Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#712 (c.1863)

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 passed 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 –

## ANALYSIS

"One of the perfect poems in English…it exemplifies better than anything else [Emily Dickinson] wrote the special quality of her mind…. If the word great means anything in poetry, this poem is one of the greatest in the English language: it is flawless to the last detail. The rhythm charges with movement the pattern of suspended action back of the poem. Every image is precise and, moreover, not merely beautiful, but inextricably fused with the central idea. Every image extends and intensifies every other. The third stanza especially shows Miss Dickinson's power to fuse, into a single order of perception, a heterogeneous series: the children, the grain, and the setting sun (time) have the same degree of credibility; the first subtly preparing for the last. The sharp *gazing* before *grain* instills into nature a kind of cold vitality of which the qualitative richness has infinite depth.

The content of death in the poem eludes forever any explicit definition. He is a gentleman taking a lady out for a drive. But note the restraint that keeps the poet from carrying this so far that it is ludicrous and incredible; and note the subtly interfused erotic motive, which the idea of death has presented to every romantic poet, love being a symbol interchangeable with death. The terror of death is objectified through this figure of the genteel driver, who is made ironically to serve the end of Immortality. This is the heart of the poem: she has presented a typical Christian theme in all its final irresolution, without making any final statement about it. There is no solution to the problem; there can be only a statement of it in the full context of intellect and feeling. A construction of the human will, elaborated with all the abstracting powers of the mind, is put to the concrete test of experience: the idea of immortality is confronted with the fact of physical disintegration. We are not told what to think; we are told to look at the situation.

The framework of the poem is, in fact, the two abstractions, mortality and eternity, which are made to associate in perfect equality with the images: she sees the ideas and thinks the perceptions. She did, of course, nothing of the sort; but we must use the logical distinctions, even to the extent of paradox, if we are to form any notion of this rare quality of mind. She could not in the proper sense think at all, and unless we prefer the feeble poetry of moral ideas that flourished in New England in the eighties, we must conclude that her intellectual deficiency contributed at least negatively to her great distinction. Miss Dickinson is probably the only Anglo-American poet of her century whose work exhibits the perfect literary situation—in which is possible the fusion of sensibility and thought. Unlike her contemporaries, she never succumbed to her ideas, to easy solutions, to her private desires….

No poet could have invented the elements of…["Because I could not stop for Death"]; only a great poet could have used them so perfectly. Miss Dickinson was a deep mind writing from a deep culture, and when she came to poetry, she came infallibly. Infallibly, at her best; for no poet has ever been perfect, nor is Emily Dickinson. Her unsurpassed precision of statement is due to the directness with which the abstract framework of her thought acts upon its unorganized material. The two elements of her style, considered as point of view, are immortality, or the idea of permanence, and the physical process of death or decay. Her diction has two corresponding features: words of Latin or Greek origin and, sharply opposed to these, the concrete Saxon element. It is this verbal conflict that gives to her verse its high tension; it is not a device deliberately seized upon, but a feeling for language that senses out the two fundamental components of English and their metaphysical relation: the Latin for ideas and the Saxon for perceptions—the peculiar virtue of English as a poetic tongue. Only the great poets know how to use this advantage of our language.

Like all poets, Miss Dickinson often writes out of habit; the style that emerged from some deep exploration of an idea is carried on as verbal habit when she has nothing to say…. But she never had the slightest interest in the public. Were four poems or five published in her lifetime? She never felt the temptation to round off a poem for public exhibition. Higginson's kindly offer to make her verse 'correct' was an invitation to throw her work into the public ring—the ring of Lowell and Longfellow. He could not see that he was tampering with one of the rarest literary integrities of all time. Here was a poet who had no use for the supports of authorship--flattery and fame; she never needed money.

She had all the elements of a culture that has broken up, a culture that on the religious side takes its place in the museum of spiritual antiquities. Puritanism, as a unified version of the world, is dead; only a remnant of it in trade may be said to survive. In the history of puritanism she comes between Hawthorne and Emerson. She has Hawthorne's matter, which a too irresponsible personality tends to dilute into a form like Emerson's; she is often betrayed by words. But she is not the poet of personal sentiment; she has more to say than she can put down in anyone poem. Like Hardy and Whitman she must be read entire; like Shakespeare she never gives up her meaning in a single 1ine. She is therefore a perfect subject for the kind of criticism which is chiefly concerned with general ideas. She exhibits one of the permanent relations between personality and objective truth, and she deserves the special attention of our time, which lacks that kind of truth.

She has Hawthorne's intellectual toughness, a hard, definite sense of the physical world. The highest flights to God, the most extravagant metaphors of the strange and the remote, come back to a point of casuistry, to a moral dilemma of the experienced world. There is, in spite of the homiletic vein of utterance, no abstract speculation, nor is there a message to society; she speaks wholly to the individual experience. She offers to the unimaginative no riot of vicarious sensation; she has no useful maxims for men of action. Up to this point her resemblance to Emerson is slight: poetry is a sufficient form of utterance, and her devotion to it is pure. But in Emily Dickinson the puritan world is no longer self-contained; it is no longer complete; her sensibility exceeds its dimensions. She has trimmed down its supernatural proportions; it has become a morality; instead of the tragedy of the spirit there is a commentary upon it. Her poetry is a magnificent personal confession, blasphemous and, in its self-revelation, its implacable honesty, almost obscene. It comes out of an intellectual life towards which it feels no moral responsibility. Mather would have burnt her for a witch."

Allen Tate
*Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas*
(Scribner's 1936) 13-16, 22-25

"There are a few curious and remarkable poems representing a mixed theme, of which ["Because I could not stop for Death"] is perhaps the finest example…. In the fourth line we find the familiar device of using a major abstraction in a somewhat loose and indefinable manner; in the last stanza there is the semi-playful pretence of familiarity with the posthumous experience of eternity, so that the poem ends unconvincingly though gracefully, with a formulary gesture very roughly comparable to that of the concluding couplet of many an Elizabethan sonnet of love; for the rest the poem is a remarkably beautiful poem on the subject of the daily realization of the imminence of death—it is a poem of departure from life, an intensely conscious leave-taking. In so far as it concentrates on the life that is being left behind, it is wholly successful; in so far as it attempts to experience the death to come, it is fraudulent, however exquisitely, and in this it falls below her finest achievement.

