Because I could not stop for Death

Poetry Guide
Because I could not stop for Death

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About Because I could not stop for Death

ABOUT THE ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION OF THE POEM

‘Because I could not stop for Death’ was written around 1863, not published until 1890, after Dickinson’s death, in Poems by Emily Dickinson. It is one of Dickinson’s best-known and commonly studied poems. Today, it is considered to be one of the great masterpieces of American poetry.

In this poem, Dickinson depicts one speaker’s journey into the afterlife with personified “Death” leading the way. She describes a close encounter with “Death” and “Immortality”. She uses personification to portray “Death” and “Immortality” as characters. Her familiarity with them at the beginning of the poem causes the reader to feel at ease with the idea of death. However, as the poem progresses, a sudden shift in tone causes readers to see it for what it really is, cruel and evil.

In this image, viewers can see several of the elements that Dickinson describes in her poem. In the foreground, there is the carriage, driven by Death, and the narrator waiting to be picked up. Behind the two is the field, one of the images that the narrator describes on their journey, along with the setting sun. A mostly bright color palette is used to reflect the tone of the poem, one that’s more lighthearted than it is depressing or fearful. Although death is a slightly intimidating character, it is ensured that the narrator’s depiction of him could still hold true while looking at the image.
Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
And Immortality.  

We slowly drove – He knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,  
For His Civility –  

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess – in the Ring –  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –  
We passed the Setting Sun –  

Or rather – He passed Us –  
The Dews drew quivering and Chill –  
For only Gossamer, my Gown –  
My Tippet – only Tulle –  

We paused before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground –  
The Roof was scarcely visible –  
The Cornice – in the Ground –  

Since then – ‘tis Centuries – and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads  
Were toward Eternity –  

I couldn’t stop for death,  
he came to me.  
I got into his carriage which held just us  
along with immortality  

Death and I drove slowly, he wasn’t in a rush. And I had  
already set aside  
all the tasks and pleasures I experienced throughout my  
life  
in respect of his gentlemanly manners.  

We drove by a school, where children  
worked hard to play  
During their break, outside in a circle.  
We drove by fields of grain that stared at us.  
We drove by the setting sun.  

Or, instead, the sun passed by us.  
When it did, dew formed making the world cool.  
I was cold as well, wearing thin clothing.  
A thin gown and a thin scarf.  

We stopped for a moment in front of a house  
It was partially buried in the ground.  
The roof was slightly exposed,  
The ceiling was in the ground.  

Its been centuries since all those events occurred, but  
It feels like less than a day  
Since I saw and understood that the horses’ heads  
Were pointing towards the afterlife.  

‘Because I could not stop for Death’ depicts a speaker’s journey from life to death, led by Death himself. In the  
first lines of the poem, the speaker uses the famous line “Because I could not stop for Death,/ He kindly  
stopped for me.” Death stopped for the speaker and helped her into the carriage that’s going to carry her to  
the afterlife.  

They drive along the lane and the speaker takes note of what she sees around her. She was in the process of  
putting away the life she knew and allowing this next stage of existence to take over. They pass a school,  
fields, and the setting sun. The poem concludes with the speaker saying that it has been centuries since all  
this occurred and she first realized the horse’s heads were pointed toward “eternity.”
THEMES

- DEATH
- MORTALITY/IMMORTALITY
- THE AFTERLIFE
- THE NATURE OF LIFE

MORTALITY/IMMORTALITY & DEATH

The most obvious theme of this poem is mortality and death. What makes this poem’s take on these two themes so interesting is that they are depicted from a position of immortality. The speaker is already in the afterlife when she’s describing her experiences with death. She’s on a journey that’s leading towards the afterlife, one from which there is no chance of escape. Despite her predicament, she remains calm throughout the entire poem. She describes events in a matter-of-fact tone that makes them easy to consider from an objective point of view.

Death remains unhurried throughout the poem as well. He knows that he doesn’t need to rush her to her destination, she’s going to end up there no matter how fast he goes.

THE AFTERLIFE

The poem raises questions about the speaker’s immortality, or what happens after one dies. The afterlife is hinted at but there are questions in regard to what is going to happen to the speaker once she reaches her destination. “Immortality” as an ambiguous figure is included in the poem as well.

