Not Waving but Drowning

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

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

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

Stevie Smith
In the first stanza, the man is already dead as nobody had seen him waving nor heard his pleas for help. However, the dead man himself wants to emphasise the fact that he was not “waving but drowning.”
The word ‘you’ includes us readers as well: we could have prevented this tragedy by realising that the ‘dead man’ was in difficulty. However, our indifference and self-centredness took over and we left him to ‘drown’.
People are ‘sorry’ for what happened to him especially because he was a funny man who loved ‘larking’. They failed to realise that this was probably a coping strategy to hide his pain and that in fact he was crying out for help. Others excuse his death by saying that his heart gave way because of the freezing water. The use of the pronoun ‘they’ seems to distance us from the poem and to lessen the remorse and guilt feelings.
Stanza 2 – Analysis

Smith is satirising these people by exposing their insincerity and callousness – we fail to show loving concern for others especially in times of need. The short sentence structure also reflects the ‘neat explanations’ they offer to conceal their irresponsibility and indifference.
Stanza 3

In this stanza, the dead man contradicts the bystanders and says that the water “was too cold always.” He emphasises the fact that this drowning tragedy was not a one-off experience but rather “I was too far out all my life” implying that he had been experiencing difficulties throughout his entire life.
Stanza 3 - Analysis

The word ‘always’ shows us that life has always been a struggle for this person but no one seems to have realised. The man wants to emphasise the fact that we did not even become aware of his grave situation let alone help him. The man had always felt left out but never managed to show it whereas we were enveloped in our indifference and he was left to ‘drown’.
Smith is criticising our tendency to wear blinkers in the face of other people’s distress and to see what is convenient for us to see. In other words we fail to offer a word of comfort or a helping hand to those reaching out to us and when it’s too late, we gossip and speculate about their misfortunes.
Theme

People are not always what they seem. What we see is not always what actually is (appearance vs. reality) . We might think that others are leading a happy life whether in reality they might be going through difficult moments and are trying to reach out for help.
Mood / Tone

- **Regret** – this man could have been saved if someone realised he was ‘drowning’. On a metaphorical level, if those around him realised that he was suicidal, they could have reached out to him and helped him.

- **Cold, matter of fact, indifferent.** We are all cocooned in our own world of comfort to realise that someone out there might be in difficulty and is pleading for our help.
Structure

The poem is made up of three quatrains of different line length. This could reflect the mixed emotions the man was experiencing as he was drowning.
Diction

• Smith utilises several negative words in the poem such as ‘dead’, ‘moaning’, ‘drowning’ and ‘cold’. This reflects the fact that the poem deals with a death that could have been prevented were it not for our indifference and self-centredness.

• The use of –ing verbs such as ‘moaning’, ‘drowning’, ‘larking’, and ‘waving’ give a sense of urgency to the poem as if it is happening now. There is also the idea that the action is continuous to reflect the fact that the man has been in difficulty all his life. Besides, it emphasises the fact that indifference rules these days and several people try to reach out for help but encounter a brick wall of nonchalance and detachment.
Imagery

• The poem is an extended metaphor where drowning represents the difficulties a person faces throughout his life. Sadly, some people fail to make others aware of their need for help and so they ‘drown’ in a sea of indifference.
Other techniques used

• Repetition – the last line of the first and last stanza is repeated. The dead man is trying desperately to point out that he was crying out for help, not waving.

• The repetition of the word ‘always’ is used both by the people and the dead man. In the people’s minds, the man was always ‘larking’ whereas he actually always felt alone throughout his life.

• The dead man cries out ‘no no no’ to beg them to realise that they were wrong and that he was ‘always cold’.
• Alliteration – Ŀoved ļarking – alliteration of ‘l’. The sound is rather soft to reflect that he gave the impression that he was a happy-go-lucky person who loved to have fun.

• Assonance – Oh, no, no, no, it was too cold always – The ‘o’ sound has an echoing effect to emphasise what he wants to say as if he wants to make sure he gets his message across.
Rhyme

The rhyme scheme pattern of the poem is ABCB throughout. However, in the first and last stanza, the rhyme is not perfect. It could be that the poet wanted to emphasise the sense of failure and isolation the dead man felt. On the other hand, in the second stanza, there is perfect rhyme as if the people are sure of what they are saying whereas in reality they are clueless.
Rhythm

The poem has a steady rhythm which could reflect that the dead man’s situation remained constant. He was misunderstood both in life and in death. The switching from enjambment (run-on line) to caesura throughout the poem emphasises the contradictions found in the poem.