Allen Tate, who appears to be unconcerned with this fraudulent element, praises the poem in the highest terms; he appears almost to praise it for its defects: 'The sharp gazing before grain instills into nature a kind of cold vitality of which the qualitative richness has infinite depth. The content of death in the poem eludes forever any explicit definition…she has presented a typical Christian theme in all its final irresolution, without making any final statement about it.' The poem ends in irresolution in the sense that it ends in a statement that is not offered seriously; to praise the poem for this is unsound criticism, however. It is possible to solve any problem of insoluble experience by retreating a step and defining the boundary at which comprehension ceases, and by then making the necessary moral adjustments to that boundary; this in itself is an experience both final and serious, and it is the experience on which our author's finest work is based."

Yvor Winters
"Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment"
*In Defense of Reason*, 3rd ed.
(Alan Swallow 1938, 1947) 283-99

"Emily Dickinson's poems on death are scattered in clusters through the two volumes which contain her poetic works. Drawn together in one of the several orders that suggest themselves, they constitute a small body of poems equal to the most distinguished lyric verse in English.

She is surely unparalleled in capturing the experience of New England deathbed scenes and funerals. Of this kind the three best poems are 'How many times these low feet staggered,' 'I heard a fly buzz when I died,' and 'I felt a funeral in my brain.' Her most successful device in these poems is her juxtaposition of the sense of the mystery of death with the sense of particular material stresses, weights, motions, and sounds so that each clarifies and intensifies the other…

Few other writers have expressed such astonishing loneliness… The objection has been made that no poet ought to imagine that he has died and that he knows exactly what the experience is like. The objection does not apply, at any rate, to 'I heard a Fly buzz,' since the poem does not in the least strive after the unknowable but deals merely with the last sensations of consciousness ["merely"? That the speaker is dead is "proof" of an afterlife and Immortality.]

Of the several poems which describe death as a gentleman visitor or lover the most familiar is also incomparably the best ["Because I could not stop for Death"]…. The only pressing technical objection to this poem is the remark that 'Immortality' in the first stanza is a meretricious and unnecessary personification and that the common sense of the situation demands that Immortality ought to be the destination of the coach and not one of the passengers. The personification of death, however, is unassailable. In the literal meaning of the poem, he is apparently a successful citizen who has amorous but genteel intentions. He is also God. And though as a genteel citizen, his 'civility' may be a little hollow—or even a confidence trick—as God his 'civility' is that hierarchic status which he confers upon the poet and for which she gladly exchanges the labor and leisure of the less brilliant life she has been leading.

The word 'labor' recalls Emily Dickinson's idea that life is to be understood as the slow labor of dying; now this labor is properly put away. So is the leisure, since a far more desirable leisure will be hers in 'eternity.' The third stanza is a symbolic recapitulation of life: the children playing, wrestling (more 'labor') through the cycle of their existence, 'in a ring'; the gazing grain signifies ripeness and the entranced and visionary gaze that first beholds the approach of death of which the setting sun is the felicitous symbol.

The last two stanzas are hardly surpassed in the whole range of lyric poetry. The visual images here are handled with perfect economy. All the poem needs is one or two concrete images—roof, cornice—to awake in our minds the appalling identification of house with grave. Even more compelling is the sense of pausing, and the sense of overpowering action and weight in 'swelling' and 'mound.' This kinesthetic imagery prepares us for the feeling of suddenly discerned motion in the last stanza, which with fine dramatic tact presents us with but one visual image, the horses' heads. There are progressively fewer visible objects in the last three stanzas, since the seen world must be made gradually to sink into the nervously sensed world—a device the poet uses to extraordinary effect in the last stanza of 'I heard a Fly buzz'."

Richard Chase
*Modern Poetry and the Tradition*
(U North Carolina 1939)

"Allen Tale is indisputably correct when he writes (in *Reactionary Essays*) that for Emily Dickinson 'The general symbol of Nature…is Death.' Death is, in fact, her poetic affirmation. Yet he continues with a questionable declaration: '…and her weapon against Death is the entire powerful dumb-show of the puritan theology led by Redemption and Immortality.'

It is true that she is forced to experience and deal with nature before she can turn her back on it, but redemption and immortality are for her neither weapon nor protection. If these concepts deserve any place at all, it is rather because they are avenues of escape from death. In her love poems, as well as in the group dealing with time and eternity, she returns constantly to her preoccupation with death—both as it is

incorporated in all of nature, and as it encompasses it on all sides. Here she faces and resolves the issue many times, but never wholly with what Tale is pleased to call her 'puritan theology.'

Certainly the love poems provide the more personally representative passages from which to draw an argument against Tate's statement. A recurrent theme in these poems is the separation of two lovers by death, and their reunion in immortality. But Emily Dickinson's conception of this immortality is centered in the beloved himself, rather than in any theological principle…. The immortality which concerns her arises directly from her connection with a second person, and never exists as an abstract or Christian condition…. In this same way, redemption is also reduced to the simplest personal equation. In these poems redemption, as such, is never mentioned; rather, the awareness of it permeates the entire section. Redemption for Emily Dickinson is too synonymous with immortality to receive much individual distinction. There is little talk of heaven or hell, except as they exist within the poet herself….

It is not the 'dumb-show of the puritan theology' which protects the poet, but her own redefinition of Christian values. This redefinition is not important because of any radical deviation from the church's precepts, but because the catchwords of pulpit and hymnal have been given an intimate and casual interpretation. She speaks of Death's coming for her, yet has him arrive in a carriage to take her for an afternoon's drive. She writes of Calvaries, but they are 'Calvaries of Love'; the grave is 'my little cottage'…. The familiar and comforting words that, for her, spell everyday life are used to mask unrealized abstractions. It is by contracting the illimitable spaces of after-life to her own focus, that she can find peace, for 'their height in heaven comforts not.' She fills the abyss with her talk of tea and carriages and the littleness of time. Puritan theology may have given her a fear of the loneliness of death, the Bible and hymnal may have provided her with patterns and phrases, but these equip her with terminologies, molds in which her personal conceptions can take form, rather than actual Christian conceptions.

Death for Emily Dickinson, therefore, was an uncomfortable lacuna which could in no way be bridged, except by transposing it into a more homely metaphor. Death as a caller, the grave as a little house—these are a poetic whistling in the dark. In a safe and ordered microcosm, she found death an ungoverned and obsessing presence. It could be neither forgotten nor accepted in its present form. Death had possessed too many of her friends to be reckoned with as a complete abstraction. But when she translated this oppression into a language of daily routine, she could blot out the reality of death with pictures conjured up by the surrounding images…. The idea of filing it off, of wading into death and its liberty, of calling death a primer, or of singing away eternity, is the balance of known with unknown which Emily Dickinson must portion out to herself before she can rest.