The poet uses words like “shorter than a Day” and “centuries” to suggest the nature of death and the afterlife. No one knows exactly what’s going to happen and with these words, she uses ambiguity to emphasize this.

THE NATURE OF LIFE

It’s also important to consider the way that the poet comments on the nature of life. No matter who one is, they are on a path that inevitably leads towards death. This can be seen through Dickinson’s depiction of a journey in death’s carriage. It mimics the transition from birth, through all of life’s joys and trials, all the way to death. The journey from life to death is also seen through the “Grazing grain,” which grows and dies and the children playing “in the Ring.” The “Setting Sun” also serves as a symbol.

It’s impossible to live without death and therefore, the latter should be appreciated and acknowledged without fear, as the speaker does.
STRUCTURE & FORM

- NUMBER OF STANZAS: SIX
- LINES PER STANZA: FOUR
- METER: BALLAD METER (IAMBIC TRIMETER & IAMBIC TETRAMETER)
- RHYME SCHEME: ABCB

FORM

'Because I could not stop for Death' is a six stanza poem that is divided into sets of four lines, known as quatrains.

RHYME SCHEME

These quatrains follow a loose rhyme scheme of ABCB. Dickinson uses a great deal of slant rhyme, or rhymes that are not perfect. They’re slightly off. It’s impossible to know whether Dickinson chose these slant rhymes on purpose or turned to them because she couldn’t find perfect rhymes that suited her intentions.

METER

The meter is far more consistent than the rhyme scheme. It follows the traditional pattern found in most Dickinson poems—ballad meter. This means that the first and third lines are made up of four sets of two beats, for a total of eight syllables. The first of these beats is unstressed and the second is stressed. This is known as iambic tetrameter. The second and fourth lines also use iambics (or unstressed and stressed beats) but there are only three sets of two beats in each line. This is known as iambic trimeter. The lines alternate between these two metrical patterns throughout the poem.

LITERARY DEVICES

Dickinson makes use of several literary devices in 'Because I could not stop for Death'. These include but are not limited to:

ALLITERATION

It occurs when words are used in succession, or at least appear close together, and begin with the same sound. For example, “labor” and “leisure” in the second stanza and “school” and “strove” in the third stanza

ALLUSION

It’s an expression that's meant to call something specific to the mind without directly stating it. Although it is not clearly stated in the lines of this poem, it is clear that the speaker is supposed to be in some sort of afterlife, likely the Christian concept of heaven. But, the fact that it is not stated explicitly allows any number of interpretations about what kind of world the speaker is living in now.

ANAPHORA

It occurs when the same word or words are used at the beginning of lines. For example, "We passed" at the beginnings of lines one, three, and four or stanza three.
CAESURA
It can be seen when the poet inserts a pause into the middle of a line. This might occur due to the natural rhythm of the meter or through the use of punctuation. For example, “At Recess – in the Ring” and “We slowly drove – He knew no haste.” Both of these examples use both meter and punctuation to create the effect.

PERSONIFICATION
It is one of the most obvious techniques at work in this poem. It occurs when a poet imbues a non-human creature or object with human characteristics. Death is very clearly personified from the first stanza. He acts as the speaker’s suitor, encouraging her to get into the carriage and ride with him into the unknown. He is both “kind” and civil.

ENJAMBMENT
It occurs when a line is cut off before its natural stopping point. Enjambment forces a reader down to the next line, and the next, quickly. One has to move forward in order to comfortably resolve a phrase or sentence. For example, the transition between lines three and four of the first stanza and two and three of the second.

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4
Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

The speaker begins by stating that she was unable to stop for death. She couldn’t make herself or find the time to pause and let death take her. Death is immediately personified. Death, who is depicted as a gentleman, stopped for her instead. This is part of his job. He stops for everyone but still does so kindly. When she climbed into his carriage it was only carrying her and death. There was no one else there to talk to or share experiences with. These guests that death is a lonely process, one that is embarked on without comfort or family/friends to lean on. The only other force in the carriage was “immortality.” It’s possible this is another personified being or that it’s just a hint at what’s to come. She’s headed towards the afterlife.

