

Emily dickinson: "because i could not stop for death" essay sample

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Emily Dickinson: “ Because I could not stop for Death” Essay Sample

In “ Because I Could Not Stop For Death” Emily Dickinson explores the tension between life and death. The poem highlights the conflict between life’s desire for permanence and the irrepressible and untimely nature of death. While Dickinson’s poem presents eternity as the soul’s ultimate spoils in this struggle, the tone of the poem suggests that in itself the promise of eternity can provide no comfort to the living. The poem’s use of personification, together with a marked shift in tone and rhythm, provide an especially chilling presentation of man’s powerlessness in the face of death’s random schedule.

In the poem, death is portrayed as a gentlemanly suitor, who collects the speaker for a carriage ride, and sets her down in “ Eternity” (24). For the enjoyment of Death’s Company, the speaker sacrifices her interests and activities. On the ride they pass schoolchildren at play, fields of crops, and then the “ Setting Sun,” before stopping at a house, which seems like a “ swelling of the ground” (12, 18). Since pausing at the house, she notes that despite the passing of “ Centuries,” she still remembers the day, as if it were today, that she encountered Death.

Dickinson’s personifies Death as an inescapable conqueror, hovering above and around us. The personification also effectively conveys the unexpected nature of death and the subjectivity of humans to its timetable. There is no gradual lead up to the poem’s main idea; it is made apparent in the first two lines, “ Because I could not stop for Death-/He kindly stopped for me”(1, 2)

The use of capitalization for Death (a device Dickinson uses throughout the poem to add to tone and emphasize words that are strong in meaning) gives further power to the personification. The attribution of physical properties to an intangible concept impresses upon the reader a haunting picture of death's inevitability. And, while Dickinson does not present death in a traditional skull and crossbones manner, the chivalrous courter, who is described as being full of "Civility," through his disguise and seductive manner becomes a far more fearsome figure (8).

His "kindly" ways serve his purpose of gallantly carrying the speaker, in a state of unpreparedness, away from her worldly pursuits (2). She sacrifices her "labor" and her "leisure too" for her journey to Eternity (7). It is clear that she is not ready to depart and "could not stop for Death" (1). Nevertheless, she willingly and peacefully succumbs, and seems to take a degree of pleasure in the company of Death, being persuaded by his cavalier manner. We are told Death is considerate and drives at a leisurely pace: "We slowly drove-He knew no haste," yet the subsequent shift in tone suggests that this passivity does not indicate Dickinson's harmony with death but is merely the effect of Death's spell (5).

The vulnerability of humans to Death's whim is elucidated further by the abrupt shift in tone that occurs in stanza four. In this stanza, the sun has "passed Us-" and a "quivering and chill" replace the previous warmth (13, 14). The reader has cause to question whether death played some cruel trick on the speaker. She is left unprepared for this chill being dressed for the warm carriage ride: "For only Gossamer, my Gown-/ My Tippet-only Tulle-"

(15). Gossamer is a very light, thin cloth, and her scarf is made of tulle, which is an extremely fine netting. The sense of betrayal is apparent; Death has untowardly induced her into this cold abstract world for which she is dressed inappropriately. The idea of betrayal is intensified in the next stanza when they pause at a " House that seemed/A swelling of the Ground-" (18). This swelling of the ground is her gravesite, which is presented as her new home. We are told that the " Cornice" is in the " Ground," and Dickinson has deliberately repeated " Ground" emphasizing that this is indeed a grave (20). The metaphor is made more haunting as the scene evokes images of a groom taking his bride from the life she knew to the unfamiliar marital home, further underlining the cruelty of death's untimely nature as this suitor has brought her to a burial plot.

The friction between the vibrancy of life and the starkness of death is imparted through the shift in rhythm, imagery, and tone throughout the poem, which create a dichotomy between the first and second halves of the poem. The slow, dignified pace of the first two stanza's, " kindly stopped," and " We slowly drove-He knew no haste," serve to contrast the galloping rhythm of the third stanza, where the speaker's life is flashing before her, and the reader is carried along, experiencing the movement of life (2, 5). The line " We passed the School, where Children strove" contrasts the liveliness of the children against her inactivity within the carriage (9). She then passes through adulthood, " the Fields of Gazing Grain," into old age, " the Setting Sun" (11, 12). The word passed is repeated three times in this stanza conveying the movement of the carriage as it passes through time

into eternity. Alliteration is also dominant in this stanza: " School, where Childen strove," " Recess-in the Ring," " Gazing Grain," and " the Setting Sun," also adding to the speed and animation (9, 10, 11, 12).

The importance of these effects is felt in the next stanzas as the pace comes to a halt and the darkness and cold set in. Not only is there a conspicuous tense shift here, with time hastening unexpectedly forward to the present as the speaker is being abruptly delivered to " Eternity," but also, the imagery and language that up until then has been vivid and specific, becomes more abstract as the speaker unites with Death and Eternity. The speaker no longer even has a concept of time: " Since then-'tis Centuries-and yet / Feels shorter than the Day." For, what is really known of it? The speaker does not use concrete images to describe her new world, and Dickinson does not expound on it's nature, hence the speaker does not derive comfort from it, and nor does the reader.

Interestingly, while Death is personified, as is " Immortality" (the accomplice who rides in the carriage as a chaperone in the first stanza) Eternity is not. Dickinson boldly capitalizes the final word " Eternity," and completes the poem with a dash, pointing to its infinite nature and rendering it more penetrating - but not more concrete. The dash could just as readily be replaced with a question mark. While Dickinson depicts death in a tangible way she does not give " Eternity" any discernible or reassuring characteristics.

Dickinson infers the interconnected nature of the finite and the infinite worlds but does not attempt to illuminate the latter. We remain in the shivery, obscure world where Death's carriage has delivered the speaker. Ultimately, the poem does not offer "Eternity" up as a consolation for those struggling to accept the intrusion of Death's arbitrary and unpredictable schedule.