Because I could not stop for Death —

POEM TEXT

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 –

SUMMARY

I couldn't stop for "Death," so instead he came to get me. I climbed in his carriage, which held just the two of us—as well as Eternal Life.

We drove unhurriedly, with Death in no rush. I had left all my work and pleasures behind, in order to be respectful of his gentlemanly nature.

We went by a school, where children played during their break time, arranged in a circle. Then we passed fields of crops—which seemed to stare—and the sun as it set in the sky.

Actually, we didn't pass the sun—it passed us. As it did so, dew formed, shivering and cold. I was cold too, as I was only wearing a thin gown and a lightweight scarf.

Our next stop was at what looked like a house, except it was partly buried in the ground. I could just about see the roof; even the ceiling was in the ground.

Since that day, centuries have passed. That said, it feels as though less than a day has gone by since then—the day that I realized that Death's horses were headed in the direction of eternity.

THEMES

DEATH, IMMORTALITY, AND ETERNITY

"Because I could not stop for death" is an exploration of both the inevitability of death and the uncertainties that surround what happens when people actually die. In the poem, a woman takes a ride with a personified "Death" in his carriage, by all likelihood heading towards her place in the afterlife. The poem's matter-of-fact tone, which underplays the fantastical nature of what is happening, quickly establishes this journey as something beyond the speaker's control. It's not clear if the speaker is already dead, or she is traveling *towards* death. Either way, her death is presented as something natural, strange, and inescapable.

Indeed, the poem's opening lines make this clear. The speaker herself couldn't "stop for Death"—and not many people would—but "Death" has every intention of stopping for her. Notably, "Death" here is presented as something of a gentleman, "kindly" stopping his carriage so that the speaker can climb in. This suggests a certain comfort with, or at least acceptance of, dying on the part of the speaker, even as what this process actually entails remains mysterious.

Also in the carriage is "Immortality." It's not clear if this is another personified figure—a kind of chaperone—or something more abstract. But the presence of "Immortality" does speak to one of humanity's deepest questions: what happens when to people when they die?

"Immortality" is ambiguous here. Its presence could support the Christian idea of the afterlife—which some critics feel runs throughout Dickinson's poems. Or, by contrast, "Immortality" could be somewhat ironic, hinting at the permanent nothingness that awaits in death. Either way, such is the eternal inevitability of "Death" that he himself is in "no haste." That is, he doesn't need to hurry to make death happen, because it is an automatic fact of life. In fact, the whole journey has the air of

unhurried purpose, as though reaching the destination is a given and that therefore rushing is unnecessary. The carriage stops by a school, fields, and perhaps even the speaker's own grave (stanza five). These seem to represent different stages of life, starting from childhood and preceding—like the journey itself—to the inevitable final destination.

To underscore the poem's sense of awe surrounding the mysteries of death, the final stanza is filled with ambiguity and contradiction. The speaker explains that the carriage passed these sights "Centuries" ago, but that the entire time that has elapsed *also* feels "shorter than a Day." In the grand scheme of eternity, hundreds of years might indeed feel like a blip on the radar. This contradiction thus highlights the difficulty of imagining eternity. Life is measured by time, moving through different stages as people age; people sense the story of their lives unfolding as time goes on. But in death, the perception of time—indeed, all perception—ceases to exist. Unless, of course, there is an afterlife, an idea which the poem seems open to but inconclusive about.

Indeed, it's in large part this inconclusiveness that makes the poem so powerful. On the one hand, "Death's" kind and calm treatment of the woman could signal the comfort of a Christian afterlife—entrance to heaven and an eternity in God's presence. But more darkly, the way that the poem plays with ideas of immortality and eternity can also be read as nothing more than the dark nothingness of death itself—that life, when it's gone, is gone for good.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 17-24

THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF LIFE AND DEATH

In addition to looking at the mysteries of *death*, "Because I could not stop for death" comments on the nature of *life*. During the speaker's journey with the personified "Death," the points that they pass along the way seem charged with significance. The journey format of the poem mimics the way that life itself is a journey from birth to death—from the arrival of new life to its absence. The observations that the speaker makes along this journey seem to reinforce the idea that life and death are in cyclical balance; in a way, the poem suggests life is not possible without death.

Firstly, though it is not an explicitly stated symbol in the poem, it's important to bear in mind that this a journey taken with the aid of wheels. The carriage's wheels are, of course, circular, gently hinting at the circular transformation from nothingness to life to nothingness once more.

While the first two stanzas set up the journey itself, it's from the third onwards that the speaker starts to notice the environment around her as it passes. The first point along the way is a school, "where Children strove / at Recess – in the Ring." This image of children playing is important, symbolizing the continuation of life even after the speaker is no longer around to witness it (one of the facts that confronts everyone about death). The verb "strove" seems to suggest human effort, hinting at the way people strive to keep living even in the knowledge of inevitable death. The children are also playing in a "Ring," the circular nature of which further reflects the cycle of life and death.