LINES 5-8
We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

Death, knowing that there’s nothing that can stop him or stand in his way, drives slowly. The speaker was in no rush either. She has nothing she needs to do. She “put away” her tasks. Her work, or labor, and her leisure, are set aside. She’s doesn’t complain of or mourn their loss. Instead, she accepts this fact. She’s put her tasks aside for his gentlemanly manner. His aspect made her feel even better about the fact that her life as she knew it is over.

The carriage ride is symbolic of the author’s departure from life. She is in the carriage with death and immortality. Dickinson reveals her willingness to go with death when she says that she had “put away…labor and…leisure too, for his civility”. This further reveals that the author has come to terms with her own mortality. She has set down all she wanted to do in life, and willingly entered the carriage with Death and Immortality. She may be aware that had she not gone willingly, they would have taken her captive nonetheless, but this does not seem to alter her perception of the two characters as kind, thoughtful, and even gentle. This is portrayed as Death drives slowly for her, allowing her to reminisce. He “knew no haste” as they drove. He takes her through the course of her life with a slow and patient ride. Immortality rides along but is silent.
We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

As the speaker and Death drove along, they passed a school where children were outside. They were not playing as much as they were striving to play. Dickinson uses the past tense of “strive,” “strove,” to describe this. The children were playing at “recess,” or during their break and in a “Ring,” or a circle. The circle is an important symbol that appears several times throughout the poem, such as with the carriage wheels and in the cycle of life and death the speaker is experiencing. Another symbol appears in the next line with the “Gazing Grain.” It’s looking at them as they pass by, clearly asserting itself as a symbol of life and death. It reached maturity, as the speaker has, and is ready to be cut down so that it might grow again. The speaker and her companion also went by the setting sun. As it sets, day turns into night and her life comes to a close.

They “passed the School where the Children strove” implying that the author is generously given a few moments to remember her childhood. They then drive past the “Gazing Grain” allowing the author to think back upon the prime of her life. Then they pass the setting sun. This symbolizes the author’s death. The sunset is beautiful and gentle, and the passing from life to eternity is portrayed as such.

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

The speaker corrects herself in the fourth stanza by saying that she didn’t pass the sun, “He passed Us.” This suggests that life and death are out of her control. She can’t decide when her death comes. When the sun started to set, things grew colder and dew formed. The speaker was cold too, wearing only thin clothing. Readers should note the use of alliteration in these lines with “Gossamer” and “Gown” and “Tippet and “Tulle” in the next line. Her clothing was made of thin material and only consisted of a gown and a lightweight scarf. This suggests that her experience in the world is changing. These clothing items might’ve been well suited for the weather before but not anymore.

There is a sudden shift in tone in the fourth stanza. Suddenly, now that the sun has set, the author realizes that she is quite cold, and she shivers. Then she becomes aware that she is underdressed. Prior to this moment of realization, the author felt quite comfortable with Death and Immortality. After all, she was riding along with them in only her “gossamer” and her “Tippet - only Tulle”, or in other words, in only a sheer nightgown.

In the first through third stanzas, the author is on close affectionate terms with Death and Immortality. Describing Death as a gentleman suitor who is kind and civil, she shows no shame at being underdressed. However, when the sun sets, and the cold damp sets in, she becomes aware of her inappropriate attire.

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

The speaker and her companion stopped in front of what seemed to be a house. The house of hurried in the ground, only partially revealed. The roof was hardly visible sticking out of the ground. This is a dark image, one that readers may interpret in different ways. It perhaps suggests that life as she knew it has changed and slipped away. The cornice or the top of the roof was even in the ground.
In her moment of realization that she has been seduced by Death, they pause before her new "house", a "Swelling of the Ground". She claims the "The Roof was scarcely visible" and the "Cornice – in the Ground". The tone becomes one of disappointment, as the author realizes that death is not all she thought it would be. Now, as the sun has set on her life, and she is standing before her new forever home, disappointment sets in. Death was kind and gentle, like a gentleman suitor. He lured her in with grandiose promises of eternity. Now that she sees her small, damp, eternal home, she feels cheated.

LINES 21-24

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity –

The last stanza looks back on everything that’s happened. The speaker recalls how everything she described happened centuries ago. But, she adds, it feels as though it’s been “shorter than the Day” since it all happened. By bringing these two very different measurements together, she’s emphasizing how strange time is and the confusing nature of the afterlife. No one knows exactly what’s going to happen. In the last two lines, she concludes by saying that all that time, or barely any at all, has passed since she first understood that the horses pulling the carriage were taking her away. She was headed towards “Eternity,” where she is now. This could evoke many different interpretations of the afterlife.

