past sometimes made his gods cruel. Although man is still in such a primitive state that he must worship and make gods of love and hate, the situation could be worse. The poet again grudgingly admits, as in "How do you see?" that Christianity is not as bad as it could be.

Despite the fact that so many of Smith's religious poems reject Christianity, she does write poems of belief, which offer her conception of a replacement God. She corrects what she sees as Christian misconceptions of God and Christian doctrine, providing her own beliefs and a god of her own making. In "No Categories!" she protests a dogma-filled religion, trying to replace dogma with a god of love. She protests the belief in angels as ridiculous, praising God alone. The poem opens with an affirmation of God:

I cry I cry
To God who created me
Not to you angels who frustrated me.

(p. 258)
The angels have "severe faces" and "scholarly grimaces"; they represent those in the Church who set down exact doctrines with their "do this and do that" attitude and "exasperating pit-pat." They make up rules which are impossible for man to follow; these rules are "not what the Creator meant." Smith affirms a belief in the Creator, but not in what she sees as constraining rules of conduct invented by man.

She again tries to profess a love in God without having to believe in Christian commandments in the seemingly comical "God Speaks." God is the speaker in this poem, which affirms God but disavows the biblical scheme of Christianity. God admits in the poem that there is some error in man, His creation: "I made Man with too many faults yet I love him" (p. 409). God says that He is genial and wants man to be happy; man has painted Him all wrong: "He should not paint me as if I were abominable." God continues that the belief that He gave His son for man's salvation is a misguided one which "leads to nervous prostration." He wants man to be at home with Him, but man cannot come to God by wishing and by hoping in the Christian religion--"only by being already at home here." Man has to be good without enchantment, to live in the material world as in "The Frog Prince," in order to
live in heaven. But unlike the latter poem, "God Speaks" is an affirmation of a supreme being.

Smith provides again her own humanist, merciful God in a poem which affirms a belief in finding God in man and his heart; characteristically, however, her affirmation of God has nothing to do with Christianity. The poem, "Mother, among the Dustbins," is a discussion between a child and his mother; the child asks questions of his mother about God, but as in many of Smith's poems, the child reveals his wisdom, finally instructing the adult. The child tells his mother that he sees God all around him and wonders if she does also:

Mother, among the dustbins and the manure
I feel the measure of my humanity, an allure
As of the presence of God, I am sure. 
(p. 118)

The mother replies that she feels the same presence of God in the common things of their lives--in the broom and cobwebs, but "most of all in the silence of the tomb."

She continues that the modern disbelief in God is foolish:

Ah! but that thought that informs the hope of our kind
Is but an empty thing, what lies behind? 
(p. 118)

What lies behind the disbelief in God is "naught but the vanity of a protesting mind." This skepticism is "the thought that bounces / Within a conceited head"; "Man is most frivolous when he pronounces" (p. 118). These lines
do not sound like the same poet who so heartily approves of the decline of religious faith and who also quite often herself pronounces.

The child then picks up his mother's point, telling her that he will retain his faith, and advises her to do likewise. In the last couplet, the narrator intrudes:

Can you question the folly of man in the creation of God? Who are you?

(p. 118)

Twisting the normal idea of God creating man, the poet has man the creator of God; but this God is good and should not be tampered with, a view unlike the poet's aversion to man's created God in "Was He Married?" The poem echoes the biblical pronouncement that only the fool says that there is no God, although this God is one whom man has himself created. The child and his mother are allowed their simple faith; they offer no restraining Christian doctrine of pain or torment, simply faith in man.

As well as providing a God of her own making, Smith also offers her ideas of how Christ should be considered. She replaces the common conceptions, or what she believes to be misconceptions, with her own Christ. "The Airy Christ" presents a lovely, life-loving Christ who scorns strict moral codes. The poem opens with her new view of Christ:
Who is this that comes in splendour, coming from the blazing East?
This is he we had not thought of, this is he the Airy Christ.

(p. 345)

Listening to those who preach about him, Christ "frowns an airy frown"; he realizes that he must be crucified, but that part of Christianity does not interest him, as it did not interest God in "God Speaks." The poem describes Christ, dispassionately considering the crucifixion, as he

Looks aloofly at his feet, looks aloofly at his hands,
Knows they must, as prophets say, nailed be to wooden bands . . .

The sweet singer does not care that he was crucified.

(p. 345)

Christ knows that men must have Christian laws to follow--"working laws"--yet he sings happily. Those who can understand his joy in life will not need such codes:

Those who truly hear the voice, the words, the happy song,
Never shall need working laws to keep from doing wrong.

However,

Deaf men will pretend sometimes they hear the song, the words,
And make excuse to sin extremely; this will be absurd.