Soon after, the traveling party goes by a field. While the sun is setting—representing the speaker's death—the "Gazing Grain" seems to be growing strong. This, then, is another example of the continuation of life after death. Every year crops are harvested (representing death) and then are replanted or regrown, enacting the shift from life into death and back again.

Then, in the penultimate stanza, the speaker seems to see her own grave. There is a sense here that the reality of death has arrived—that the speaker will no longer be around to witness children playing or crops growing. But because of the other sights that have been mentioned earlier, the grave visit doesn't really feel as significant as one might expect. That is, the speaker herself will of course soon be gone, but the poem is charged with the knowledge that everything else will carry on as before. Perhaps her death even makes way for the continuation of life in her absence—for new children to "strive," just as harvested grain makes way for new crops.

Subtly, then, the poem suggests an interdependence between life and death. Both seem like necessary parts of the world as presented in the poem, even if their relationship is by its nature perplexing and intriguing. Dickinson manages to put into images the complexity of these thoughts, and intentionally leaves such questions unresolved for the reader to consider.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 3
- Lines 4-8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 17-20
- Line 21
- Lines 21-24

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.

This poem has arguably one of the most arresting and intriguing openings in English language poetry. A first-person speaker, later revealed to be a woman through the description of her clothing in stanza four, encounters "Death." This Death is a personified figure, arriving to pick the woman up as though he is running some kind of 19th century taxi service.

But, of course, this ride comes about *not* because the woman wants it to, but because it is her time to die. She "could not stop for Death"—and, indeed, not many people would *choose* to do so—and so it is Death's responsibility to stop for her. The description of Death as "kindly" in line 2 suggests a gentlemanly figure, one who is going about his duty while behaving respectfully to those he picks up. It's notable, though, that as with the rest of the poem Death remains silent here. Death remains a mysterious, shadowy figure, even if he isn't presented as something fearsome and terrifying.

The woman climbs into Death's carriage and makes another mysterious observation. Describing those present within the vehicle, she mentions that, other than herself and Death, "Immortality" is also present. This moment is highly ambiguous, perhaps deliberately so. It's not clear if, like Death, Immortality is a personified figure—and another silent type at that. Alternatively, immortality may just be present in a more abstract sense as part of the atmosphere of the carriage.

The poem's sounds help capture the nuances of this opening stanza. The consonance of /l/ sounds in "held" and "Ourselves" seems to cling to the mouth of the reader, evoking the way in which this is, put simply, not a voluntary journey—that is, despite Death's gentlemanly civility, he also *forces* the speaker to join him.

LINES 5-8

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

Now that the woman is in Death's carriage, stanza two marks the beginning of the journey. Throughout the poem, there is a clear message that Death is in no hurry. This is because, whether the poem is interpreted as a bleak message about the nothingness that awaits those that die *or* as the more comforting idea of a Christian afterlife, both options are a kind of eternity. There's a sense that, in the face of eternity, there's no need to rush. As long as there is life, Death's work will never be done—so he might as well proceed at a leisurely pace.

To convey this unhurriedness, line 5 uses assonance:

> We slowly drove – He knew no haste

These long /o/ sounds feel weighty and slow, emphasizing that Death has plenty of time. After the line's caesura, the speaker restates this, explaining that Death "knew no haste." The enjambment in lines 5-7 is in a way ironic, quickening the pace of the lines while actually emphasizing the needlessness of rushing. Perhaps it indicates that the speaker herself acts fairly quickly in order to "put away" her "labor" and "leisure," sensing Death's "Civility" and feeling that she has to behave in a way that's equal to the respect he seems to show her.

Dickinson employs a characteristic formulation in the phrase, "I had put away / My labor and my leisure too." Dickinson often mixes abstract nouns—like "labor" and" leisure"—with concrete actions (like putting something away). In essence, the lines describe the newfound irrelevance of human activity. If the speaker is now dead, which gradually seems to be the case, her earthly work and pleasure are no longer important. "Labor" and "leisure" are linked together by alliteration, indicating that these are both life-based activities that the speaker will no longer be engaged in—not in the same way, at least.

LINES 9-12

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

The third stanza describes some of the places that the speaker and Death pass while on their journey. The stanza uses anaphora through the repeated "We passed" to give a sense of a voyage taking place in different stages, with each repetition introducing the next location.

The locations in and of themselves are significant too, seeming to represent different stages in an individual's life. The first stop—though it's not clear whether the carriage actually stops or just passes by—is a school. Here, the speaker witnesses children playing during recess. But the poem uses a very specific verb here: "strove" (as opposed to something like "play"). This word suggests effort, in turn calling to mind that living itself involves a kind of constant effort—at odds with the relaxed and laidback way in which the speaker now travels.

There's also some important symbolism at play here too. Just after line 10's caesura, the speaker clarifies that the children are playing "in the Ring." This means that the children are organized in a circle shape, which mirrors the poem's idea of life and death as part of a kind of cycle. If the school stands in for childhood, the "Fields of Gazing Grain" represent the maturity of adulthood. This grain literally grows *up*, metaphorically continuing the discussion of life's journey after the mention of

the school. The alliteration of the two /g/ sounds suggests something coming to fruition.

