

:: STRUCTURE ::**17.0 Objectives****17.1 Background****17.2 Introduction****17.3 Summary****17.4 Themes****17.5 Key words****17.6 Let us sum up****17.7 Check your progress****17.8 Books suggested**

17.0 OBJECTIVE

- The unit focuses on the analysis of “Because I could not stop for Death” by Emily Dickinson.
- The unit will encompass the summary, background and themes of “Because I could not stop for Death”.
- The necessary critical analysis of the poem “Because I could not stop for Death” will be presented concisely and lucidly.

17.1 BACKGROUND

Dickinson's most well-known and highly discussed poem, "Because I could not halt for Death," first appeared in the first volume of her poetry, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1890. The incorrect title, "The Chariot", was given to it by Higginson,

who may have been inspired by a Victorian artwork from the Victorian era depicting Apollo, the patron of the arts, riding the artist to heaven in his chariot. The editors sadly removed the fourth stanza, and Mrs Todd "improved on" the poet's exact rhyme in stanza three by rhyming "Mound" with "Ground" in its place. The restored poem was only made available to readers in Johnson's 1955 Poems. Despite this, it was already noted as one of her most significant and is still praised as a succinct articulation of her most important theme: immortality and death.

The 1847 death of Olivia Coleman, the attractive older sister of Emily's close friend Eliza M. Coleman, who passed away from a tubercular haemorrhage while out riding in a carriage, has been proposed by academics as the inspiration for Dickinson's "Carriage Ride with Death." However, the picture also has a wide range of cultural sources. For example, the central metaphor of the poem—a young woman being kidnapped by death—is based on the ancient myth of Persephone, the daughter of Ceres, whom Hades takes to the underworld. In addition, a common iconographic motif in mediaeval times was "Death and the Maiden," which occasionally took the shape of a virgin being sexually ravished by death.

Despite being unaware of these customs, Dickinson gave them a uniquely personal touch. She not only moved the kidnapping to the back roads of her own New England, but she also changed the female "victim" into a keen observer/participant in the mysterious journey from life to death and from temporal existence to eternal life. The speaker never verbalizes any genuine feeling over her kidnapping, and she never refers to it as such. She does not appear to be afraid or in agony. She is too busy to stop for him, and he, the courtly suitor, takes the initiative, so there is no sign that she is in love with death. Nevertheless, she does not push back. Instead, she is carried away by death, which is shown as "civility" or an act of politeness.

Additionally, she reacts politely, setting aside her work and her free time for the duration of her life. She is drawn in by the journey she meticulously watches and chronicles. The poem serves as her means of examining the query that preoccupied her mind: "What does it feel like to die?"

17.2 INTRODUCTION

Dickinson's extremely famous poem "Because I could not stop for Death" draws on the sentimental idea of death as a gentle lover escorting his love to a new and blissful home. The motif of death as a courtly lover is highlighted in the poem's first three stanzas. Death here is "kindly" and offers the narrator a smooth journey to the afterlife. The journey is slow, not frighteningly hasty or bumpy, and death is full of chivalric "Civility." The journey includes familiar scenes as the carriage glides past the school and fields. However, the fourth stanza brings an abrupt turn to the poem.

In the first three stanzas, the spatial coordinates of the poem are clear and consistent. The carriage journeys straight away from the home and town, eventually passing "the Setting Sun." However, when the narrator suddenly adds, "Or rather – He passed Us –," the journey's progress suddenly becomes confusing. This abrupt turn in the poem flags a movement away from the sentimental idea of death as an easy spiritual journey. Instead of moving smoothly past the setting sun to the heavens, the journey ends abruptly, and the scene becomes threatening. The poem has quickly moved from the positive image of "the Fields of Gazing Grain" to the darker image of the "Dews . . . quivering and chill" that threaten a vulnerable body clad with "only Gossamer" and "only Tulle."

The journey ends not with the arrival at a heavenly home but in the buried and suffocating home "in the Ground" – the physical grave. The carriage that seemed so comfortable in the poem's first half is not a chariot that transports a soul to an afterlife but a hearse transporting a body to the cemetery. "Eternity" seems nothing more than "Centuries" of physical decay in the earth that feels shorter than "the Day" when the narrator first noticed she was on her way to death. This poem's last stanza also suggests that genuine eternity lies in the day we recognize death and thus capitalize on the present moment, which is itself infinite.