(p. 345)

Christ does not want men to be good because they have to, but because they want to--to make gods of love and hate but not to deify them as in "Was He Married?" He also does not want men to love him because of his sacrifice but because of his joy:
For he does not wish that men should love him more than anything
Because he died; he only wishes they would hear him sing.
(p. 345)

The joy of Christ is stressed, and the New Testament moral code is discarded.

Similarly replacing the common views of the sacrificial Christ with the poet's own views is "Christmas," which affirms Christ's joy and his nobility--he was not humble, but a god. Narrating the Christmas story, Smith writes that a child is born "and he is Noble and not Mild"--the converse of the conventional gentle Jesus meek and mild--"And he is born to make men Wild" (p. 222). The Christ of whom the poet approves is powerful and joyful, not somber and lowly, remarkably like Blake's "Tiger" Christ, as Enright points out.11

One final poem which presents Smith's replacement of the Christian religion with her own religion of humanism is "In the Park," a poem about prayer. Word play is important in this poem, which revolves around a clever misunderstanding between two old gentlemen resulting from one's impaired hearing. The first old man tries to instruct the other in how to pray, admonishing him to pray for the weak, the deformed, the unfortunate. The first says to the second, who is nearly deaf,
"Pray for the Mute who have no word to say,"
Cried the one old gentleman, "Not because they are dumb,
But they are weak. And the weak thoughts beating in the brain
Generate a sort of heat, yet cannot speak.
Thoughts that are bound without sound
In the tomb of the brain's room, wound. Pray for the Mute."

(p. 373)

The second gentleman misunderstands, thinking that he is to pray for the newt, not the mute. Puzzled, he tells the first that the amphibian needs no prayers; the creature is free to swim in the element which it loves best. The deaf man is thrilled to be able to rejoice in another creature's happiness, as

The happiness he spoke of
Irradiated all his members, and his heart
Barked with delight to stress
So much another's happiness.

(p. 373)

After they clear up the confusion, the narrator intrudes, asking whether it is "Christianer" to pray for the pain of the Mute or to rejoice in the happiness of the newt. The first speaker, who prayed for those in pain, is, as expected, converted by the second, exulting that he can see the better means of prayer. Both old gentlemen are happy to praise man, not to pray for man's pain in the conventional Christian way. The poem concludes with the "converted" man's statement:

"Praise," cries the weeping softened one,
"Not pray, praise, all men,
"Praise is the best prayer, the least self's there, that least's release."
(p. 374)

Man, like the newt, should rejoice in his own home—the earth. And he should stress happiness rather than dwell on pain, avoiding the selfish element present in Christian prayer. The poet affirms a faith in mankind, not Christian prayer, by contriving a deaf man who could "hear" better than his friend who has no such handicap. Smith thereby replaces the conventional form of prayer with her own humanistic form of prayer by rejoicing in man.

Thus Stevie Smith presents in her numerous poems about God and Christianity her own ideas of what God should and should not be. She wants to believe in a joyful humanistic God, not in the cruelty of eternal punishment and in restrictive Christian moral codes. She rejects Christianity as untrue and cruelly unfair, and as possessing an abominable history of persecution. She normally expresses approval at the decline of Christianity in the modern world, criticizing those who accept its tenets, especially the Catholic Church. For this religion which she rejects, however, she provides a replacement in her own brand of humanism. Although her religion was always ambivalent, it was always present in her life and in her poems. She aptly expresses her indecision and obsession with the Church in her
Novel on Yellow Paper: "I have a lot against Christianity, though I cannot at the moment remember what it is."
NOTES


6Smith, quoted in Ivy and Stevie, p. 48.


9Smith, Yellow Paper, p. 33.


12Smith, Yellow Paper, p. 33.
CHAPTER III

THE THEME OF DEATH IN SMITH'S POETRY

Along with her obsession with God, Stevie Smith was equally preoccupied with death, describing her poems as "a bit deathwards in their wish." As Ian Hamilton suggests, her poetry frequently possesses a "cemetery-going taste for the macabre." Her fascination with death in various forms is present throughout her work; many of her poems are portraits, Spoon River fashion, of the dead relating their life stories from the grave. And many of these voices from the tomb are of those who have committed suicide—who have stabbed, shot, drowned, and drugged themselves—as Smith examines with morbid delight the gory details of their deaths.

Although Smith admitted that she did not know why, she was ultimately optimistic about death. Her basic attitude toward death is that it is a welcome release—a gift to man which allows for a peaceful, oblivious end to life in a difficult world. As with religion, her view of death is ambivalent, although she is more consistent in her attitudes toward death than towards God. Just as she often rejects Christian doctrine in her
religious poems, she also rejects Christian doctrine as a basis for her view of death; her poems about death do not deal with Christian concepts of heaven and hell, but with what she prefers to believe about death. She always personifies death as a god, and as she tries to replace the Christian God with her own God, she likewise creates her own god of Death in which to believe. She converses as intimately with the god Death as she does with the Christian God in her poems, but scolds the god Death much less frequently than the Christian God. Death is ultimately to her a kinder friend than the Christian God; to the poet, Death is even a more personal entity than the Christian God with whom she so often argues.