Line 12 brings the speaker to another stage along this journey, also employing alliteration in "Setting Sun." Of course, the image of the sun setting maps easily onto the idea of life coming to an end, the light of the speaker's life close to being extinguished.

LINES 13-16

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

Stanza four is a kind of revision of the previous stanza, specifically of line 12, about the "Setting Sun." Essentially, the speaker clarifies that she and Death didn't really "pass" the sun, but that "He"—the personified sun—"passed Us."

This alters the reader's perception of time. Already, the poem has established that Death is in no hurry (see stanza two). The fact that the sun passes *them* (the speaker and death), rather than the other way around, encourages the idea that Death and his passenger have changed their relationship to time. They've slowed down so that the world seems to pass them by. The use of caesura in line 13 captures this moment of revision and halting motion.

The sun, which governs people's lives—humans live according to circadian rhythms which are dictated by night and day—is a symbol of human time. It represents the way people measure their lives in days, mornings, and nights. Yet now, human time seems to leave the speaker behind, who slowly rides in the cold with only Death for company.

Line 14 conveys the effect that the night has on the grass. Dew gathers on the grass and grows "quivering and Chill," hinting at the coldness of death. Lines 15 and 16 make it clear that the speaker is a woman: she's wearing a thin "Gossamer" gown (that is, it's woven of cobwebs, whether figuratively or literally) and a scarf made out of the thin material "tulle." The thinness of this material makes a statement about the transition between life and death, suggesting that the comforts of life—such as warm clothing—can't be taken beyond the grave. The speaker is underdressed, indicating that she is a little unprepared—as she herself made clear in the first line. This speaks to the way that people generally are unprepared for their own deaths, because it is something for which it is hard to know *how* to prepare.

LINES 17-20

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

In stanza five, the speaker appears to "pause" at a tomb, probably her own. This seems to be the last stop along the journey. Interestingly, the speaker avoids calling this "Swelling of the Ground" a grave. Instead, the speaker refers to it as a "House." After all, in their way, graves *are* the houses of the dead.

Line 19 states that the roof of this structure is "scarcely visible." That is, the roof is practically buried underground. This can be read as subtly reinforcing the mystery of death—how it's impossible to see, in life, what will happen after death. The buried roof also suggests the end of the speaker's earthly life. Her house, a representation of everyday domestic living, literally disappears into the ground.

Interestingly, this stanza marks a departure from the usual rhyme scheme (which is ABCB, with mostly half rhymes). Rather than rhyming the word "Ground," the poem simply repeats it. This reinforces the finality of the speaker's destination, as if there is nowhere else to go and the poem, accordingly, has lost its forward momentum.

The caesura in line 20 seems to make "in the Ground" seem even more final, as if the phrase itself has been buried at the end of the stanza. This finality also emphasizes the bodily reality of death; whether or not there is a Christian afterlife awaiting the speaker's soul, their body is permanently plunged in the earth.

LINES 21-24

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

While up to now the poem has been told in the past tense, the final stanza brings the poem into the speaker's present. The ending is intensely ambiguous and mysterious, as Dickinson's poems—especially those about death—so often are.

The speaker states that it has been "Centuries" since the day of her ride with Death; but she also says that, despite the sheer amount of time that appears to have passed, it "feels shorter than the Day." In other words, the speaker feels both that a long *and* a short time have passed. The key to understanding this stanza is perhaps in the word "Feels." This skewed sense of time is specifically related to the way that the speaker herself now perceives time. She now seems to exist in some kind of "Eternity"—the ultimate destination of the carriage—meaning that time no longer functions in the same way.

There are two main ways of interpreting this ending. This "Eternity" could be the heavenly afterlife promised in the Christian tradition. But the way that the journey has taken place—with "Death" as the driver—doesn't seem to have much in common with Christian mythology specifically. A reader intent on finding Christian resonances *could read* Death's horse-drawn carriage as an allusion to the Four Horsemen of

the Apocalypse in the Book of Revelation, but this reading is far from certain. In fact, the speaker's journey has more in common with trips to the underworld as depicted in classical Greek and Roman mythologies.

Regardless, the speaker *could* be speaking from her new vantage point in the Christian heaven. Alternatively, it's possible that she exists in an altogether more down-to-earth "Eternity," a kind of nothingness. This could just be the reality of death—that it represents an eternity of nothingness, needing no religious explanation. The caesurae of line 21 and the enjambment of the following lines play with this idea of a disrupted understanding of time, the caesura slowing the lines down and the enjambment speeding them up.

SYMBOLS

THE CARRIAGE

The carriage in "Because I could not stop for Death" symbolizes the journey from life to death. This journey begins when a personified version of "Death" comes to pick up the speaker, who admits that *she* was never going to stop for *him* on her own—he had to come to her. The carriage then carries the speaker through a landscape that represents a kind of sped-up version of life. In this way, life as a metaphorical journey becomes a literal journey in the carriage.

