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Emily Dickinson's "Because I could
not stop for Death":
Challenging Readers' Expectations

With a keen eye for detail and a steadfast "resilience not to be overcome by mysteries that eluded religion, science, and the law" (Eberwein 42), Emily Dickinson's poetry records the abstractions of human life so matter-of-factly that her readers often take her technical skill for granted. Take, for example, the six-stanza poem "Because I could not stop for Death"—a detached, but never completely dispassionate, recollection of a human's journey to its final conclusion. The verse is crafted so succinctly and with such precision that its complex and vivid images are made even more extraordinary and meaningful. We might expect literature on the theme of death to invoke religious imagery, stillness, and a sense of dread or foreboding, but none of this is the case. Instead, the poem challenges the preconceptions Dickinson's contemporaries had about death, and in doing so it makes us challenge ours as well.

From the start, Dickinson infuses this often-grim topic with a palpable humanity, beginning with her personification of death as the courteous, careful carriage driver bearing the narrator's body to rest. Literary critic Harold Bloom asserts, "The image here of a woman and her escort, Death, meditating on the prospect of eternity, is neither one of despair nor loss nor outrage, but of resignation" (37). This "resignation," though, does not come across as the predictable acceptance of God's will. In fact, any mention of God or the soul is remarkably absent from this poem about death and eternity. This suggests the uneasy relationship Dickinson had with the strict religious beliefs of her society and her family. "Raised during the period of New England Revivalism," writes David Yezzi, "Dickinson declined to make the public confession of faith that would admit her to the church (her father made his twice) and by the

age of thirty she left off attending services altogether." Clearly at odds with familial and social expectations, Dickinson nonetheless fearlessly expresses her religious "doubt, which her poems later absorbed as ambiguity and contradiction" (Yezzi).

Dickinson's narrator does not fear death, perhaps because death is associated here not so much with endings or divine judgment but instead with a very human journey. The driver seems affable, "kindly stopp[ing]" and driving slowly. In stanza two, the narrator puts her work away to observe the driver calmly (490). It may seem unlikely that she would be trusting of so ominous a character, but as Thomas Johnson explains it:

Emily Dickinson envisions Death as a person she knew and trusted, or believed that she could trust. He might be any Amherst gentleman, a William Howland or an Elbridge Bowdoin, or any of the lawyers or teachers or ministers whom she remembered from her youth, with whom she had exchanged valentines, and who at one time or another had acted as her squire. (222)

Indeed, the fact that the carriage driver has stopped for the narrator on a day when she was too busy to do the same emphasizes his courtesy and thoughtfulness as a character. This is an original and deeply humanistic perception of death, in which the personified entity is neither a black-cloaked grim reaper nor a stern servant of God.

Along with its deep humanity, Dickinson's image of Death has a fluidity and graceful movement that is, at first, juxtaposed against our more frightening preconceptions of the idea. This tangible sense of motion is perhaps best illustrated in the poem's perfectly constructed third stanza. Here, a series of images metaphorically re-creates a natural progression—childish play gives way to growing grain, and, eventually, to the setting of the sun (490). At least one critic has pointed out how these three images might represent childhood, maturity, and old age (Shaw 20). The very fact that the narrator views these scenes from a slowly rolling carriage lends the passage a clear

sense of movement and an unexpected vitality. The absurdity of this meandering vessel passing “the Setting Sun” perhaps suggests a sense of quickening as death draws near, or it may even signal the dissolution of temporal reality altogether. Regardless, the steady progression of this section is undeniable.

The strong sense of motion is continued in the fourth stanza, though with some differences. Here, the movement is less concrete, as the narrator herself moves from a life marked by careful self-control into a position in which she all but succumbs to outside forces. As “the Dews drew quivering and chill” (490), the narrator has lost the ability to keep herself warm. Her earthly garments do not provide adequate protection. From her philosophical viewpoint, however, these difficulties, like death itself, are to be calmly accepted rather than feared. Indeed, up to this point, there is not a single truly fearful image in this remarkable poem about death.

As the poem moves into its fifth stanza, the momentum is halted temporarily and a more traditional death image is finally introduced with the line “We paused before a House that seemed / A Swelling of the Ground” (490). At this point, the character of Death seems to bid his passenger a rather unceremonial goodbye at the foot of her earthen grave. As the resting place is described, he retreats, returning to the world of the living to repeat his duty with another passenger. While the sparse but vivid description of the grave should invoke a paralyzing loneliness, Dickinson again thwarts our expectations, tempering the reader’s fear by having her narrator merely pause at the sight, as if staying for a short while at a hotel or a friend’s house. Once again, a usual symbol of finality is given a transitive purpose.

The final stanza seemingly places the narrator at a new destination, Eternity. While this would certainly be the logical end of her journey, Dickinson’s exquisite use of language suggests that the entire account may simply be a daydream—a mental dress rehearsal for the real death to come. Consider this account of the poem’s final stanza:

All of this poetically elapsed time “Feels shorter than the Day,” the day of death brought to an end by the setting sun of the third stanza. [. . .] “Surmised,” carefully placed near the conclusion, is all the warranty one needs for reading this journey as one that has taken place entirely in her mind [. . .] the poem returns to the very day, even the same instant, when it started. (Anderson 245)

Thus even the most basic facts about death—its finality and permanence—are brought into question.

Finally, “Because I could not stop for Death” indicates both Dickinson’s precise and vivid style and her unwillingness to settle for the ordinary interpretation. Death no longer conforms to the readers’ preconceptions, as religion, stillness, and finality give way to humanist philosophy, motion, and continuity. The poet observes, experiences, and recounts her perceptions in metaphor. She opens up many questions about the nature of death, yet she provides no easy answers to her readers. Instead, we are provided with an account of death that weaves in and out of time, finally looping back on its own structure to provide a stunningly dramatic conclusion. In six short stanzas, Dickinson cleverly exposes what she saw as fundamental flaws in the traditional conception of death, burial, and the eternal afterlife, and in doing so, she opens up new pathways of thought for us all.

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