The idea of death as a god is the underlying theme of all her poems about death, poems which prove to be of three major types. First, Smith writes a considerable number of poems which express a longing for a natural death because death is preferable to life. The poet pleads with the god Death in such poems to come to her on his own to release her from the prison of the living. Second, she writes many poems which concern suicide; man's ability to control the god Death by means of suicide is a common theme in Smith's poetry. Unlike the Christian God against whom she often rages, Death as a god is man's servant; Death cannot refuse man's
summons. Smith takes great comfort in man's power to control such a god, although she is ambiguous about whether man has the right to exercise this power.

Third, Smith writes the few poems in her collection which express sadness about death, poems which accuse the god Death of injustice; she laments the deaths of loved ones and of those whose time to die she believes has arrived too soon. Smith views death as unfortunate only in the cases of others; for herself, however, death is always eagerly anticipated.

Smith's poems which express a longing and love for a natural death view the god Death as a friend and as a gift to man from the Christian God himself. The poet describes the condition of death as one of peace and oblivion in some of these poems, while in others she contrasts the condition of life to death, preferring death.

She describes her views of Death as a kind friend and the kindest of all the gods in "Why do I . . . . ," in which Death eases the pain of mankind and so is man's friend:

Why do I think of Death as a friend?
It is because he is a scatterer
He scatters the human frame
The nerviness and the great pain
Throws it on the fresh fresh air
And now it is nowhere."
After man dies, his pain no longer exists; the poet loves and longs for the god who ends this pain:

Only sweet Death does this
Sweet Death, kind Death,
Of all the gods you are best.

Death becomes more than a friend to the poet, though, in "Tender Only to One"; in this poem, Smith becomes so intimate with and passionate about the god Death that he becomes her lover. The poem opens with the narrator discarding flower petals, attempting to discover to which lover she should be true. The last stanza reveals that the narrator is tender only to one lover--Death:

Tender only to one,
Last petal's last breath
Cries out aloud
From the icy shroud
His name, his name is Death.

Although Death is portrayed as icy and formidable, the poet nonetheless composes a love poem to the god.

This god who is both friend and lover to the poet is seen to be a gift from the Christian god himself. In "My Heart Goes Out," Smith concludes that man should appreciate this gift from the Creator, but few are perceptive enough to be properly grateful. Smith praises the God of Christianity for such a reward as death:

My heart goes out to my Creator in love
Who gave me Death, as end and remedy.
All living creatures come to quiet Death
For him to eat up their activity.
And give them nothing, which is what they want
although
When they are living they do not think so.

(p. 368)

If people only understood the truth about death, says the poet, then they would realize their love and desire for it as she does.

Smith even goes so far as to present the gift of death as a reason for man's existence. In "From the Coptic," a poem inventing a creation myth, the promise of death becomes the impetus for man to come alive. As the poem begins, man is not yet created; he is potential man in the form of red clay. Three angels arrive to make the clay rise into man, commanding the clay:

Stand up, stand up, thou lazy red clay,
Stand up and be Man this happy day.

(p. 281)

Man, however, does not see the day as such a happy one; the red clay groans, asking why it should become man. The first two angels offer unsatisfactory reasons; they tell the clay that man shall experience both happiness and pain, but will never know when either is going to befall him. The clay refuses to become man, preferring instead to remain lifeless clay:

... the red clay lay flat in the falling rain,
Crying I will stay clay and take no blame.

(p. 282)
The third angel, however, produces a reason which induces the clay to become man: he offers him death. The angel says to man,

When thou hast heard what I have to say
Thou shalt rise Man and go man's way.

What have you to promise? the red clay moans,
What have you in store for my future bones?
I am Death, said the angel, and death is the end.
I am Man, cries clay rising, and you are my friend.

Death is to man in this poem such a wonderful gift from God that man consents to his own creation in order to receive the gift.

Smith in many poems focusses on what this gift of death is like. The poem "The River Deben" compares death to the peacefulness of the river. As the narrator rows along the river on a beautiful, calm night, she describes her wish that she could surrender to the water and experience a peaceful death:

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.

The poet is not contemplating actually drowning herself; she realizes that Death is not ready for her yet: "The time is not yet, he will not come so readily." She only wishes that she could experience the joyful tranquility of death:
Oh happy Deben, oh happy night, and night's companion
Death,
What exultation what ecstasy is in thy breath
It is as salt as the salt silt that lies beneath.

Flow tidal river flow, draw wind from the east,
Smile pleasant Death, smile Death in darkness
blessed,
But tarry day upon the crack of dawn. Thou comest
unwished.

(p. 49)

The condition of death she sees as a highly desirable
state of oblivion. This state is described longingly in
"Oblivion," in which the poet is metaphorically drowning.
A human being tries to touch the poet to call her back
from oblivion, but she refuses to come because death is
so lovely:

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.