The carriage is a type of vessel or container for the speaker, mirroring the speaker's body, which could be thought of as the "carriage" for her soul. Just as the speaker must eventually disembark from the carriage to enter her "House," or tomb, so too must the speaker's soul eventually depart from her body, whether to join God in heaven or to re-enter nothingness.

Additionally, the carriage's wheels, though never explicitly mentioned, summon the idea of circularity. These wheels propel the speaker's journey, and their circular shape is gently suggestive of the idea that life and death are in a kind of cycle, one leading to the other forevermore. The "Ring" of children in line 10 further hints at this circularity, as if the wheels on the carriage and features of the landscape are mirroring each other.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "The Carriage"

THE CHILDREN

The third stanza is deeply symbolic, appearing to represent different stages along the journey of a typical human life. The first of these is the school, where the speaker sees children playing. Altogether, this image represents the first stage of life: childhood.

Interestingly, the verb used to describe the children's activity is not "played" but "strove." In other words, the children seem to be making a real effort at whatever game they're playing, which subtly comments on the effort involved in life more generally. Life, the poem seems to say, is also a game people strive to succeed at. This is especially relevant given that the speaker has just "put away" her life's "labor." She has given up striving and now makes her way to the grave.

Also important is the particular shape into which the children have organized themselves. They are in a ring—a circular shape—which hints symbolically at the idea of death and life as a cyclical relationship. Death and life are defined in terms of each other—they depend on one another to exist.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "We passed the School, where Children strove / At Recess – in the Ring –"

THE FIELDS

The second stage along the speaker's journey is "the Fields of Gazing Grain." The grain symbolizes adulthood and maturity. Having passed by the school—which represents childhood—the speaker now sees this symbolic image of growth. Each year, crops are brought to maturity and then cut down to be sold. Every year, in other words, brings with it a cycle of new life and death—just like the human world too.

The use of "gazing" is unusual—grain is not usually described in such a way. This seems to relate to the strangeness of the speaker's perspective: just as the sun appears to pass her, rather than she passing by the sun, the grain seems to return her searching look. In other words, the mystery that she perceives in the outside world is reflected back upon her, reinforcing the poem's general atmosphere of unsettling ambiguity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –"

THE SUN

The setting sun symbolizes the end of life. The speaker is nearing the end of her journey. What will follow, of course, is nighttime—or death. That is, the speaker's sun is setting, and she is leaving her earthly existence.

The symbols in stanza 3 become less and less earthbound as the stanza progresses. The school is a tangible and real location; the fields widen the perspective to indefinite boundaries; and finally the "Setting Sun" exists in the sky, out beyond earthly life altogether. This captures the way that

people's perspectives enlarge as they get older. It also mirrors the speaker's progress towards the "Eternity" of death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "We passed the Setting Sun –"
- **Line 13:** "Or rather – He passed Us –"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is quite a prominent feature of "Because I Could Not Stop for Death."

Technically speaking, alliteration is first used in the /h/ sounds of line 5—"He knew no haste"—but it's the next example that seems more significant. In line 7, the speaker relates how she "put away" her "labor" and "leisure," in part because Death was so "kindly" and civil towards her. In other words, she felt duty-bound to leave aside both her work and her play.

These, perhaps, are the two key factors in most people's lives: the work that people do (labor) and what they do outside of that work (leisure). Both are, of course, incredibly open-ended. Labor doesn't need to mean paid work—it could relate to domestic work at home, or even writing poetry. And leisure could be anything from hobbies to spending time with loved ones. Accordingly, the alliteration that joins these two words emphasizes the way that they are such key parts of what it means to be human. It makes them more prominent, suggesting their deep-rooted importance.

In the following stanza (stanza 3), the poem intensifies its use of alliteration. Here, each line has a pair of alliterating sounds:

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

This alliteration emphasizes the way that each location the carriage passes represents a different stage of life, whether literally with regards to childhood or metaphorically in the figure of the setting sun (representing the end of life). The alliteration draws attention to each line, making them feel like distinct units, almost like signposts coming into view.

Another example of alliteration is in lines 15 and 16. Again, the alliteration comes in pairs:

> For only Gossamer, my Gown –
> My Tippet – only Tulle –

The alliteration helps make the lines sound delicate, which in turn suggests the thin clothing that the female speaker is wearing.

