

Because i could not stop for death by emily dickinson literature review

[Life](#), [Death](#)



INTRODUCTION

In “ Because I Would Not Stop for Death,” Emily Dickinson expresses a certain peace with death, as she sees Death approaching and walks with him for a time, observing everything that had come before in her life, and awaiting what lay next. This poem is one of her most well-known works, and is indicative of her attitudes toward the afterlife. (“ Verse Cities,” 2008) This explication will examine each line of the poem in detail, and determine how it uses language and symbols to thoroughly examine this particular subject.

‘ Because I could not stop for Death’

The beginning line establishes the fact that Death was not something that the speaker was particularly concerned about; she ‘ could not stop,’ because she would not allow herself to be distracted with her eventual demise – she saw little point in letting it stop her.

‘ He kindly stopped for me’

The use of the word ‘ kindly’ is interesting, because Death is not often considered kind. However, it could be indicative of Dickinson’s relative peace and ease with Death, as she would possibly consider the ‘ stopping’ for Death to visit her as a kindness. These first two lines help to indicate just how inevitable Death is; you do not have to seek it out for it to find you.

‘ The carriage held but just ourselves’

The carriage in this poem is used as a means of transportation, a way of ferrying her and Death to their destination in a way that would require little effort and exertion. Carriages are often slow moving vehicles, but preferable

to walking; the comparison of the slow slide toward death as a carriage ride gives her death the impression of slowly fading away, and going on a journey. The use of the word 'ourselves' helps to cement Death as a being and a character in the poem.

'And Immortality.'

This line adds Immortality to the mix as a third figure. This is a distinct entity to Death, but not exclusively so; after all, he arrives right when Death does, and accompanies her on the journey to the other side.

'We slowly drove, he knew no haste,'

Death 'knew no haste,' as the march toward death is slow and inevitable - Death does not need to hurry because he knows that they will reach their destination at some time. Also, the slowness of the journey allows the speaker to reflect upon her life and comment on the journey itself.

'and I had put away / My labour, and my leisure too,'

These two lines indicate just how willing Dickinson is to give up her life. Her labour and her leisure both represent the work she has had to do in this life, as well as the fun times that she has had. However, it is now time for her to move on to the other side, and she accepts it with grace.

'For his civility.'

Death is once again described as genteel, kind, 'civil,' showcasing just how eager and willing he is to get the speaker to the other side. (Baker 215) He presents himself as a suitor, willing to ingratiate himself to her. However, the

questions remains as to whether or not he is truly kind, or if he is just acting that way to ferry her along.

‘ We passed the school where children played,’

The speaker is remembering her childhood, and times where she played (the aforementioned ‘ leisure’) and had fun. Their ‘ passing’ of the school indicates an abandoning of it as well, as she will never see or remember that school ever again.

‘ their lessons scarcely done;’

The children in the school are barely grown up, and many people who are approaching Death feel that their life lessons are ‘ scarcely done’ as well; this line demonstrates an expression of regret at the things that people (particularly the speaker) feel they still have left to do before dying.

‘ We passed the field of gazing grain,’

The gazing grain indicates a pastoral image, full of life and wonder. The grain is growing, fully present and living within the world, and the speaker is looking at it, still marveling that life will go on without her.

‘ We passed the setting sun.’

They also ‘ pass’ the setting sun, indicating a decline and the death of the day, while still appreciating the sheer and sincere beauty that a setting sun can provide. Also, the repetition of ‘ We passed’ in the previous lines helps to cement the journey and run down the list of everything that the speaker will do without in death.

‘ We paused before a house that seemed / A swelling of the ground;’

The ‘ house’ in this line is her coffin; because it is in the ground, it causes a ‘ swelling.’ Also, the fact that they finally ‘ pause’ here after ‘ passing’ everything else indicates that this is their destination. She is finally ready to die.

‘ The roof was scarcely visible,’

She is describing the coffin as if it were a real house; the ‘ roof’ of this house is merely the top of her coffin. It is scarcely visible because of how dark it will be inside it; all the same, the lines read with the same detachment that she has expressed throughout the poem.

‘ The cornice but a mound.’

Again, this coffin is a house, and so it has a cornice; however, since it is underground, it looks as though it is ‘ but a mound.’ It is another description of her making peace with the home she will have for the rest of time.

‘ Since then ‘ tis centuries; but each / Feels shorter than the day’

In the beginning of this final stanza, the passage of time is mentioned; hundreds of years have passed, but due to the inexorable march of Death, these days feel short.

‘ I first surmised the horse’s heads / Were toward eternity.’

The horses are presumably the ones who were driving the carriage along in her ride with Death and Immortality. She is realizing that the longest day she

has ever experienced was the day of her death – she had figured out that the horses were traveling toward Death, or ‘ eternity.’ (Poets. org, 2011)

The entire poem carries six stanzas of four lines each; the second and fourth lines of most stanzas rhyme, and every other line is either iambic tetrameter or iambic trimeter. This helps to carry forth a rhythm of movement that is even and unerring, giving the impression of the carriage galloping along toward Death without stopping.

“ Because I Could Not Stop for Death” is a very poignant poem that demonstrates a certain calmness about death. There is no need to avoid it or challenge it, as Death will ‘ stop’ for you one day as well. Your grave will become your ‘ house,’ and time will seem to stand still. There is no need to fear death, as it is merely part of the circle of life. Death is a companion that will lead you along to the promised land, and you will gain a measure of Immortality in your new house on the mound. This message and more is conveyed through the language and meter used within Emily Dickinson’s poem.

Works Cited

" Because I could not stop for Death." Poets. org. Web. 6 Apr. 2011.

.

Baker, David. " Elegy and Eros: Configuring Grief." Virginia Quarterly Review. 207-220.

Virginia Quarterly Review,

2005. Academic Search Alumni Edition. EBSCO. Web. 6 Apr. 2011.

<https://assignbuster.com/because-i-could-not-stop-for-death-by-emily-dickinson-literature-review/>

" Verse Cities." New York Times Book Review (2008): 6. Academic Search Alumni Edition.

EBSCO. Web. 6 Apr. 2011.