(p. 562)

The narrator does not want to leave the sweet comfort
of nothingness, however:

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.

(p. 562)

The human voice persists, so the poet turns her back on
death rather than life. She cannot help thinking that
oblivion was better than life, though. Eagerly, she
awaits death's return:
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.
(p. 562)

Complementary to this description of death's comforting peace are several poems which describe the anxiety of living. Smith often describes the world as so difficult to live in that she longs for an end to her life to be rid of the rest of the world. In "Up and Down," she writes that the world is too busy; there are too many people who "push and rush and jerk and worry / Full of ineffectual flurry" (p. 31); she is tired of them all, concluding, "I shall be glad when they have done" (p. 31). She calls for death to hurry to her to release her from this obnoxious world:

I shall be glad when there's an end
Of all the noise that doth offend
My soul. Still Night, don cloak, descend.
(p. 31)

"Come Death (I)" reveals an even more cynical attitude toward life, the poet finding living to be an almost unbearable condition:

How vain the work of Christianity
To teach humanity
Courage in its mortality.
Who would not rather die
And quiet lie
Beneath the sod
With or without a god?
Foolish illusion, what has Life to give?
Why should man more fear Death than fear to live?
(p. 108)
Life is presented as a "foolish illusion" which is much more fearful than death. Regardless of any possible religious beliefs man may hold, the poet indicates that life is more difficult to endure than death.

To be delivered from the hell of humanity is, therefore, a prize; death is a reward. In the poem "Pretty," the poet discusses the various meanings of the word "Pretty," finally concluding that the condition to which "pretty" may best be applied is death, not anything living:

Cry pretty, pretty, pretty and you'll be able
Very soon not even to cry pretty
And so be delivered entirely from humanity
This is prettiest of all, it is very pretty.

(p. 409)

Such pessimism on the poet's part is especially visible in "Le Revenant," in which the narrator's uncle returns from the dead, preaching that death is better than life. However, no one believes him:

He came unto a habitation
That was the centre of the nation
He knocked upon each house and said:
It is much better to be dead.

And when they stoned him from the door
He vowed he would come back no more.

(p. 267)

The resurrected uncle promises to return to the dead, forever to be rid of mankind.

At times Smith's cynicism becomes so strong that she concludes it is better never to have been born than to
endure life, although death is second best to never having
been born. In "Ah, will the Saviour . . . ?" the poet
reverses the Christian belief in Christ's resurrecting
the dead; the poet asks to be resurrected from the tomb
of life into death, not from death into an afterlife.
Asking God to take her away from an unendurable existence,
the narrator sighs:

    The cross begot me on the stone,
    My heart emits no further moan,
    But fortified by funeral thought
    Awaits the doom of the distraught.

    Ah! will the Saviour never come
    To unlock me from the tomb,
    To requite the tears that falter
    For a birth I could not alter?

(p. 177)

Wishing never to have been born, the narrator's only hope-
ful thoughts are of death.

    Not only does the poet often pessimistically long for
her own death; at times she also wishes for the end of the
whole world. She occasionally indicates that man should
be obliterated entirely, as in "Will Ever":

    Would that the hours of time as a word unsaid
    Turning had turned again to the hourless night,
    Would that the seas lay heavy upon the dead,
    The lightless dead in the grave of the world new
drowned.

(p. 153)

Normally, Smith yearns only for her own death as a release
from life; but, in this case, she thinks mankind would
be better off if the entire world would disappear.
Usually very certain about desiring death, Smith in one poem, "The Hostage," allows some reservations about whether she should feel guilty about longing for death. The poem, about a woman soon to be hanged, contains certain autobiographical details. The victim, the narrator, is nervous because she is glad to be dying soon and wonders if perhaps she is wrong to desire her own approaching death. She confesses to a priest, admitting that she is not Catholic, but she needs to confess nonetheless because of her troubled conscience:

> Just a talk, not really a confession, but my heart is sore.
> No, it's not that I have to die, that's the trouble,
> I've always wanted to
> But it seemed so despondent you know, ungracious too.

(p. 325)

She feels that she should not be so eager to die, admitting that, even as a child, she thought of her own death, which Smith herself did:

> Even as a child, said the lady, I recall in my pram
> Wishing it was over and done with. Oh I am
> Already at fault.

(p. 325)

She admits that life is often beautiful, and that nature sometimes makes her glad to be alive, but she never could quite feel at home in the world. Never having formed close relationships because of her morbidness, she prefers death:
Of course I never dared form any close acquaintance. Marriage? Out of the question. Well for instance it might be infectious, this malaise of mine (an excuse?). Spread That? I'd rather be dead.

(p. 326)

She worries that God may not forgive her for wanting so much to be dead:

But will the Lord forgive me? Is it wrong? Will He forgive me do you think for not minding being hung, Being glad it will soon be over.