Allen Tale is on the right track in referring to death as her 'general symbol of Nature.' It is the logical culmination of nature, and the greatest example of the change which is constantly moving through nature. Emily Dickinson regards nature as resembling death in that it can, for the moment, be brought within her garden walls, but still spreads around her life and beyond her door, impossible to hold or to measure. Both are forces which must be discussed and rehearsed constantly. They are too present and compelling to be pushed into the recesses of the mind. The brute energy of both must be leashed to the minutely familiar. Emily Dickinson's wild nights are bound and her fears assuaged with the images of her immediate reality. But this immediate reality is made up of her personal terms, and has come from her own heart, not from the tenets of her church."

Ankey Larrabee
"Three Studies in Modern Poetry"
*Accent* III (Winter 1943) 115-17

"The central theme [of "Because I could not stop for Death"] is the interpretation of mortal experience from the standpoint of immortality. A theme stemming from that is the defining of eternity as timelessness. The poet uses these abstractions—mortality, immortality, and eternity—in terms of images. How successfully, then, do these images fulfill their intention, which is to unite in filling in the frame of the poem?

In the first two lines Death, personified as a carriage driver, stops for one who could not stop for him. The word 'kindly' is particularly meaningful, for it instantly characterizes Death. This comes with surprise,

too, since death is more often considered grim and terrible. The third and fourth lines explain the dramatic situation. Death has in the carriage another passenger, Immortality. Thus, in four compact lines the poet has not only introduced the principal characters metaphorically, but she has also characterized them in part; in addition, she has set the stage for the drama and started the drama moving. It may be noted; in passing, that the phrase, 'And Immortality,' standing alone, helps to emphasize the importance of the presence of the second passenger.

In the first line of the second stanza, 'slowly drove' and 'knew no haste' serve to amplify the idea of the kindliness of the driver, as well as the intimacy which has already been suggested by 'held just ourselves.' In the fourth line, 'For his civility' further characterizes the polite, kindly driver. The second, third and fourth lines tie in perfectly with the first two lines of the poem: she who has not been able to stop for Death is now so completely captivated by his personality that she has put away everything that had occupied her before his coming.

The third stanza contains a series of heterogeneous materials: children, gazing grain, setting sun. But under the poet's skillful treatment these materials, seemingly foreign to one another, are fused into a unit and reconciled. How? Not, obviously, by simply setting them side by side, but by making them all parts of a single order of perception. They are all perceived as elements in an experience from which the onlooker has withdrawn. In its larger meaning this experience is Nature, over which, with the aid of death, the individual triumphs. 'Gazing grain,' shifting 'gazing' from the dead woman who is passing to a common feature of Nature at which she is astonished, gives the grain something of the fixity of death itself, although the grain is alive. This paradox is highly significant in the context of the poem: 'grain' symbolizes life, mortality; 'gazing' suggests death, immortality. 'Setting sun' is no less powerful in its suggestion of the passage of time; and 'the school where children played, / Their lessons scarcely done' makes a subtle preparation for it.

In the next stanza the house, appearing as a 'swelling of the ground,' the roof 'scarcely visible' and the cornice, 'but a mound,' suggest the grave, a sinking out of sight. 'Paused' calls to mind the attitude of the living toward the lowering of a coffin into the ground, as well as other associations with the occurrence of death. 'Centuries' in the last stanza refers, of course, to eternity. 'Each feels shorter than the day' ties in with 'setting sun' in the third stanza and suggests at the same time the timelessness of eternity. Indeed, an effective contrast between the time of mortality and the timelessness of eternity is made in the entire stanza.

'Horses' heads' is a concrete extension of the figure of the carriage, which is maintained throughout the poem. The carriage is headed toward eternity, where Death is taking the passenger. The attitude of withdrawal, or seeing with perspective, could not have been more effectively accomplished than it has been by the use of the slowly-moving carriage. Remoteness is fused with nearness, for the objects that are observed during the journey are made to appear close by. At the same time, a constant moving forward, with only one pause, carries weighty implications concerning time, death, eternity. The person in the carriage is viewing things that are near with the perspective of distance, given by the presence of Immortality.

The poem could hardly be said to convey an idea, as such, or a series of ideas; instead, it presents a situation in terms of human experience. The conflict between mortality and immortality is worked out through the agency of metaphor and tone. The resolution of the conflict lies in the implications concerning the meaning of eternity: not an endless stretch of time, but something fixed and timeless, which interprets and gives meaning to mortal experience. Two seemingly contradictory concepts, mortality and immortality, are reconciled, because several seemingly contradictory elements which symbolize them are brought into reconciliation.

The interaction of elements within a poem to produce an effect of reconciliation in the poem as a whole, which we have observed in these analyses, is the outstanding characteristic of 'Metaphysical' poetry. This poetry Cleanth Brooks defines as that in which 'the opposition of the impulses which are united is extreme' or, again, that 'in which the poet attempts the reconciliation of qualities which are opposite or discordant in the extreme.' I have no intention of forcing this classification upon the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Indeed, I have no intention of forcing any classification upon her; I have tried to focus more upon the mechanics of

her poetry. It seems fairly clear however…that she is free from the limitations of the romantic poet, which she is generally mistaken to be.

She does not employ metaphor only for illustration or decoration of some 'truth,' as the romantic poet usually does. She does not merely introduce an element of paradox, as the romantic poet tends to do; rather she succeeds in bringing it to the surface and in reconciling seemingly contradictory concepts. She does not use disparate materials sparingly and put them down in juxtaposition without blending them, as the romantic poet is often inclined to do. And her liberty in the use of words would hardly be sanctioned by the typically romantic poet, for fear of being 'unpoetic' and not 'great' and 'beautiful.'

The kind of unity, or reconciliation that we have been observing at work in these poems is chiefly responsible for their success. Proof of this is found in the fact that the few poems of Emily Dickinson's that are not successful show no evidence of the quality; and some others that are only partially successful show less of it. In this sense we are justified in referring to Emily Dickinson as a metaphysical poet."