As one final example, look at line 23. Here, the twin /h/ sounds of "Horses' Heads" recall the sound of horses exhaling as the speaker undertakes her final journey. This use of alliteration, and the poem's use of alliteration in general, helps draw attention to the specificity of its descriptions.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "H," "kn," "n," "h"
- **Line 6:** "A," "h," "a"
- **Line 7:** "l," "l"
- **Line 9:** "S," "s"
- **Line 10:** "R," "R"
- **Line 11:** "G," "G"
- **Line 12:** "S," "S"
- **Line 14:** "D," "d"
- **Line 15:** "G," "G"
- **Line 16:** "T," "T"
- **Line 17:** "s"
- **Line 18:** "S"
- **Line 21:** "S," "C"
- **Line 22:** "th," "th"
- **Line 23:** "H," "H"
- **Line 24:** "t," "t"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is used prominently in the third stanza. The entire poem is framed as a journey taken by the speaker at the invitation of a personified "Death" figure. Stanza 3 is an important one in terms of building a sense of the momentum of traveling. This is where the anaphora comes in, forming the opening words of three out of the stanza's four lines:

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

The repeated "We passed" has a kind of hypnotic effect, evoking the sound of the carriage wheels as they turn. But the anaphora also divides the stanza into distinct stages—the school, the fields, and the sun—which also contributes to the sense of a journey. Each use of anaphora, in other words, marks out a different destination as the journey unfolds.

The phrase "We passed" also captures the fact that this is a deathward journey—eventually, the speaker will *pass* away. At each stage of the journey, that death seems near and nearer.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "We passed"

- **Line 11:** "We passed"
- **Line 12:** "We passed"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is a common feature of Emily Dickinson's poetry, and is used here in "Because I Could Not Stop for Death."

One of the first examples is line 3:

> The Carriage held but just Ourselves –

The shared /e/ sound seems to gently grip the line, conveying the way that the speaker and Death are "held" by the carriage. Subtly, it also suggests the way that—though Death is a "kindly" figure—the speaker has no choice but to go on this journey. In other words, it is her time to die; she has to take this ride.

The next use of assonance is in line 5. This stanza—the second—serves to demonstrate the way in which the personified Death is in no hurry at all. Indeed, he rides with "Immortality" in the carriage too. Line 5 uses two long /o/ sounds in "slowly drove" to take the pace out of the line and make it feel like it too is in no hurry.

There is also some subtle assonance in lines 10 and 11:

> At Recess – in the Ring –
> We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –

These lines also feature prominent alliteration, and the assonance supports the way that this alliteration makes each line seem like a distinct destination along the speaker's journey.

Another example of assonance is in line 14, which has shared /oo/ and /i/ sounds:

> The Dews drew quivering and Chill –

These vowel sounds seem to act out the line's description of grass growing dewy as the night comes on. That's because the line shifts from slightly longer /oo/ sound to the quicker /i/ sound, which gently evokes the action and noises of shivering.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "o," "o"
- **Line 2:** "e," "y," "e"
- **Line 3:** "e," "u," "u," "e"
- **Line 5:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 6:** "A," "a," "a"
- **Line 7:** "y," "a," "a," "y"
- **Line 10:** "i," "i"
- **Line 11:** "a," "ai"
- **Line 13:** "a," "a"
- **Line 14:** "e," "e," "i," "i"
- **Line 19:** "i," "i"
- **Line 20:** "i," "i"
- **Line 21:** "i," "e," "i," "e," "ie," "e"
- **Line 22:** "ee"
- **Line 23:** "I," "i"

CONSONANCE

The consonance in "Because I could not stop for Death" plays a steady and subtle role throughout the poem.

For instance, line 3 combines consonant /l/ sounds with the assonance of /e/ sounds in "held" and "Ourselves." These sounds work to give the sense of a tightening grip. It is a moment in which the sound of the line feels extremely deliberate—as though it had to be that way—which captures how the speaker is picked up by Death whether she wants to be or not.

Another example of consonance occurs in lines 21-23. Here, there is an abundance of /s/ sounds (specifically known as sibilance). These lend the ending a ghostly, whisper-like quality:

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

It's as though the speaker is disappearing back into the "Eternity" in which she now resides, which contrasts with the relatively down-to-earth tone of the rest of the poem.

The final line also contains an abundance of consonant sounds:

> Were toward Eternity -

Here, almost every consonant gets tied up in consonance. This helps lend the line a feeling of finality and completeness, thus capturing the "Eternity" that the speaker now inhabits.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "t," "t," "D"
- **Line 2:** "d," "r"
- **Line 3:** "rr," "g," "l," "j," "s," "s," "l"
- **Line 4:** "l"
- **Line 5:** "l," "l," "H," "kn," "n," "h"
- **Line 6:** "h"
- **Line 7:** "l," "l"
- **Line 8:** "C"
- **Line 9:** "ss," "S," "l," "r," "l," "r," "s," "r"
- **Line 10:** "R," "c," "ss," "R"
- **Line 11:** "s," "G," "z," "G"
- **Line 12:** "ss," "S," "S"
- **Line 13:** "ss," "s"

- **Line 14:** “D,” “w,” “d,” “w,” “qu,” “n,” “d,” “ll”
- **Line 15:** “n,” “l,” “G,” “m,” “m,” “G,” “n”
- **Line 16:** “T,” “n,” “l,” “T,” “ll”
- **Line 17:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 18:** “S,” “r”
- **Line 19:** “R,” “s,” “s,” “c,” “r,” “c,” “l,” “s,” “l”
- **Line 20:** “Th,” “C,” “n,” “n,” “th,” “r,” “n”
- **Line 21:** “S,” “n,” “c,” “n,” “s,” “C,” “n,” “s,” “n”
- **Line 22:** “s,” “r,” “r,” “th,” “n,” “th”
- **Line 23:** “r,” “s,” “s,” “r,” “s,” “H,” “s,” “s,” “H,” “s”
- **Line 24:** “W,” “r,” “t,” “w,” “r,” “t,” “r,” “t”

CAESURA

Caesura is used quite frequently in "Because I could not stop for death." In most cases, the caesura is represented by a dash—a characteristic trait of Emily Dickinson's poems.