(p. 326)

She also hopes that there will be no Christian eternal life to disturb her rest in one of her few statements in her poems of death which mentions eternal life:

Hoping he isn't the Ruler, the busy Lover, Wishing to wake again, if I must at all, As a vegetable leaning against a quiet wall, Or an old stone, so old it was here before Man, Or a flash in the fire that split our world from the sun.

(p. 326)

The priest admits that he can find nothing in his holy texts to instruct her; he finds her case complicated but will pray for her. Not knowing what else to tell her, the priest says that she can continue to be glad that she will soon die:

Meanwhile, since you want to die and have to, you may go on feeling elated.

(p. 327)

The priest allows her the consolation of death; the narrator may continue to rejoice in the fact of her own
death. Her guilt feelings are not quite resolved but are at least temporarily allayed.

Smith is normally sure of herself when writing about her own death—she does not usually worry about whether it is wrong to want to die and whether death may not be the peace which she envisions. "The Hostage," however, reveals a measure of uncertainty in her attitude toward death.

Besides writing poems which express a longing for a natural death to release her from life, Smith also writes numerous poems about suicide. Admitting that the thought of suicide is her constant companion, she writes, "Always the buoyant, ethereal and noble thought is in my mind: Death is my servant." Smith first thought of suicide as a young child while confined to a tuberculosis sanitarium; the idea comforted her then and later: "I'm twice the girl I was that lay crying and waiting for death to come at that convalescent home. No, when I sat up and said: Death has got to come if I call him, I never called him and never have." She even advises children to follow her example and likewise to find comfort in the thought of death: "it is a wise thing that every intelligent, sensitive child should early be accustomed to the thought of death by suicide." Although absorbed and fascinated by such thoughts all her life, she never attempted suicide.
Damian Grant suggests that she was able to contemplate suicide with such ease because she was so secure, unlike other poets obsessed with death who actually committed suicide, such as Sylvia Plath.

Indeed, the suicide of a poet is made to appear comical and absurd in Smith's poem, "Pearl," dedicated "To an American lady poet committing suicide because of not being appreciated enough." The poem teases the woman who has killed herself, making the situation seem silly:

Then cried the American poet where she lay supine: "My name is Purrel; I was cast before swine."

(p. 457)

No evidence exists that Smith had in mind any specific poet, although the poem dates from 1966, and Plath committed suicide in 1963. Speculation about an actual identity in the poem is fruitless.

Smith is ambiguous in her poetry about whether man does have the right to commit suicide. In her poems, she many times merely draws portraits of suicide victims, refusing to judge their actions but revealing her own absorption in the subject. Some of her poems condone suicide as a necessary and brave act, while others condemn it as cowardly. Basically, she views suicide as cowardly if one kills oneself out of fear of life; one should commit suicide only if life becomes physically
or mentally unbearable. Nowhere in her poetry does Smith treat the act of suicide as a sin.

Many of Smith's studies of suicide neither condone nor condemn the action, such as "Dido's Farewell to Aeneas," one of Smith's several poems about mythological characters. The poem is a monologue in which Dido prepares to take her life; as she is about to kill herself, she cries:

Come Death, you know you must come when you're called
Although you're a god. And this way, and this way,
I call you.

(p. 330)

Death cannot refuse Dido's summons; without commenting on the morality of the act, Smith merely describes the kind of death which so fascinates her.

Like the poem about Dido's death, many of Smith's portraits of suicide are of deaths resulting from unrequited love. Her characters in such poems kill themselves because of broken hearts, as in "Does No Love Last?" in which a potential suicide will soon throw herself off a cliff:

I stand I fall
The depths appal
Upon my knees upon the bridge I fall,
Far down below
I see in fancy
My body spread
That in a frenzy
Down I cast.
'Tis broken now and bloody.
Does no love last?

(p. 62)
Smith's interest in the lover's suicide is quite morbid in this case.

She becomes even more macabre in contemplating her own death, as in "God the Drinker." The poem opens similarly to Emily Dickinson's "I like to see it lap the Miles":

I like to see him drink the gash
I made with my own knife
And draw the blood out of my wrist
And drink my life.

Who is this One, who drinks so deep?
His name is Death, He drinks asleep.

(She has taken the sweet knife far away,
The knife bleeds by night and day,
Night and day the blade drips,
I put the sweet knife to my lips.)

It was a god, he drank my health,
He came in shadows and by stealth.

(p. 340)

The poet is hungry for the "sweet" knife to bring her own death. Rather than a train lapping up the valleys and water tanks as in Dickinson's poem, Smith's poem portrays the god Death lapping up her life and blood in a grotesque suicide fantasy which makes no value judgment about suicide.