Eunice Glenn
"Emily Dickinson's Poetry: A Revaluation"
*The Sewanee Review* LI
(Autumn 1943) 585-88

"This poem illustrates how, in Professor Whicher's words, Miss Dickinson's line of thinking at times 'rises to a…level where abstract ideas are personified and dramatized, filled with vital breath, and placed in exciting relation with each other.' By telling vividly of the start of a journey by carriage to eternity, with Death as the coachman, the poem thus fancifully gives concrete expression to the hope for immortality. The details of the poem are arranged so as to disassociate the travelers more and more from earthly life. In the opening lines, 'I could not stop' ambiguously suggests a laborer who could not put off toil. The second stanza shows that the poet has 'put away' not only toil but also leisure. Now the slow carriage passes children at play, oblivious of the nearby travelers; next it passes fields which emphasize the lifelessness of the poet and the driver by 'gazing' at them. After the darkness has come with the passing by of the setting sun, the travelers pause before a grave whose tenant has crumbled to dust: even that semblance of being has disappeared. Such is the preparation for the final stanza, in which immortality has replaced the mortality of earth."

James E. Miller, Jr.
*The Literature of the United States* II, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 196

"In 1863 Death came into full stature as a person. 'Because I could not stop for Death' is a superlative achievement wherein Death becomes one of the great characters of literature. It is almost impossible in any critique to define exactly the kind of reality which her character Death attains, simply because the protean shifts of form are intended to forestall definition. A poem can convey the nuances of exultation, agony, compassion, or any mystical mood. But no one can successfully define mysticism because the logic of language has no place for it. One must therefore assume that the reality of Death, as Emily Dickinson conceived him, is to be perceived by the reader in the poems themselves. Any analysis can do no more than suggest what may be looked for .

In 'Because I could not stop for Death' Emily Dickinson envisions Death as a person she knew and trusted, or believed that she could trust. He might be any Amherst gentleman, a William Howland or an Elbridge Bowdoin, or any of the coming lawyers or teachers or ministers whom she remembered from her youth, with whom she had exchanged valentines, and who at one time or another had acted as her squire…. The carriage holds but the two of them, yet the ride, as she states with quiet emphasis, is a last ride together. Clearly there has been no deception on his part. They drive in a leisurely manner, and she feels completely at ease. Since she understands it to be a last ride, she of course expects it to be unhurried. Indeed, his graciousness in taking time to stop for her at that point and on that day in her life when she was so busy she could not possibly have taken time to stop for him, is a mark of special politeness. She is therefore quite willing to put aside her work. And again, since it is to be her last ride, she can dispense with her spare moments as well as her active ones….

She notes the daily routine of the life she is passing from. Children playing games during a school recess catch her eye at the last. And now the sense of motion is quickened. Or perhaps more exactly one should say that the sense of time comes to an end as they pass the cycles of the day and the seasons of the year, at a period of both ripeness and decline…. How insistently 'passed' echoes through the [third] stanza! She now conveys her feeling of being outside time and change, for she corrects herself to say that the sun passed them, as it of course does all who are in the grave. She is aware of dampness and cold, and becomes suddenly conscious of the sheerness of the dress and scarf which she now discovers that she wears….

The two concluding stanzas, with progressively decreasing concreteness, hasten the final identification of her 'House.' It is the slightly rounded surface 'of the Ground,' with a scarcely visible roof and a cornice 'in the Ground.' To time and seasonal change, which have already ceased, is now added motion. Cessation of all activity and creativeness is absolute. At the end, in a final instantaneous flash of memory, she recalls the last objects before her eyes during the journey: the heads of the horses that bore her, as she had surmised they were doing from the beginning, toward—it is the last word—'Eternity'…. Gradually, too, one realizes that Death as a person has receded into the background, mentioned last only impersonally in the opening words 'We paused' of the fifth stanza, where his services as squire and companion are over. In this poem concrete realism melds into 'awe and circumference' with matchless economy."

Thomas H. Johnson
*Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography*
(Harvard 1955) 222-24

"A comment by Richard Chase on Emily Dickinson's 'Because I Could not stop for Death' reads in part as follows: 'The only pressing technical objection to this poem is the remark that "Immortality" in the first stanza is a meretricious and unnecessary personification and that the common sense of the situation demands that Immortality ought to be the destination of the coach and not one of the passengers. The personification of death, however, is unassailable. In the literal meaning of the poem, he is apparently a successful citizen who has amorous but genteel intentions. He is also God….

The trouble with this remark is that it does not present the common sense of the situation. Emily Dickinson was taught Christian doctrine—not simply Christian morality but Christian theology—and she knew that the coach cannot head toward immortality, nor can one of the passengers. Dickinson here compresses two related but differing concepts: (1) at death the soul journeys to heaven (eternity), and thus the image of the carriage and driver is appropriate; and (2) the soul is immortal, and our immortality, therefore, 'rides' always with us as a co-passenger; it is with us because the soul is our immortal part and so may be thought of as journeying with us. The poet's language is compact and oblique, but there is no false personification in it. Since the soul is one's true person (essence, not mask), no personification is needed, except possibly what may be involved in the separable concept of the soul itself. Both immortality and death, however, need personification and are given it. The horses' heads are toward eternity, but not toward immortality.

Incidentally, why 'amorous but genteel'? To those who believe in an afterlife, death may be kind in taking us from a world of proverbial woe into one of equally proverbial eternal bliss; the irony is in the contrast between our fear of death and the kindness of his mission, and it seems unnecessary to call upon an amorous implication. The idea of the 'Bride of Christ' may be permissible but it seems far-fetched in the context of the poem as we have it."

Theodore C. Hoepfner
"'Because I Could Not Stop for Death'"
*American Literature* XXIX (March 1957) 96

"[Emily Dickinson's] finest poem on the funeral ceremony [is "Because I could not stop for Death"]. On the surface it seems like just another version of the procession to the grave, but this is a metaphor that can be probed for deeper levels of meaning, spiritual journeys of a very different sort…. At first reading, the orthodox reassurance against the fear of death appears to be invoked, though with the novelty of a suitor

replacing the traditional angel, by emphasizing his compassionate mission in taking her out of the woes of this world into the bliss of the next.

'Death,' usually rude, sudden, and impersonal, has been transformed into a kindly and leisurely gentleman. Although she was aware this is a last ride, since his 'Carriage' can only be a hearse, its terror is subdued by the 'Civility' of the driver who is merely serving the end of 'Immortality.' The loneliness of the journey, with Death on the driver's seat and her body laid out in the coach behind, is dispelled by the presence of her immortal part that rides with her as a co-passenger, this slight personification being justified by the separable concept of the soul. Too occupied with life herself to stop, like all busy mortals, Death 'kindly stopped' for her. But this figure of a gentleman taking a lady for a carriage ride is carefully underplayed and then dropped after two stanzas.