17.3 SUMMARY

The most widely read and debated poem by Emily Dickinson is "Because I could not halt for Death." Although it is difficult to determine how much its problematic aspect contributes to this fascination, it warrants such attention. According to some scholars, the poem depicts death accompanying the female speaker to an absolute paradise. Others think that death appears as a liar, or even a rapist, who drags the victim away to be destroyed. Others believe the poetry leaves the issue of her final

destination unresolved. This poem acquires initial intensity by having its protagonist speak from beyond death, like "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died." However, in this case, the action has already begun to die effectively, and its physical qualities are merely hinted at.

Because I could not stop for death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

The opening stanza offers a positive perspective on a depressing situation. Death is gracious. He arrives in a car that suggests awe or courtship, and he carries eternity or at least its promise. The word "stop" can refer to stopping by someone or ceasing one's regular activities. The irony of death's benevolence in this pun suggests his cruel intention to claim the woman despite her involvement with life. He comes across as a potential suitor since she is alone—or almost alone—with death.

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

Death never has to move quickly in the second stanza because he always has enough power and time. The speaker now acknowledges that she has neglected both her work and her leisure; She has given up her life claims and appears pleased with her civility in exchange for death—a civility appropriate for a suitor but an ironic quality of a force that does not require rudeness.

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 sense of motion and the gap between the living and the dead are conveyed in the third stanza. Children carry on with the conflicts and games of life, which the deceased woman no longer cares about. Her state also has nothing to do with the vitality of nature, which she sees in the sun and grain; It creates a terrifying contrast.

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

However, in the fourth stanza, she becomes troubled by what appears to be a physical threat and her separation from nature. She realizes that the

sun is passing them rather than them, implying that time is leaving her behind and that she has lost the ability to move independently. Her dress and scarf are made of soft materials, and she is assaulted by the evening's wet chill, which symbolizes the coldness of death. Some critics maintain that she is destined for a celestial marriage and is dressed in the white robes of Christ's bride.

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

The body is placed in the grave in the fifth stanza, which is depicted as a swelling in the ground and suggests it will sink. Its flat roof and low roof supports add to the feeling of dissolution and may represent how quickly the deceased is forgotten.

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

The conclusion of the stanza suggests that the carriage with the driver and guest is continuing its journey. The soul is moving on without the body if it has been centuries since it was deposited. Because she experienced the shock of death on that first day, it felt longer than the subsequent centuries. Even at that point, she was aware that the destination was eternity; however, the poem does not specify whether eternity comprises anything other than the void into which her senses are dissolving.

Emily Dickinson may intend paradise to be the woman's destination, but the conclusion withholds a description of what immortality may be like. The presence of immortality in the carriage may be part of a mocking game or indicate some real promise. Since interpreting some details is problematic, readers must decide on the poem's dominant tone.

17.4 THEMES

Death

The experience of the physical process of dying is usually not pleasant in Dickinson's lyrics. However, the spiritual dimension that opens up through death, as a rule, is a joyous experience worth striving for. A masterly example of her ambiguous attitude towards the experience of death is in this poem, which at first glance seems to display a nice picture of death and accentuates the naturalness and gracefulness of the speaker's procession to the grave. In the poem, Dickinson dramatizes the role of

death as a kind and attentive lover who takes her out for a carriage ride, with immortality as a chaperon that sanctifies the relationship between death and his lady. The lover-death-image is an old one. The one presented in this poem relates to the tradition of 19th-century courtly love. Death comes as a well-mannered gentleman, apparently motivated by honourable intentions, observing all the customary civilities, concerned only with carrying the lady to her bridal rooms in heaven.

Melancholy and Nostalgia

At the beginning of the poem, death does not seem to act against the lady's will, but now he is not the gallant lover anymore but turns into a seducer trying to deceive her by making promises he will not keep. Immortality initially had the function of a chaperon to satisfy social conventions, but now he changes into death's accomplice and procurer. So, an ambivalent attitude on the part of the speaker arises from these shifts: "She is saying 'kindly', 'slowly drove' and 'Civility' in retrospect through clenched teeth." The highly ambiguous character of this poem suggests that in the face of death, Dickinson is persistently torn between fascination and fear. Because of her uncertainty, there is no coherent concept in the visions of her death, but rather a multitude of realizations that are hard to account for. The poem shares the impressionist sequence of images taken from the sphere of everyday life and the line. In the poem, the speaker who has already died is looking back at her death as if in an afterthought, although the intervals of time differ considerably.