It has now been centuries since that moment of realization when she “first surmised” that Death had seduced her, that he had appeared a kindly gentleman at first, but had left her alone in the dark, cold, damp grave.

TONE & MOOD

• TONE: CALM AND MEASURED
• MOOD: CONTEMPLATIVE AND ACCEPTING

The tone is the voice of the poet or speaker in the poem. She is aware of what is happening around her but is not overly emotional about it. This is maintained throughout the first few stanzas until the speaker gets closer to death. At this point, things start to shift a little and the tone becomes more sinister. This is seen through words like "Chill" and "quivering". The last lines bring back the peace of the first part of the poem as the speaker matter-of-factly states that the horse’s heads are pointed towards eternity. Her death is inescapable and her tone reflects that.

The mood of a poem is the emotional experience that the poet is attempting to create for the reader. In this case, the speaker’s tone reflects what the reader should feel about the experience. While death is not something that most people look forward to, this piece reminds readers that there’s nothing one can do to escape it. This should leave anyone reading this piece feeling accepting and peaceful about what’s to come as they contemplate the cyclical nature of life and death. It’s impossible to have one without the other.

VOCABULARY

Haste: moving quickly, or hurriedly
Labor: the work someone completes. Could be the act of writing in the speaker’s case. Strove: past tense of "strive." Used to describe the effort the children make to play.
Quiver: trembling or shaking.
Gossamer: a fabric with a delicate texture, often thin.
Tippet: a thin scarf.
Tulle: a lightweight material often used in dresses and for making veils.
Cornice: an architectural feature around the top of a structure.
Surmised: the past tense of "surmise," meaning to presume something is true.
CHARACTERS

The Narrator: The speaker of the poem is a woman who "could not stop for death" and is instead collected by Death. She wears a gown and goes with Death without argument. She’s passive and calm, seemingly unafraid of what’s coming next. Her clear head allows her to describe the world around her, like the “Setting Sun” and “Fields of Grazing Grain.” The end of the poem reveals that the narrator has been dead the whole time and is looking back on these events.

Death: The personification of death is the second character introduced in the poem after the narrator. Death is described as a gentleman who rides up to the narrator in his carriage. He’s referred to as “kind” and unrushed. He moves with ease and offers civility. Death does not try to scare the narrator, instead, he goes about his job, doing the simple things he can to make her comfortable. The character of Death is an extended metaphor created by Dickinson in order to examine what death might be like.

SYMBOLS

The Children: are part of Dickinson’s representation of the stages of life. She sees children outside and says that they “strove” at their games. This is an interesting and important word choice. Rather than playing, they are striving to play. This suggests that they are making an effort to live their life and enjoy it. Their actions are juxtaposed against the speaker. She’s put away her life and accepted that her journey is almost over.

The Grazing Grain: another symbol that suggests the cyclical nature of life and death. The grain grows to its peak and is then cut down and sold. When Dickinson’s speaker sees it, it’s reached maturity, as she has, and is ready to be cut down. The grain is juxtaposed against the children who are just beginning their journey.

The Sun: a clear symbol of the end of one’s life. The speaker is near the end of her journey, having seen other sights along the way. As the sun sets, night or death begins.

SPEAKER

‘Because I could not stop for Death’ is written from a first-person perspective. This means that the female speaker uses first-person pronouns, like “I” and “my” to describe her experience. It’s personal, but it also relates more broadly to the experience that everyone is going to have with death. She uses language that’s appropriate to the time period in which this poem was written while also expressing a very human and relatable understanding of what death is and how she could not “stop” for it.

SETTING

The setting changes throughout this poem. It is a strange landscape with children playing, crops growing, and houses buried in the earth. It’s also a journey that takes the speaker from life to death. This means that the images and symbols are more metaphorical than they are physical. The journey is a slow one, giving the speaker plenty of time to look around her and see her surroundings. It also gives the reader more than enough time to take in the details and understand their importance.

Because the poem is told in the past tense, it becomes clear at the end of the piece that the speaker has been dead the whole time. It’s unclear how long, as time passes differently in the afterlife.
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

‘Because I could not stop for Death’ was published in 1863, and believed to be written between 1855 and 1863. These are the years in which Emily Dickinson wrote most intensely.