Many of Smith's poems do approve of suicide, however. In "Never Again," the poet writes that she will take her own life when she has had enough of this difficult world:

Never again will I weep
And wring my hands
And beat my head against the wall
When I have had enough
I will arise
And go unto my Father
And I will say to Him:
Father, I have had enough.

When the narrator is ready to die, unable to endure life longer, she will call Death.

Smith expresses the view that man should endure life if at all possible, but she also states that it is unwise to endure life if hope is gone. She asks in "Is it wise?" whether man is wise in abandoning hope wholly, answering that to completely give up hope is foolish:

Is it wise
To love Mortality
To make a song of Corruptibility
A chain of lined lies
To bind Mutability?
No, it is not wise.

Although it is unwise to abandon hope, it is also unwise to endure unbearable pain:

Is it wise
To endure
To call up Old Fury
And Pain for a martyr's dowry
When Death's a prize
Easy to carry?
No, it is not wise.

Rather than live in pain and endure a martyr's existence, man should give up only if no other answer is possible. If no other answer is possible, then the poet approves of suicide.
Suicide is not merely condoned but even viewed as a brave act in "Harold's Leap," a poem describing the suicide of a young man who threw himself off a cliff because of an unidentified despair. The poem states that Harold was normally a coward; he was "always afraid to climb high" (p. 233). Fearful of both life and death, he nevertheless "felt he should try." He manages to perform one courageous deed--suicide--and the poet applauds his action:

I would not say that he was wrong,  
Although he succeeded in doing nothing but die.  
Would you?  
Ever after that steep  
Place was called Harold's Leap.  
It was a brave thing to do.  
(p. 233)

As Smith views the god Death as man's friend, she also writes that man should be friends with death, particularly if one is going to call death by suicide. In "Exeat," the poet decides that suicide is commendable only if one has lived a full life and is personally friends with Death. If so, then man is ready to commit suicide. The poem describes a Roman emperor's visit to his prisoners being tortured in cramped cells; the poet explains the emperor's attitude toward death:

I remember the Roman Emperor, one of the cruellest of them,  
Who used to visit for pleasure his poor prisoners cramped in dungeons,  
So then they would beg him for death, and then he would say:
Oh no, oh no, we are not yet friends enough.
He meant they were not yet friends enough for him to
give them death.
So I fancy my Muse says, when I wish to die;
Oh no, Oh no, we are not yet friends enough.

(p. 414)

Not having finished her work as a poet, Smith is not yet
ready to relinquish her life:

How can a poet commit suicide
When he is still not listening properly to his Muse?

(p. 414)

The time may come, however, when suicide will be desirable;
when one has done what he wishes with his life and is ready
to go, then he should leave:

Yet a time may come then a poet or any person
Having a long life behind him, pleasure and sorrow,
But feeble now and expensive to his country
And on the point of no longer being able to make a
decision
May fancy Life comes to him in love and says:
We are friends enough now for me to give you death;
Then he may commit suicide, then
He may go.

(p. 414)

Therefore, if one's life is of no use to himself or anyone
else any longer, life may offer him the gift of death,
which he may rightfully accept.

Smith's attitude toward suicide is not always so
positive; she many times condemns suicide, concluding
that man should endure his life. Although in "Harold's
Leap," suicide is considered to be a brave act, at
other times the poet sees it as cowardly. Smith said
that suicide should be a noble act: "It is just as
possible to be ignoble in self-slaying as in every other department of human activity."

Such an ignoble self-slaying is presented in "Death Came to Me," in which the narrator describes from the grave his act of suicide; the poet does not specifically condemn the action, but implies that it was cowardly. The suicide victim says that death came to him, offering him first a knife, then poison, then a gun with which to commit suicide. He rejects the first two as too painful; he has not the courage to try the knife or the poison, saying of the knife, "I love my flesh too much / For such / A way" (p. 50); and of the poison, he admits that he "Had not the heart to try." So, he chooses the most craven method, the revolver. The poem ends with his shooting himself in the head; he is portrayed as a coward, although that is not specifically stated. The poet does not sympathize with this particular suicide, but hints that he should have either endured or found a more noble way in which to kill himself.

Smith does specifically state that suicide can be cowardly, in "Study to Deserve Death." In this poem she writes that endurance is better; one should not endure out of pride, but one will appreciate death much more by having waited for it, as she writes:
Prate not to me of suicide,
Faint heart in battle, not for pride
I say Endure, but that such end denied
Makes welcomer yet the death that's to be died.
(p. 185)

The poet makes the point that death is a prize to be earned; man should wait for it and not summon the god prematurely. As Enright points out, although Smith thought of death as friend, she thought of death as a friend one "should not impose upon." 11

Besides presenting suicide as a cowardly action, Smith can also see it at times as extremely selfish. In "Analysand," she states that excessive concern for oneself leads to the depression which often ends in suicide:

All thoughts that are turned inward to their source
Bring one to self-hatred and remorse
The punishment is suicide of course.
(p. 54)

Constant self-analysis should be avoided, and the suicide which may result from it is ignoble. 12

Smith has God himself condemn suicide in "God and Man," a monologue spoken by God about his beloved creature, man. God states that man is his darling, his love, but also his pain; he asks man not to commit suicide: "Oh Man, do not come to me until I call" (p. 261). God is presented as loving man; God grows in man rather than man in God. Man is the favorite of all God's creatures, but again he pleads with man not to die until he is ready for him:
In man is my life, and in man is my death,
He is my hazard, my pride and my breath,
I sought him, I wrought him, I pant on his worth,
In him I experience indeterminate growth.