Chivalry

The poem deals with a similar moment in which a woman is severed from her chosen tasks and carried off by an anonymous gentleman called 'Death'. Once again, the fair theme of love is associated with a thought so mean. However, this poem explicitly states that the advent of the gentleman caller is nothing short of death for the woman. While this poem is usually read as a poem about death, revealing Dickinson's playfully macabre vision of death as a gentleman caller, it is a poem that identifies the gentleman caller as death; for him, a woman is expected to put away both her labour and her leisure.

Courting is a male prerogative; she must wait to be called upon, but a quick and total surrender is expected once chosen. She must give up her work and leisure for His Civility. He has all the privileges of authority; he nominates the time of execution but is regarded as 'kindly' and civil. That the death coach contains the new couple - 'And Immortality' - suggests something of the enormous duration of the marriage journey. However, it

also suggests that male authority extends into eternity; earthly life and the afterlife are in his hands; indeed, that hypothesis underpins his authority here.

17.5 KEY WORDS

Afterlife	life after death
Ambiguous	open to more than one interpretation; not having one obvious meaning
Articulation	the formation of clear and distinct sounds in speech
Benevolence	the quality of being well meaning; kindness
Ceres	In Greek mythology, Ceres became the mother of Persephone through her brother Zeus.
Chivalry	the medieval knightly system with its religious, moral, and social code
Hades	In Greek mythology, Hades kidnaps Persephone.
Iconographic	the visual images and symbols used in a work of art
Immortality	the ability to live forever; eternal life
Melancholy	a feeling of pensive sadness, typically with no obvious cause
Nostalgia	a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past
Persephone	In Greek mythology, Persephone, also called Kore or Kora, is the daughter of Zeus and Demeter (Ceres).
Spatial	relating to or occupying space
Victorian	a person who lived during the Victorian period

17.6 LET US SUM UP

In conclusion, Emily Dickinson's 1863 poem "Because I could not stop death" was intriguing. This poem depicts a slow, upbeat journey through life before abruptly taking a dark turn and staring death in the face. Alliteration and personification are two types of figurative language used in this poem. There are also numerous themes in this poem.

17.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Choose the correct option:

- 1) What is the 'Death' or 'He' personified to?
 - a) Her husband
 - b) Her life
 - c) A gentleman who drives a carriage
 - d) God
- 2) What does the word 'immortality' mean?
 - a) Motor
 - b) Death
 - c) Sleep forever
 - d) Live forever

- 3) What is the 'House' referred to in the fourth stanza?
 a) A cellar
 The grave
 b) The narrator's home
 c) The narrator's home
 d) A church
- 4) 'And I had put away / My labor and my leisure too' - What is meant by these lines?
 a) The narrator is tired
 b) The narrator has finished her day at work
 c) The narrator will never again work or participate in any other activity
 d) The narrator is only being polite to Death
- 5) Which words could be used to describe Death in this poem?
 a) Hasty, rough, terrifying
 b) Civil, polite, gentlemanly
 c) Loud, friendly, pleasant
 d) Inconspicuous and weak

❖ **Answer in Brief:**

- 1) Why is death called a civil suitor?
- 2) What does the speaker do in return to his civility?
- 3) Describe the scenes witnessed by the poet as the carriage progressed through its last ride.
- 4) How does the poet give the theme of death an erotic touch?
- 5) Where does the carriage stop?

Write a detailed note on the following questions:

- 1) Where does the poet think of her new house as her grave?
- 2) Explain how the poem ends in ambiguity?

Answers:

- 1) – A 2) – D 3) – C 4) – C 5) – B

17.8 BOOKS SUGGESTED

- Christensen, Lena. *Editing Emily Dickinson: The Production of an Author (Studies in Major Literary Authors)*. Routledge, 2007.
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Legare Street Press, 2021.
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