The balanced parallelism of the first stanza is slightly quickened by the alliterating 'labor' and 'leisure' of the second, which encompass vividly all that must be renounced in order to ride 'toward Eternity.' So the deliberate slow-paced action that lies suspended behind the poem is charged with a forward movement by the sound pattern, taking on a kind of inevitability in the insistent reiteration of [stanza three]…. Here her intensely conscious leave-taking of the world is rendered with fine economy, and instead of the sentimental grief of parting there is an objectively presented scene. The seemingly disparate parts of this are fused into a vivid re-enactment of the mortal experience. It includes the three stages of youth, maturity, and age, the cycle of day from morning to evening, and even a suggestion of seasonal progression from the year's upspring through ripening to decline. The labor and leisure of life are made concrete in the joyous activity of children contrasted with the passivity of nature and again, by the optical illusion of the sun's setting, in the image of motion that has come to rest.

Also the whole range of the earthly life is symbolized, first human nature, then animate, and finally inanimate nature. But, absorbed 'in the Ring' of childhood's games, the players at life do not even stop to look up at the passing carriage of death. And the indifference of nature is given a kind of cold vitality by transferring the stare in the dead traveler's eyes to the 'Gazing Grain.' This simple maneuver in grammar creates an involute paradox, giving the fixity of death to the living corn while the corpse itself passes by on its journey to immortality. Then with the westering sun, traditional symbol of the soul's passing, comes the obliterating darkness of eternity. Finally, the sequence follows the natural route of a funeral train, past the schoolhouse in the village, then the outlying fields, and on to the remote burying ground.

In the concluding stanzas the movement of the poem slows almost to a stop, 'We paused' contrasting with the successive sights 'We passed' in the earlier stages of the journey. For when the carriage arrives at the threshold of the house of death it has reached the spatial limits of mortality. To say that it 'passed the Setting Sun' is to take it out of bounds, beyond human time, so she quickly corrects herself by saying instead that the sun 'passed Us,' as it surely does all who are buried. Then, as the 'Dews' descend 'quivering and chill,' she projects her awareness of what it will be like to come to rest in the cold damp ground. The identification of her new 'House' with a grave is achieved by the use of only two details: a 'Roof' that is 'scarcely visible' and a 'Cornice,' the molding around the coffin's lid, that is 'in the Ground.' But the tomb's horror is absorbed by the emphasis on merely pausing here, as though this were a sort of tavern for the night. When she wanted to she could invoke the conventional Gothic atmosphere, and without being imitative…

The house of death so lightly sketched is not her destination. That is clearly stated as 'Eternity,' though it is significant that she never reaches it…. An eminent critic, after praising this as a remarkably beautiful poem, complains that it breaks down at this point because it goes beyond the 'Limits of Judgment'; in so far as it attempts to experience death and express the nature of posthumous beatitude, he says, it is 'fraudulent.' But in addition to being a hyper-rational criticism, this is simply a failure to read the text. The poem does not in the least strive after the incomprehensible. It deals with the daily realization of the imminence of death, offset by man's yearning for immortality. These are intensely felt, but only as ideas, as the abstractions of time and eternity, not as something experienced. Being essentially inexpressible, they are rendered as metaphors. The idea of achieving immortality by a ride in the carriage of death is confronted by the concrete fact of physical disintegration as she pauses before a 'Swelling in the Ground.'

The final stanza is not an extension of knowledge beyond the grave but simply the most fitting coda for her poem. In projecting the last sensations of consciousness as the world fades out, she has employed progressively fewer visible objects until with fine dramatic skill she limits herself at the end to a single one, the 'Horses Heads,' recalled in a flash of memory as that on which her eyes had been fixed throughout the journey. These bring to mind the 'Carriage' of the opening stanza, and Death, who has receded as a person, is now by implication back in the driver's seat. 'Since then—'tis Centuries,' she says, in an unexpected phrase for the transition from time to eternity, but this is a finite infinity; her consciousness is still operative and subject to temporal measurement.

All of this poetically elapsed time 'Feels shorter than the Day,' the day of death brought to an end by the setting sun of the third stanza, when she first guessed the direction in which these apocalyptic horses were headed. 'Surmised,' carefully placed near the conclusion, is all the warranty one needs for reading this journey as one that has taken place entirely in her mind, 'imagined without certain knowledge,' as her Lexicon defined it. The last word may be 'Eternity' but it is strictly limited by the directional preposition 'toward.' So the poem returns to the very day, even the same instant, when it started. Its theme is a Christian one, yet unsupported by any of the customary rituals and without any final statement of Christian faith. The resolution is not mystical but dramatic.

Read in this way the poem is flawless to the last detail, each image precise and discrete even while it is unified in the central motif of the last journey. Yet another level of meaning has suggested itself faintly to two critics. One has described the driver as 'amorous but genteel'; the other has noted 'the subtly interfused erotic motive,' love having frequently been an idea linked with death for the romantic poets. Both of these astute guesses were made without benefit of the revealing fourth stanza, recently restored from the manuscript. But even in the well-known opening lines of the poem there are suggestive hints for anyone who remembers that the carriage drive was a standard mode of courtship a century ago.

In the period of her normal social life, when Emily Dickinson took part in all those occasions that give youthful love its chance, she frequently went on drives with young gentlemen. Some ten years before the date of this poem, for example, she wrote to her brother: 'I've been to ride twice since I wrote you…last evening with Sophomore Emmons, alone'; and a few weeks later she confided to her future sister-in-law: 'I've found a beautiful, new, friend.' The figure of such a prospective suitor would inevitably have come to the minds of a contemporary audience as they read: 'He kindly stopped for me — / The Carriage held but just Ourselves…' Such a young couple likewise would have driven beyond the village limits into the open country and then, romantically, past the 'Setting Sun.' Restraint kept her from pushing this parallel to the point of being ludicrous, and the suitor image quickly drops into the background.