During Dickinson’s early years, she experienced the death of many people close to her, including her cousin. It is easy to see why she felt familiar with death. Dickinson also lived near a cemetery, so she watched many people, even loved ones riding in a hearse to their final resting places. This is a likely inspiration for the setting of this poem.

In times of sorrow, she would likely have heard sermons about salvation, paradise, and mansions waiting in eternity. During Dickinson’s lifetime, many of her close family members and friends joined the church as the 1830s saw what many referred to as “revivals” or “awakenings” in which many people proclaimed faith in Jesus Christ and eternal life.

‘Because I could not stop for Death’ makes it very clear that Dickinson, at some point in her life, viewed death as something sweet and gentle. She welcomed death, perhaps because of the idea that she would be only passing from this life to somewhere better. This is portrayed in the first stanza of the poem when the author begins her ride with Death, viewing him as a welcome and familiar friend. She is calm and reflective as she passes by the school children and the grain field. She’s at peace watching the beautiful sunset in her life. But when the warmth of the sun is gone and the damp cold sets in, she looks at her new home, and it isn’t a mansion in the sky (John 14:1-3), but merely a swelling of the ground.

Dickinson appears to have toyed with the idea of believing in an afterlife in paradise, but in the end claimed that she was “one of the lingering bad ones”, which suggests that she wanted to believe in life after death in paradise, but could not. In the end, she believed the grave was her final resting place (The Dickinson Properties).

IMPORTANT QUOTES

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –

Without a doubt, the first lines of the poem are some of the most important in the whole poem. It’s from these lines that the poem takes its title. They also introduce the reader to the fact that “Death” is going to be personified throughout.

And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,

While this is not entirely unusual in poetry, Dickinson’s creative approach to the image of death retrieving a woman and bringing her to the afterlife is one of the best examples of this technique. It should also be noted that her description of Death as “kindly” in these lines is unusual and striking. Death is not something to be feared in this world Dickinson has created. He’s a gentleman, someone who evokes appreciation and even love from the speaker by the end of the poem.

In the sixth and seventh lines, the speaker reminds the reader that everything is changing for her. She has put away her “labor,” or the work she’s done all her life and the worries she’s carried, as well as her “leisure.” Earthly pleasures and earthly worries are gone.

We slowly drove - He knew no haste.

Here, the narrator describes how in control death is. Even if the speaker wanted to get away she wouldn’t be able to. He’s driving the carriage, taking everything at his own pace. This allows the speaker to take in the effects of the trip, study her landscape for the last time, and then finally, slowly, be introduced to her grave.
We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –

This “House” is a metaphor for the speaker’s grave, it’s her resting place, the house in which she’s going to spend eternity. Her calm tone continues as it has from the first lines, depicting what she sees without drama or unnecessary words. Here, she describes the grave as a “House,” suggesting that she’s going to, or she hopes that she will feel at home there.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

What is the theme of ‘Because I could not stop for Death’?

It explores themes of mortality and immortality, as well as spirituality, and even love. See the “Theme” section for more.

What is the tone of ‘Because I could not stop for Death’?

The tone is relaxed and peaceful throughout the poem. The narrator is happy to be at Death’s side and flattered that he would take the time to stop and pick her up.

Who is the speaker in the poem?

It is always interesting to consider who the speaker or narrator of a piece of poetry is. Often, it’s easy to suggest that the poet is the speaker. Sometimes this is the case, but not always. In ‘Because I could not stop for Death,’ readers are informed that the speaker is a woman but beyond that, there is little information. Perhaps Dickinson was imagining herself on the way to her death or perhaps she was thinking more generally of any woman who moves peacefully into the next life. Her vision of death is idealized. There is no fear present in this poem, it’s likely that this is what Dickinson hoped death would be like.

What forms of figurative language does Dickinson use in the poem?

Dickinson uses examples of personification, metaphors, imagery, similes, and more. See the “Literary Devices” section of the analysis for more.

What does the poem ‘Because I could not stop for Death’ mean?