The first example is in line 5. Here, the caesura is relatively easy to interpret. The speaker is discussing the unhurried pace with which "Death" undertakes the journey, and the caesura is an obvious way of slowing down the pace of the line to match.

Line 10's caesura is an interesting one. The speaker is discussing what she can see, in this case children playing on their break time. Specifically, they are arranged in a "Ring" (a shape which is gently suggestive of the cycle of life and death). The use of caesura here means that the phrase itself, "in the Ring," is in its own little space, just like how the children have organized themselves.

The following caesura, in Line 13, is about clarification, which is a way that Dickinson often employs the dash. Here, the speaker wants to make clear that she didn't really pass the "Setting Sun," but that it felt more like the sun passed them her.

Line 20's caesura creates a moment's dramatic pause before the poem uses its only repeated end word: "Ground." The two "Ground[s]" make it doubly clear that the speaker is not looking at an ordinary house, but a kind of tomb or grave.

Finally, line 21's double caesurae are similar to the one in line 5. They allow the speaker to make clear that it has been "Centuries" since this particular day. The caesurae slow the line down, conveying the passage of time.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “–”
- **Line 9:** “”,
- **Line 10:** “–”
- **Line 13:** “–”
- **Line 15:** “”,
- **Line 16:** “–”
- **Line 20:** “–”
- **Line 21:** “–,” “–”

ENJAMBMENT

While a number of this poem's 24 lines are end-stopped with the characteristic Dickinson dash, other lines use enjambment.

Line 1 is enjambed on the word "Death," drawing emphasis to the central concept of the poem (death), while also requiring line 2 in order to grammatically complete the phrase. This enjambment captures a kind of logical structure: *Because X / Therefore Y*.

A more dramatic example occurs in the second stanza. Lines 5 to 7 are enjambed, with the almost ironic effect of speeding up the poem's pace even though the speaker is discussing Death's unhurried way of traveling. That said, the lines describe how the speaker puts "away" her "labor and [her] leisure" in response to the gentlemanly manner of Death. So, while Death remains unhurried, the speaker scrambles to seem attentive and respectful.

The enjambment from line 9 to 10 extends its phrase across two lines, which in turn makes it seem like it requires more effort. This is in line with the unusual use of the verb "strove"—as opposed to something like "play"—to describe the children's break time activity as almost strenuous. Likewise, line 17's enjambment "Swell[s]" the phrase length, gently conveying the way in which the "Ground" is swollen with the "Roof" of the speaker's tomb.

The enjambment in the final stanza once again has to do with time and pace. The stanza uses caesurae to make line 21 feel slow, but enjambment from line 21 to 23 to make this section feel quicker. This accurately reflects the speaker's state: she believes centuries to have passed, but also feels as though *no* time has passed at all. The perception of time, then, has been disrupted.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “Death – / He”
- **Line 5:** “haste”
- **Line 6:** “And,” “away”
- **Line 7:** “My”
- **Line 9:** “strove”
- **Line 10:** “At”
- **Line 17:** “seemed”
- **Line 18:** “A”
- **Line 21:** “yet”
- **Line 22:** “Feels,” “Day”
- **Line 23:** “I,” “Heads”
- **Line 24:** “Were”

PERSONIFICATION

"Because I could not stop for Death" rests heavily on personification. From line 2 onwards, "Death" itself is personified, presented as a kind and civilized gentleman who comes unannounced to pick up the speaker. "Death" seems to

be a kind of guide or chaperone, taking the speaker either to the afterlife or to eternal nothingness.

That said, it's notable how little detail the speaker can actually give about this "Death" character. He is "kindly," and possesses a noticeable "Civility"—in a way, he is a perfect gentleman, behaving respectfully to his female companion. The only other thing revealed about Death is the manner in which he undertakes his business. He knows "no haste"; in other words, he is totally unhurried. Since he is a kind of emissary from some eternal realm, it makes sense that he doesn't need to rush—time isn't so dire when you're an eternal being.

The way in which Death remains silent throughout is an important part of the poem's power. It has a distancing effect, creating an atmosphere of solitude around the speaker even, even though she travels in company. This speaks to the mystery of death itself, the way in which no one can ever really know what death is like until it actually happens.