Oh Man, Man, of all my animals dearest,
Do not come till I call, though thou weariest first.

(p. 261)

God desires in the poem that man should endure his life,
even if unbearable, until the appointed time for his death.

A similar attitude is present in "Mr. Over," in which
the devil approves of suicide. In the poem, the narrator
is thinking of a dead friend and wishes to die also: "And
a voice in my heart cried: Follow / Where he has led"
(p. 262); however, the voice tempting the poet to die
is from the devil; the advice is a ruse:

And a devil's voice cried: Happy
Happy the dead.

(p. 262)

A false voice attempts to trick the narrator into suicide;
and as in "The Hostage," Smith is perhaps not so sure that
death is the peace for which she hopes.

Smith goes so far as to consider suicide absurd at
times; like the death of the lady poet in "Pearl," another
suicide is viewed as silly in "I Am," which portrays a man
contemplating the deed. Both personified nature and a
priest try to dissuade the man, telling him that God will
save him. He wants to commit suicide, however, and does
so defiantly, but the poet condemns the action as ridiculous. The man replies to the priest:

I know the worth of the heavenly prize
And I know the strength of the race to be run
But my black heart cleaves to the strength of my gun.

(p. 275)

The narrator then intrudes, dismissing the suicide as absurd:

Then he put his gun to his head and shot
Crying absurdly, I am not.

(p. 275)

Finally, one of Smith's poems states very clearly that life should be endured if at all possible and suicide should be avoided; in "The Stroke," the poet is old and ill, lamenting that her youth is gone. She and a voice which she addresses as "the feeling of youth" converse; the "feeling of youth" offers her suicide but then recommends that she ignore the offer and endure her life:

I will comfort you with love and pain.
And also, if you like, I can procure for you a potion
That you will not take in vain.
The torpors of age could not seize the notion
To drink of the freeing grain, to measure the freeing grain.
All the same, I should not take it if I were you,
As you always can, but rather see life with me through.

(p. 571)

Suggesting that she not commit suicide, but think of it only as a comforting last resort if life really becomes too dreadful, the poet again expresses the attitude that suicide should be avoided.
Smith's attitude toward suicide, therefore, is ambivalent; she at times sees it as a brave act and at times not so brave. Ultimately, she seems to believe that endurance is the best course; death will eventually arrive to release man from his cares. Nonetheless, she is still fascinated and attracted by the thought of suicide as an escape and by the ability to control the god Death, even though in her own life she never called the god.

Smith occasionally turns from poems expressing a longing for death and examining suicide to those poems which lament the deaths of others. These poems are not nearly so numerous as the first two kinds; there are only a few cases in which she is sad about death, and many of these poems are comical or absurd elegies for dead animals. She does seem to be sad about death when contemplating the demise of her loved ones or noble people whom the world will miss. In such cases, she rages against the god Death whom now she cannot control, as she so often rages against the Christian God in her religious poems.

Two poems serve as good examples of instances when Smith is sorrowful about death. One is "Night-Time in the Cemetery," which depicts a different attitude toward death than is usual for the poet. Walking in the graveyard with other mourners, she sees the cemetery as horrid:
I have a horror of this place  
A horror of each moonlit mourner's face.  
(p. 29)

She is bitter, trudging mournfully through the graveyard:

Yet I must tread  
About my dead  
And guess the forms within the grave  
And hear the clank of jowl on jowl  
Where low lie kin no love could save.  
Yet stand I by my grave as they by theirs. Oh bitter  
Death  
That brought their love and mine unto a coffin's breadth.  
(p. 29)

In the second example Smith rages against death not  
for taking her loved ones but for taking those whose time  
has not yet come; in "Proud Death with Swelling Port,"  
death is a proud god who takes the best of mankind, leaving  
the dregs:

Proud Death with swelling port comes ruffling by  
He takes the worthy and leaves the fond.  
So many worthy men and they must die,  
And all the foolish men stay still beyond  
The shadow of Death's beckoning. O let them go  
And save man's nobler sons and daughters from Death's  
blow.  
(p. 127)

Smith claims that death wants the "first fruits," the best  
of the lot, and asks the Lord to spare them and take first  
the lesser men:

O spare them Lord, take toll of lesser men,  
For it is certain they will come again.  
(p. 127)

She pleads that these noble people be allowed a natural  
death after an old age, not an early death while they are  
in their prime:
. . . O Father, let them live
Throughout life's day, and in the cool of Night
That is the cloak of natural death take them away,
But while the sun is up still let them stay,
(p. 127)

This poem portrays death no longer as a kind friend and servant, but as an enemy. For these people whom death steals away, an early death is a tragedy, unlike the poet's usual view of death as a happy ending.