The love-death symbolism, however, re-emerges with new implications in the now restored fourth stanza, probably omitted by previous editors because they were baffled by its meaning: 'For only Gossamer, my gown — / My Tippet — only Tulle --'. This is certainly not a description of conventional burial clothes. It is instead a bridal dress, but of a very special sort. 'Gossamer' in her day was not yet applied to fine spun cloth but only to that filmy substance like cobwebs sometimes seen floating in the autumn air, as her Lexicon described it, probably formed by a species of spider. This brings to mind her cryptic poem on the spider whose web was his 'Strategy of Immortality.' And by transforming the bridal veil into a 'Tippet,' the flowing scarf-like part of the distinctive hood of holy orders, she is properly dressed for a celestial marriage. 'Death,' to be sure, is not the true bridegroom but a surrogate, which accounts for his minor role. He is the envoy taking her on this curiously premature wedding journey to the heavenly altar where she will be married to God. The whole idea of the Bride-of-the-Lamb is admittedly only latent in the text of this poem, but in view of the body of her writings it seems admissible to suggest it as another metaphor for the extension of meanings….

'Because I could not stop for Death' is incomparably the finest poem of this cluster. In it all the traditional modes are subdued so they can, be assimilated to her purposes. For her theme there, as a final reading of its meaning will suggest, is not necessarily death or immortality in the literal sense of those terms…. One surely dies out of this world in the end, but one may also die away from the world by deliberate choice during this life. In her vocabulary 'immortal' is a value that can also attach to living this side of the grave: 'Some — Work for Immortality — / The Chiefer part, for Time --' As an artist she

ranked herself with that elite. At the time of her dedication to poetry, presumably in the early 1860's, someone 'kindly stopped' for her—lover, muse, God—and she willingly put away the labor and leisure of this world for the creative life of the spirit. Looking back on the affairs of 'Time' at any point after making such a momentous decision, she could easily feel 'Since then — 'tis Centuries --'.

Remembering what she had renounced, the happiness of a normal youth, sunshine and growing things, she could experience a momentary feeling of deprivation. But in another sense she had simply triumphed over them, passing beyond earthly trammels. Finally, this makes the most satisfactory reading of her reversible image of motion and stasis during the journey, passing the setting sun and being passed by it. For though in her withdrawal the events of the external world by-passed her, in the poetic life made possible by it she escaped the limitations of the mortal calendar. She was borne confidently, by her winged horse, 'toward Eternity' in the immortality of her poems."

Charles R. Anderson
*Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise*
(Holt 1960) 241-46, 248-49

"Yvor Winters has spoken of the poem's subject as 'the daily realization of the imminence of death—it is a poem of departure from life, an intensely conscious leave-taking.' But in its final claim to actually experience death, Winters has found it fraudulent. There is, of course, a way out of or around the dilemma of posthumous speech and that is to suppose that the entire ride with death is, as the last stanza indicates, a 'surmise,' and ''tis Centuries --', a colloquial hyperbole. But we ought not insist that the poem's interpretation pivot on the importance of this word. For we ignore its own struggle with extraordinary claims if we insist too quickly on its adherence to traditional limits.

In one respect, the speaker's assertions that she 'could not stop for Death --' must be taken as the romantic protest of a self not yet disabused of the fantasy that her whims, however capricious, will withstand the larger temporal demands of the external world. Thus the first line, like any idiosyncratic representation of the world, must come to grips with the tyranny of more general meanings, not the least of which can be read in the inviolable stand of the universe, every bit as willful as the isolate self. But initially the world seems to cater to the self's needs; since the speaker does not have time (one implication of 'could not stop') for death, she is deferred to by the world ('He kindly stopped for me --'). In another respect, we must see the first line not only as willful (had not time for) but also as the admission of a disabling fact (could not). The second line responds to the doubleness of conception. What, in other words, in one context is deference, in another is coercion, and since the poem balances tonally between these extremes it is important to note the dexterity with which they are compacted in the first two lines.

There is, of course, further sense in which death stops for the speaker, and that is in the fusion I alluded to earlier between interior and exterior senses of time, so that the consequence of the meeting in the carriage is the death of otherness. The poem presumes to rid death of its otherness, to familiarize it, literally to adopt its perspective and in so doing to effect a synthesis between self and other, internal time and the faster, more relentless beat of the world. Using more traditional terms to describe the union, Allen Tate speaks of the poem's 'subtly interfused erotic motive, which the idea of death has presented to most romantic poets, love being a symbol interchangeable with death.' It is true that the poem is charged with eroticism whose end or aim is union, perhaps as we conventionally know it, a synthesis of self and other for the explicit purpose of the transformation of other or, if that proves impossible, for the loss of self. Death's heralding phenomenon, the loss of self, would be almost welcomed if self at this point could be magically fused with other….

Death is essence of the universe as well as its end, and the self is wooed and won by this otherness that appears to define the totality of experience. Indeed the trinity of death, self, immortality, however ironic a parody of the holy paradigm, at least promises a conventional fulfillment of the idea that the body's end coincides with the soul's everlasting life. But, as in 'Our journey had advanced,' death so frequently conceptualized as identical with eternity here suffers a radical displacement from it…. Along these revisionary lines, the ride to death that we might have supposed to take place through territory unknown, we discover in stanza three to reveal commonplace sights but now fused with spectacle. The path out of the world is also apparently the one through it and in the compression of the three images ('the School, where

Children strove,' 'the Fields of Gazing Grain --', 'the Setting Sun --') we are introduced to a new kind of visual shorthand. Perhaps what is extraordinary here is the elasticity of reference, how imposingly on the figural scale the images can weigh while, at the same time, never abandoning any of their quite literal specificity. Hence the sight of the children is a circumscribed one by virtue of the specificity of their placement 'At Recess — in the Ring --', and, at the same time, the picture takes on the shadings of allegory.

This referential flexibility or fusion of literal and figural meanings is potential in the suggestive connotations of the verb 'strove,' which is a metaphor in the context of the playground (that is, in its literal context) and a mere descriptive verb in the context of the implied larger world (that is, in its figural context). The 'Fields of Gazing Grain --' also suggest a literal picture, but one that leans in the direction of emblem; thus the epithet 'Gazing' has perhaps been anthropomorphized from the one-directional leaning of grain in the wind, the object of its gazing the speaker herself. The 'Children' mark the presence of the world along one stage of the speaker's journey, the 'Gazing Grain --' marks the passing of the world (its harkening after the speaker as she rides away from it), and the 'Setting Sun --' marks its past. For at least as the third stanza conceives of it, the journey toward eternity is a series of successive and, in the case of the grain, displaced visions giving way finally to blankness.

But just as after the first two stanzas, we are again rescued in the fourth from any settled conception of this journey. As we were initially not to think of the journey taking place out of the world (and hence with the children we are brought back to it), the end of the third stanza having again moved us to the world's edge, we are redeemed from falling over it by the speaker's correction: 'Or rather — He passed Us —.' It is the defining movement of the poem to deliver us just over the boundary line between life and death and then to recall us. Thus while the poem gives the illusion of a one-directional movement, albeit a halting one, we discover upon closer scrutiny that the movements are multiple and, as in 'I heard a Fly buzz when I died,' constitutive of flux, back and forth over the boundary from life to death.