‘Because I could not stop for Death’ is a simple lyric that talks about Emily Dickinson’s fearlessness in the face of death. The title of the poem means that the poetic persona has no time to wait for death. Her mind is fearless and rational. She takes death as a natural phenomenon like the withering of plants. There is no fear in accepting what must occur. Hence, the poet can’t burden her mind with the thoughts of something natural not only to herself but also to the whole of humankind.

What is the message of the poem?

The message of the poem is one should not fear death as it’s not that horrific one thinks of. Death is rather gentlemanly, prudent, and civilized.

Why did Emily Dickinson write ‘Because I could not stop for Death’?

‘Because I could not stop for Death’ was written as the poet’s response to death. Dickinson wrote this poem for expressing her wish for attaining salvation. Moreover, she wishes for an eternal life blessed with the care of God. Through writing this poem, the poet also highlights her attitude towards oblivion and her acceptance of death as it is. Her belief in the afterlife gets emphasized in this poem.

When was ‘Because I could not stop for Death’ written?

Emily Dickinson never published the poem, but it is estimated that she wrote ‘Because I could not stop for Death’ in the early 1860s. The poem was only publicly published posthumously in 1890, in the collection ‘The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Series 1.’
Was Emily Dickinson a romantic or transcendentalist?

Emily Dickinson was familiar not only with the Bible but also with contemporary popular culture. She was influenced by the romantic poets of England and America. In her poems, one can find the dominant theme of "memento mori" or "remember you will die". This theme was the stock-in-trade theme of the romantics. So, it’s better to say she was a Romantic poet. However, some of her poems also encompass transcendental thoughts.

What is the central topic of the poem?

The central topic of the poem is the inevitability of death and the poet’s calm acceptance of it. Moreover, Dickinson projects her belief in the Christian afterlife and eternity in this poem. She doesn’t fear death. Her heart is pleased to have such a gentlemanly and civilized person such as death as her charioteer in the journey towards eternity.

What is the main theme of ‘Because I could not stop for Death’?

The main theme of ‘Because I could not stop for Death’ is death and immortality. In this poem, the poet describes how she visualizes death and what’s its role in her life.

What is the irony in ‘Because I could not stop for Death’?

The very first line of the poem, ‘Because I could not stop for Death’ contains irony. In old age, one waits tensely for the upcoming death and fears death’s cold yet firm grips. In contrast, Emily Dickinson can’t even stop to think about death. In her active life, she didn’t stop for death. It is death who stopped to receive the poet and accompanied her towards eternity. In this way, the poet implies irony in the first line of the poem.

Who is “Death” in the poem?

Death is personified. The capitalization of the first letter of "Death" signifies that the poet invests that abstract idea with hearing and feeling. Moreover, “Death” is compared to a bold companion of the poet. He is gentlemanly and civilized. The poet depicts "Death" as the charioteer of her journey towards eternity.

What type of poem is ‘Because I could not stop for Death’?

‘Because I could not stop for Death’ is a lyric poem. Dickinson wrote this poem from the first-person point of view. From the very first line, it becomes clear it’s going to be a subjective poem about the inevitability of death and eagerness for eternity. Whatsoever, the first-person speaker presented in the poem makes it an example of a free-verse lyric.

How is “Death” personified in the poem?

Emily Dickinson uses personification in the second line of the poem. Here the poet says, "He kindly stopped for me". The reference to "Death" in the first line and the capitalization of the first letter of the word, make it clear that the poet compares death to a human being as well as a charioteer who leads the poet towards eternity.

What is the “Death” or “He” personified to?

Dickinson personifies death and compares it with a charioteer. According to the poet, death is a gentleman and civilized in his attitude. He is neither rash nor that terrifying creature one thinks of. It is human beings who imagine death as something formidable and horrific. But, in Dickinson’s poem, death is her bold companion.

Why is “Immortality” in “The Carriage”?

Emily Dickinson compares death to the controller of the chariot that leads one to eternity. With her, there is another abstract idea: immortality. From the idea of the poem, it becomes clear that the poet incorporates immortality as a companion in her journey to heaven since she has trust in the Christian belief of the afterlife. In the afterlife, one attains immortality for the blessings of God.

What does “My Tippet – only Tulle –” mean?

“My Tippet – only Tulle –” contains two concepts. One is "Tippet" meaning a long scarf and "Tulle" meaning soft, fine silk. So, after her death, her dress also presents her mental state as well as her minimalistic lifestyle. The finesse of her scarf symbolically represents serenity in the afterlife.
Why is death often personified in literature?