Smith's fascination with death is prevalent throughout her work, whether she is longing for her own death or lamenting the deaths of others. Her life-long ill health surely contributed to her constant thoughts of death. She is not nearly so ambivalent about her attitudes toward death as she is toward God, but she is nonetheless not consistent, particularly in her views of suicide. Always, death is to her a god, and in most cases, a kind friend. Her final poem, "Come Death (2)," written in 1971 while she was dying of a brain tumor, sums up well her ultimate attitude toward death. Rather than turning to God in her last poem, Smith turns to the god Death for comfort:

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 know,
Listen then to this sound I make, it is sharp.
Come Death. Do not be slow,
(p. 571)
Death is her intimate friend, the friend she knows even better than God; Death is to her finally the god that she most desires.
NOTES


3Smith, quoted in Ivy and Stevie, p. 45.


6Smith, Yellow Paper, p. 134.

7Smith, Yellow Paper, p. 136.

8Smith, Yellow Paper, p. 131.

9Damian Grant, rev. of Scorpion and Other Poems, by Smith, Critical Quarterly, 14 (1972), 94.

10Smith, Yellow Paper, p. 135.


12The date of "Analysand" is 1937; the poem perhaps anticipates the contemporary confessional poets.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Stevie Smith's treatment of such themes as God and death reveals her seriousness as a poet; although she earned a reputation, Mary Sullivan suggests, as a "comic writer who is sometimes serious,"¹ she was rather a serious writer who employed a comic mask. The whimsy of her style, or what John Carey calls the "oddity" of her voice,² contrasts to the seriousness of her subjects. Behind the mask lies not only seriousness, but also pain, which caused her to search for answers to her obsessive questions about God and death. Philip Larkin recognizes the weight of her work, insisting that, in spite of all her work which sounds "like William Blake rewritten by Ogden Nash," the poems "speak with the authority of sadness."³

In religion, Smith never synthesized her views; she probed questions of God and Christianity throughout her career, remarkably proving herself to be a doubter, an atheist, and a believer, all at once. She could never be satisfied with belief or unbelief; Peter Porter accurately describes the believing aspect of her relationship with God:

70
For her, God had neither died nor gone away, but lived next door and was a very bad neighbour. She talked to Him about His Catholic Church and His atrocities."

Smith indeed talked to God as an intimate acquaintance, sometimes as a friend and sometimes as an enemy. In her quarrel with God in her poetry, she tried to decide what to think about Christian doctrine, of which she never approved; she liked the idea of a loving, merciful supreme being who would countenance nothing so dreadful as eternal damnation and restrictive moral codes. The Anglican Church of her upbringing, however, was difficult for her to shake off.

This difficulty resulted in her multiplicity of religious viewpoints, which is similar to that discussed by Flannery O'Connor about Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*; O'Connor sees this inability to abandon religion as proof of integrity:

That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence. For them Hazel Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to.

O'Connor goes on to say that perhaps integrity lies in what one is unable to do, concluding that free will means "many wills conflicting in one man." For Stevie Smith, whether to believe in God was clearly a matter of
great consequence, and like Hazel Motes, she was unable to dismiss that "ragged figure." Perhaps in her inability to bring her conflicting wills into one lies her integrity, also. As Calvin Bedient recognizes, "none of Stevie Smith's poems summarizes her view of life, for finally she had no view, only views." 

Smith had no single view toward God, and she also had no single view toward her other dominant theme--death. Her attitude toward death, though more consistent than her religious position, was nonetheless ambiguous. Smith was always fascinated and drawn by a morbid attraction to death; because she was never in good health, death naturally occupied a prominent position in her thoughts. In her poetry, she longed for death to release her from life, flirted with the idea of suicide, and wrote sadly of death only in the cases of others. Death was always a god to her, providing her with a safety valve--Death could not refuse to release her from life if she called him. As Mary Sullivan writes, Death was to Smith the "great prince," whom she "kept hovering . . . courted, flouted, reminded that he must, if she wants, bear her upwards from the mire of makeshift and fearful compromise." Smith herself never did summon the god Death in her own life, but she found considerable comfort in
the idea that such a god would be powerless to refuse her if she did call.

Her examination of the two gods of Christianity and Death was exhaustive. Obsessed with both gods, she never could choose a simple answer to her questions, but all her life attempted to work out her solutions. Her solution proved to be a belief in several conflicting ideas at once.
NOTES


BIBLIOGRAPHY