Despite the correction, 'Or rather — He passed Us —,' the next lines register a response that would be entirely appropriate to the speaker's passing of the sun. 'The Dews drew' round the speaker, her earthly clothes not only inadequate, but actually falling away in deference to the sensation of 'chill --' that displaces them as she passes the boundary of the earth. Thus, on the one hand, 'chill --' is a mere physiological response to the setting of the sun at night, on the other, it is a metaphor for the earlier assertion that the earth and earthly goods are being exchanged for something else. Implications in the poem, like the more explicit assertions, are contradictory and reflexive, circling back to underline the very premises they seem a moment ago to have denied. Given such ambiguity, we are constantly in a quandary about how to place the journey that, at anyone point, undermines the very certainty of conception it has previously established….

While Dickinson's representation of the ride with death is less histrionic, it is as insistent in our coming to terms with the personalization of the even and of its perpetual reenactment in the present. For the grave that is 'paused before' in the fifth stanza, with the tombstone lying flat against the ground ('scarcely visible --'), is seen from the outside and then (by the transformation of spatial considerations into temporal ones) is passed by or through: 'Since then — 'tis Centuries --'. The poem's concluding stanza both fulfills the traditional Christian notion that while the endurance of death is essential for the reaching of eternity, the two are not identical, and by splitting death and eternity with the space of 'Centuries --', chal1enges that traditional notion. The poem that has thus far played havoc with our efforts to fix its journey in any conventional time or space, on this side of death or the other, concludes with an announcement about the origins of its speech, now explicitly equivocal: ''tis Centuries — and yet / Feels shorter than the Day.'

What in 'There's a certain Slant of light' had been a clear relationship between figure and its fulfillment (a sense of perceptive enlightenment accruing from the movement of one to the other) is in this poem manifestly baffling. For one might observe that for all the apparent movement here, there are no real progressions in the poem at all. If the correction 'We passed the Setting Sun — / Or rather — He passed Us --' may be construed as a confirmation of the slowness of the drive alluded to earlier in the poem, the last stanza seems to insist that the carriage is standing still, moving if at all, as we say, in place. For the

predominant sense of this journey is not simply its endlessness; it is also the curious back and forth sweep of its images conveying, as they do, the perpetual return to what has been perpetually taken leave of….

The inability to know eternity, the failure to be at one with it, is, we might say, [is] what the allegory of 'Because I could not stop for Death' makes manifest. The ride with death, though it espouses to reveal a future that is past, in fact casts both past and future in the indeterminate present of the last stanza. Unable to arrive at a fixed conception, it must rest on the bravado (and it implicitly knows this) of its initial claim. Thus death is not really civilized; the boundary between otherness and self, life and death, is crossed, but only in presumption, and we might regard this fact as the real confession of disappointment in the poem's last stanza."

Sharon Cameron
*Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre*
(Johns Hopkins U 1979)

"Dickinson's most famous poem spoken from beyond the grave confronts precisely this problem: the assertiveness of the circuit world ['the world of matter and time and intellectual awareness…busyness is the circuit world's dominant characteristic, industry its major value'] against the claims of complementary vision…. The representative of the verse here is a decidedly imaginary person—not Emily Dickinson's self-projection (which would be of one straining for escape beyond circumference and intensely alert to all details of transition) but a woman contented within the routine of circuit busyness. Her opening words echo some of Dickinson's own habitual usages but present a contradictory value system adapted to worldly achievements.

This lady has been industrious—too busy to stop her work, whatever it may have been. Dickinson, too, proclaimed herself too busy in her self-descriptive July 1862 letter to Higginson and in a letter to Mrs. Holland… Her businesses, then, differed from the routine employments of the circuit citizens who might be mocking her. What the poet could not stop for was circuit judgments. Her businesses, as she reported them that intensely productive summer, were love, song, and circumference—all of them leading her outside the circuit. Circumference, from the perspective of the circuit world, was death and the cessation of industry, although there might be a different life beyond it. The speaker of this poem, however, is too busy with ordinary duties to stop for Death, who naturally stops her instead. She is less like Emily Dickinson than like that whirlwind of domestic industriousness, Lavinia, whom her sister once characterized as a 'standard for superhuman effort erroneously applied.'

Caught up in the circuit world of busyness, the speaker mistakes Death for a human suitor; her imagination suggests no more awesome possibility. Two persons, in fact, have come for her, Death and Immortality, though her limited perception leads her to ignore the higher-ranking chaperon. The relationship between the two figures—analogous to that between circumference and awe—attracts none of her notice. In fact, she pays little attention even to her principal escort, being occupied instead with peering out the carriage window at the familiar circuit world. She sees the schoolchildren playing in their circumferential ring, little realizing that she has now herself become that playfellow who will go in and close the door—thus breaking the circle. And she sees the 'Gazing Grain' indicative of the late-summer crop Death is already reaping even as she herself gazes back into the circuit, indicative also of some farmer's midlife industriousness—the sort another circuit-minded speaker pitied when death deprived him of harvest. Rather than attending to mysteries, this speaker focuses only on the familiar until a novel perspective on the sunset jolts her into awareness of her own transitional state. Rather than making friends with Immortality, she concentrates on mortality….

Death does not launch the persona of this poem into another world (Immortality would have to be enlisted for that, rather than sitting ignored in the back seat of the carriage in which she and Death will eventually ride off together after abandoning the speaker). Instead Death leaves his date buried within the margin of the circuit, in a 'House' that she can maintain like one of those 'Alabaster Chambers' in which numb corpses lie but which are designed and built of elegant materials still gratifying to the circuit-locked mentality. A quester for circumference would greet Death more enthusiastically, and would both value and cultivate Death's ties to Immortality. For such a quester, the destination of the journey might prove more wondrous."

Jane Donahue Eberwein
*Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*
(U Massachusetts 1985)

"Here the speaker is carried by death, and the poem attempts the kind of consolation Freud understands as a requirement for the male imagination before it can accept its fate. Although the speaker wishes to discover a means of converting inevitability into active choice, the poem's strategy is complex, going beyond a simple shift in sexual identification. What marks the break between Freud's Shakespearean women and Dickinson's persona is that Dickinson's woman refuses to be silent; she speaks throughout the experience. If there is no conversation between death and the woman, we nevertheless hear a voice that leads us through the journey to death and beyond, and that voice is the lyric 'I' of the supposed victim who becomes the poem's controlling consciousness….