Death is often personified for expressing what a poetic mind imagines of it. As in the case of 'Because I could not stop for Death,' Emily Dickinson presents her standpoints regarding death and immortality.

WORKSHEET

Answer the following questions with reference to the text.

1. Why is the speaker so relaxed about her death?
2. Do you think Dickinson believed in this version of death? Or are the images she’s created here closer to hope or wishes for her own death?
3. How does the sound of the poem affect how you interpret it? Consider reading it out loud.
4. We know how Death acts, but what does the character of Death look like?
5. Why did Dickinson personify Death in the poem?
6. The speaker is looking back on her death from the afterlife. What kind of afterlife do you think she’s experiencing that allows her to engage in this contemplation?
7. How is personification used in ‘Because I could not stop for Death’?
8. What mood and tone are created in ‘Because I could not stop for Death’?
9. What is the last place that Death takes the narrator?
10. What does the narrator see on her carriage ride with Death and what do those sights symbolize?
11. What information does Dickinson provide about what the narrator looks like?
12. How is Death characterized?
13. What is the significance of the title?
14. Why did Death kindly stop for the speaker?
15. Who was there in the carriage?
16. Why did the speaker put away her labor and leisure?
17. What is the significance of the imagery of school children?
18. What was the speaker wearing?
19. What does the "Swelling of the Ground" stand for?
20. Where do Horses' Heads point at?

Point out the poetic devices from the following lines.

1. Because I could not stop for Death –
2. My labor and my leisure too
3. We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain – / We passed the Setting Sun –
4. The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
5. A Swelling of the Ground –
6. I first surmised the Horses' Heads

Answer the following questions from your understanding of the poem.

1. Do you think the poet's tone is appropriate? Why?
2. How does the poem's sound scheme influence the mood of the text?
3. Are you satisfied with the ending of the poem? Why?
4. "Dickinson is unafraid of Death at all. He accompanies her to eternity." Justify.
5. Suggest another title for the poem. Why is your title better than Dickinson's?
Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – ’tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity –

Comment on the shift in the speaker’s thinking process in the last two stanzas.
SIMILAR POETRY

Dickinson's 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death' is one of the most famous poems about death and the afterlife. But, there are many more that are worth reading. Some other very popular poems, with original depictions of death, include:

- 'The Afterlife' by Billy Collins – It's one of the best-known poems of Billy Collins. This poem is a witty depiction of death that allows the deceased to inhabit the world they imagined.
- 'I Have a Rendezvous with Death' by Alan Seeger – This wartime poem describes the speaker's coming and unavoidable death.
- 'When Death Comes' by Mary Oliver – In this poem, the speaker ruminates on what happens after one passes away.
- 'And Death Shall Have No Dominion' by Dylan Thomas – It's one of the best Dylan Thomas poems. This poem casts a magical look at how death controls mankind.

ABOUT EMILY DICKINSON

- Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts in December of 1830.
- She attended a primary school on Pleasant Street where she began her classical education.
- In 1858, Dickinson began to write her poems. She assembled a total of nearly eight hundred poems in forty fascicles or informal collections.
- She died on 15 May 1886 at the age of fifty-five.
- The volume, "Complete Poems" was published in 1955.
- Emily Dickinson was a prolific gardener.
- She struggled with her vision in her thirties.
- Dickinson never published anything under her own name.
- She became a recluse in the early 1860s.
- At the time, her death was put down to Bright’s disease: a kidney disease that is accompanied by high blood pressure and heart disease.

In 1858, Dickinson began to write and review her poems. She assembled a total of nearly eight hundred poems in forty fascicles or informal collections. These works were not discovered until after her death. A few years later Dickinson began a correspondence with the writer and critic Thomas Wentworth Higginson. She read his aspirational message to writers in The Atlantic Monthly and decided to reach out to him. Higginson praised Dickinson's writing but warned her away from publication for the time being. She took Higginson's advice seriously and the two corresponded until her death.

Although today she is known as an incredibly prolific writer, during her lifetime only a dozen or so poems were ever published. After her death, her sister Lavinia discovered a collection of almost 1800 poems amongst her possessions. The volume, Complete Poems was published in 1955.