The "Setting Sun" is also briefly personified as "He." The personified sun passes the speaker as she and Death seem to slow down, separating from human life. This personification can be seen as representing the speaker's growing awareness of the cosmos around her. The Sun and Death, both personified, are cosmic forces who seem to exist eternally, constantly exerting the same forces on the world regardless of human happiness or suffering.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Because I could not stop for Death – / He kindly stopped for me –"
- **Lines 5-8:** "We slowly drove – He knew no haste / And I had put away / My labor and my leisure too, / For His Civility –"
- **Lines 12-13:** "We passed the Setting Sun – / Or rather – He passed Us –"
- **Line 14:** "The Dews drew"

VOCABULARY

Carriage (Line 3) - This is a horse-drawn vehicle with four wheels, used to transport passengers.

Haste (Line 5) - Haste is a fairly old-fashioned word for hurriedness.

Labor (Line 7) - This refers to the speaker's work, which could be her employment, her domestic life, or even the act of writing poetry.

Civility (Line 8) - This refers to "Death's" gentlemanly politeness and respectful manner.

Strove (Line 9) - This is the past tense of the verb, "to strive." It means to make an effort, often one that is physical. It's a curious and significant word choice, over something more obvious like "played."

Ring (Line 10) - This is a circle shape, which the children have formed during one of their games.

Quiver (Line 14) - Quivering is a trembling/shaking motion.

Gossamer (Line 15) - Gossamer refers to a fine and delicate texture, like that of a spider's web. Here it informs the reader that the speaker's gown is very thin.

Tippet (Line 16) - A tippet is a kind of thin scarf worn by women around the neck or shoulders.

Tulle (Line 16) - Tulle is a lightweight form of netting, like that used for veils.

Cornice (Line 20) - A cornice is an architectural feature. It is a design or pattern that goes at the top of a built structure, usually around the roof or ceiling.

Surmised (Line 23) - To surmise is to presume something to be true, though without necessarily having the supporting evidence to prove it.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem's form is typical of Dickinson's poems. It is made up of six quatrains, with a regular sense of meter and rhyme that gives the poem a forward momentum (fitting the idea of a journey).

Each stanza in this poem essentially functions as a distinct stage in the speaker's symbolic journey. Their clear-cut form helps convey how the mysterious journey from life to death can be captured using simple descriptions and images. That is, the clarity of the poem's form helps capture the mysteriousness of its content.

Like Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died," the poem starts with a clear opening statement that seems to come from the speaker's past, before the main events of the poem unfold. In the final stanza the poem seems to reach the speaker's present, in which she seems to speak from beyond the grave—thus ending in an atmosphere of mystery and uncertainty.

METER

"Because I could not stop for death" is written in iambic meter (meaning the lines are made up of feet with two syllables in an unstressed-stressed pattern). Mostly, the poem alternates between tetrameter (four iambs per line) and trimeter (three iambs per line). The third stanza is a good example of this at work:

We passed | the School, | where Chil- | dren strove |

At Re- | cess – in | the Ring –
We passed | the Fields | of Gaz- | ing Grain – |
We passed | the Sett- | ing Sun – |

This particular metrical form is sometimes called common meter, and can often be found in ballad stanzas and church hymns. Using a stanza reminiscent of church hymns subtly places the poem within a religious context, meaning that its considerations of death seem to be specifically based on the question of whether or not there is a Christian afterlife.

Line 14 contains an interesting metrical variation. Whereas usually the metrical scheme would demand a line of iambic trimeter, this line packs in a few more syllables, gaining an extra foot:

The Dews | drew quiv- | er ing | and Chill –

In a way, this makes it seem as though a "Chill" runs throughout the line, briefly making it shiver and waver away from the usual metrical scheme.

All in all, however, the poem sticks remarkably close to its meter. This strong rhythmic quality, combined with its striking narrative and Dickinson's unusual turns of phrase, helps make the poem so memorable.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme in "Because I could not stop for death" aligns with the ballad stanza form. This runs:

ABCB

The poem is propelled by the expectation of rhyme, conveying the rhythm and momentum of the speaker's journey with Death. That said, Dickinson resists making the rhymes too clear or satisfying to the ear, opting in most cases for slant rhymes. "Away" and "Civility" almost rhyme, for example, but not quite.

This refusal to make the rhymes full helps build the poem's sense of disquiet and mystery. The reader can sense that there *is a* rhyme scheme, but to a degree it is hidden. Like the answer to the question at the heart of the poem—what happens when people die?—the rhyme scheme is elusive.

One especially interesting moment occurs in the penultimate stanza. Here, the poem uses the same word twice, rhyming "Ground" with "Ground" again. This emphasizes the earthiness of what appears to be the speaker's final bodily resting place—her own grave.

SPEAKER

"Because I could not stop for death" is told entirely in the first-person. The female speaker tells the reader a story retrospectively, describing how a personified "Death" came one day to pick her up. Indeed, he had to come to her because the speaker "could not stop" for him. Most likely, this relates to the way in which most people do not choose to die, but have death thrust upon them.

The speaker is aware of the customs and social behaviors of her time, both sensing a kind of gentlemanliness in the figure of "Death" *and* responding with her own polite and respectful behavior. That's why she puts away her "labor" and "leisure," intuiting that she no longer has use for work or play (because she's going to die).

