

Dickinsons poem:  
because i could not  
stop for death



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Emily Dickinson's poem Because I could not stop for Death is her personal take on the mystical relationship between life and death. She addresses death from a somewhat cynical and very unique point of view, using metaphor and symbolic imagery to relay her main point, which is that eternity exists here on earth. To get to this point she contrasts the relationship between eternity and the present, and she poeticizes her personal assumptions pertaining to the afterlife. In the first two lines of her poem, she personifies death as a tall dark and civil man, whose flattering kindness causes her to be swept away.

This is most apparently enforced through lines 6-8 when Dickenson says, And I had put away/ My labor and my leisure too/ For His Civility- (Dickenson, 6-8). Here it is easily identified to the reader that Dickenson feels no threat from death and she is even slightly honored to be in his company. The irony of this statement proposes that death is possibly a casual and antiquated part of life, and not as vile or harsh as some of the many methods through which we go about achieving it. A major motif used in the poem is the aspect of time.

The contrast between the temporary and haste-full rush of the present with the open-ended nature of eternity is the main focus of the work, and the force that drives it. It can be seen throughout the poem in multiple ways. This contrasted relationship between the present and eternity is first initiated with the opening line, Because I could not stop for Death-/He kindly stopped for me- (Dickenson, 1&2). This motif is further used when Dickenson refers to immortality being in the carriage with her, and then when she says, We slowly drove- He knew no haste (Dickenson, 5).

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Death's inclination to drive the carriage slowly is most likely due to the idea that time has no meaning in the hereafter. Time on earth is measured by the sun, but this time frame does not apply to death, nor to Dickinson anymore now that she is dead. Her recognition of this fact is another pinnacle point of contrast between the present and eternity. She even acknowledges this value of the sun to signify time when she says, We passed the Setting Sun- / Or rather- He passed Us- (Dickenson, 12 & 13).

Once she passes the sun, and the sun passes her, their relationship no longer has a bearing on her existence. From this moment on in the poem, all of Dickinson's verses represent her personal assumption of the afterlife, and these lines attempt to find meaning in the unknown. As Dickinson settles into the reality of her own death, she uses phrases like Dews drew quivering and chill- (Dickenson, 14), and terms like Gossamer and Tulle referring to the thickness of her clothing, to point out that it is very cold where she is going and she failed to prepare for the trip.

This is a very ironic notion considering that one main premise of this poem is that death is unexpected and waits for no one's schedule to be clear. Dickinson then likens her soon to be grave to that of a house, which she says looks like the swelling of the ground (Dickinson, 18). Before she comes to her final realization, Dickinson makes her very last comparison to time and eternity when she says, Since then - ' tis Centuries - and yet / Feels shorter than the Day (Dickenson, 20 & 21).

Here she identifies that she no longer has the same concept of time, as when she was living. This corresponds with her last two lines and her realization that all along immortality had been right beside her. She realizes this  
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through recognizing that the horses heads were facing eternity. I took this as another way of saying time is ever-changing and moving forward and like the children she sees playing, and all of the other surroundings, we are among this endless stream as well.

In sum, Dickinson's poem Because I could not stop for Death, becomes a critique on the way most view life. Few are given the possibility to know the exact moment of their death. Dickenson acknowledges this fact and turns it into a very mystical about entrance into the afterlife. With no more than 24 lines she tells a very saying tale, and where most stories begin with one living and then dying, her begins with her death and ends with her finding the truth behind immortality. This poem is a fable for the living.