As often with Dickinson's poems, the speaker sometimes describes things implicitly rather than stating them outright. For instance, the speaker refers to her tomb as a "House," not a grave. And in the last stanza the speaker implies that she's been dead for "Centuries" without actually saying so. This might be interpreted as innocence, as if the speaker doesn't even know she's dead, but it more broadly represents the speaker's (and by extension, Dickinson's) ability to suggest states of being without referring to them directly.

SETTING

The setting of "Because I could not stop for Death" is a carriage ride through a landscape that represents the different phases of life. That setting is complicated by the fact that the speaker seems to retell her journey from beyond the grave.

The speaker gives clear statements about the location of the poem's action. Furthermore, the poem takes place chronologically, starting when "Death" picks up the speaker and seemingly ending at the speaker's tomb. This slow-paced journey goes past places that appear to symbolize stages of human life. Children playing at a school represent childhood; growing crops represent maturity; and the "Setting Sun" conveys old age. The final step seems to be the speaker's own grave, seen in the penultimate stanza.

Yet the whole poem has been told in the past tense. The speaker has been recalling her journey to death *after* that death. In the mysterious final stanza, the speaker appears to comment from a kind of present, an eternity in which centuries pass as quickly as days. Thus, in the last stanza, the poem's setting—which was symbolically grounded in everyday images—suddenly veers into an unnameable realm from which the dead speaker relates her own death.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson lived in Amherst, Massachusetts in the 19th century. She published very little during her lifetime—indeed, published work was predominantly put out by men. She was also a famously reclusive figure, choosing to stay indoors for

most of her adult life. Her posthumous influence was far-reaching, however, and she is now considered one of the most important poets in the English language.

She is known to have valued the writings of William Wordsworth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charlotte Bronte, and Shakespeare. During her early life, Dickinson went to a religious school and continued to be preoccupied with questions about faith and the meaning of existence. Church literature, then, was also a major influence on Dickinson, and her poems often employ a meter and diction similar to that found in hymns.

"Because I could not stop for death" is one of Dickinson's most celebrated poems, and is one of many on the subject of death. Other key poems on this subject include "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died," "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain," "As imperceptibly as grief," and "Death is the supple suitor." As with "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died," Dickinson offers no simple or easy comforts about death in this poem. Instead, she builds a mysterious atmosphere in which the reader ends up with more questions than answers. Like that poem, this one seems to be spoken from beyond the grave—indicated by the unsettling final stanza.

And while the poem seems to touch on elements of the Christian tradition—particularly the idea of an eternal afterlife—the journey to whatever comes after death is more in line with Classical Greek and Roman mythology. "Death" in this poem plays a similar role to Charon in Greek myth: Charon was a boatman who would transport the souls of the newly deceased across the rivers that divide the world of the living from the world of the dead. "Death" here seems to carry out a similar kind of duty, delivering the speaker from life into death—it's just not clear what this new world is actually like. Indeed, that's part of the poem's power: it can be read as adhering to the Christian tradition, but also as being non-religious.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson grew up within a Puritan environment that placed great emphasis on Christian morality. Her father was a congressman and the patriarch of the family. Dickinson could only begin writing her poetry because her father gave her implicit permission. In this respect, then, Dickinson was a female author in a time and place when this was not encouraged.

Dickinson's America was one of religious revivalism, with competing ideas about the way in which people ought to serve God, including the temperance movement of which her father was a part. The morality of slavery—and the question of whether slavery should be abolished—was also an intensely debated issue at the forefront of the political scene, which, of course, led to the outbreak of the American Civil War.

In the 19th century New England Protestant world in which Dickinson lived, death was something to be prepared for. That is, there were religious expectations for how death was to be viewed and dealt with in order for people to go Heaven after death. But, of course, it's hard to be fully prepared for death—as reflected by the way that the speaker of the poem can't herself stop for death; death has to stop for her. Dickinson lost many loved ones during her life, perhaps contributing to her fascination with death. Furthermore, her "blackouts" (considered by some to have been epilepsy) gave her a pronounced awareness of death. Indeed, she herself was bedridden for seven months before she died.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — A reading on Youtube by Tom O'Bedlam. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6U-CRhnDyK8)
- On Playing Emily — A clip in which actor Cynthia Nixon discusses playing Emily Dickinson on screen in "A Quiet Passion." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_SId6che2k)
- Dickinson's Meter — A valuable discussion of Emily Dickinson's use of meter. (https://poemshape.wordpress.com/2009/01/18/emily-dickinson-iambic-meter-and-rhyme/)
- In Our Time Podcast — Experts talk about Emily Dickinson's life and work on the BBC's In Our Time podcast/radio show. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDBADIHwchQ)
- More from Dickinson — A link to numerous other Emily Dickinson poems. (https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poems/45673)
- The Dickinson Museum — The Emily Dickinson Museum, situated in the poet's old house, has lots of resources for students. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- As imperceptibly as grief
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- There's a certain Slant of light
- This is my letter to the world
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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