Dickinson not only has him 'stop' to pick her up, but also, as Harold Bloom has noted, she stops him. Death stops at her bidding, winning for the poet the privilege to lie against time. Death, though he may be kind, is no conversationalist, and what she knows, she learns through her own observation and surmise. The third party to this aide, 'the chaperone, immortality,' Bloom identifies with Dickinson's poems, thus leading to the triumph of art over death. And though this triumph is assuredly true for us who have her poems, I would suggest a different identity than the one Bloom assigns the chaperone, for if the poems offer a way of ensuring immortality (the texts themselves placed in a drawer, a box reminiscent of a casket?), this version of immortality does not ease the shock the self undergoes at the poem's close. The speaker is stunned not because she has achieved immortality, but because the acute awareness of the passage of time is just what has not fallen away. Immortality, with its promised freedom from the anxieties of chronos, is endlessly deferred at the poem's close….

Immortality provides no consolation, only prolonged consciousness of the end…. Although she is carried in a carriage (a sort of moving casket), the speaker nonetheless keeps her voice and maintains her awareness. Although death stops for her, her journey itself becomes an endless quest for Eternity. That one cannot triumph over time or over death may be this poem's most sorrowful wisdom. What remains within the speaker's control despite this defeat is the power of speech, a consciousness even death cannot efface. The triumph for art may be not that it will last beyond the poet, but that it continues to witness her refusal to make friends with death. Thus, Dickinson metaphorically murders death in order to control him; rather than make him her friend, she envisions him as the composite power that would seduce, wed, and silence her. Poem after poem strives to release death's hold by imagining his death as her freedom….

Dickinson must encounter and continually reenact the struggle with the exclusionary male who prefers to withhold rather than confer. Refused the assurance of becoming the Christa of American poetry or the new Christ as Whitman might triumphantly proclaim himself, Dickinson does not inherit Emerson's powers unchallenged. She first must resolve through aggression her need for supremacy in imaginatively murderous acts that recur because murder of the tradition is a most illusory triumph. Hers is a poetics as aggressive as any male oedipal struggle, yet complicated by an intensified vulnerability, a consciousness of perpetual exile, the awareness of the impossibility of winning adequate patriarchal recognition."

Joanne Feit Diehl
*Women Poets and the American Sublime*
(Indiana U 1990)

"The speaker is a beautiful woman (already dead!), and like some spectral Cinderella, she is dressed to go to a ball: 'For only Gossamer, my Gown -- / My Tippet — only Tulle --.' Her escort recalls both the lover of Poe's configuration and the 'Bridegroom' that had been promised in the Bible: 'We slowly drove -- He knew no haste / And I had put away / My labor and my leisure too, / For His Civility --'. Their 'Carriage' hovers in some surrealistic state that is exterior to both time and place: they are no longer earth-bound, not quite dead (or at least still possessed of consciousness), but they have not yet achieved the celebration that awaits them, the 'marriage supper of the Lamb.'

Yet the ultimate implication of this work turns precisely upon the poet's capacity to explode the finite temporal boundaries that generally define our existence, for there is a third member of the party--also exterior to time and location--and that is 'Immortality.' True immortality, the verse suggests, comes neither from the confabulations of a mate lover nor from God's intangible Heaven. Irrefutable 'Immortality' resides in the work of art itself, the creation of an empowered woman poet that continues to captivate readers more than one hundred years after her death. And this much-read, often-cited poem stands as patent proof upon the page of its own argument!"

Cynthia Griffin Wolff
*The Columbia History of American Poetry*, ed. Jay Parini
(Columbia U 1993)

"That this poem begins and ends with humanity's ultimate *dream of self-importance*--Immortality and Eternity--*could well be* the joke central to its meaning, for Dickinson carefully surrounds the *fantasy* of living ever after [Atheist projection] with the dirty facts of life--dusty carriage rides, schoolyards, and farmers' fields. Many may contend that, like the Puritans and metaphysicals before her, Dickinson pulls the sublime down to the ridiculous but unavoidable facts of existence, thus imbues life on earth with its real import. On the other hand, Dickinson *may have* argued otherwise…. Instead of sharing their faith, Dickinson *may be* showing the community around her, most of whom were singing 'When we all get to Heaven what a day of rejoicing that will be,' how *selfishly selective* is their belief in a system that bolsters *egocentrism* by assuring believers not only that their individual identities will survive death, but also that they are one of the exclusive club of the saved [Atheist tone]. Waiting for the return of Eden or Paradise… those believers *may* simply find themselves gathering dust. Surrounded by the faithful, Dickinson struggled with trust and doubt in Christian promises herself, but *whether she believed in salvation or even in immortality is endlessly debatable*." [italics added]

Cristanne Miller
*Comic Power in Emily Dickinson*
Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller, and Martha Nell Smith
(U Texas 1993)

"'Because I could not stop for Death' is written in what is usually called ballad measure in its neat, pure form--an obvious sign of its being a literary rather than an oral product. In the ballad measure, there are four beats per line, and four lines per stanza, as in 'Lord Randal'; but here, the second and fourth lines leave the fourth beat in silence, as a musical rest. Words realize a pattern of four beats, then three, then four beats, then three. The silent beat at the end of the even-numbered lines adds a sense of cadential completion to the pattern, a completion supported by the rhymes between the second and fourth lines. One might think of them as elongations of the third beat to cover the fourth, giving those lines a sense of finality and closure because of the double-long unit at the end. The ballad measure is also called the common measure because it is used for hymns in the early versions of the *Book of Common Prayer*; it is often used for other Christian hymns as well (such as, for example, the American hymn 'Amazing Grace'). If we consider the meter of the poem in semiotic terms, as a sign of the poem's genre, then its ambiguity between the hymn and the ballad, the sacred and the profane, will be important in our reading of the poem's thematic content….

'Because I could not stop for Death' functions clearly as an allegory. On the literal level, a woman recounts how she eloped with (or was carried off, abducted, or seduced by) a genteel gentlemen named Death. She is naive to the otherworldly qualities of Death, unaware that she must leave this world behind to go with him, that his 'House' is a grave, and that she must remain in that 'House' forever, until, at some later moment in the day recollected in retrospect, she 'surmised the Horses' Heads / Were toward Eternity.' Upon leaving to go with Death, the speaker must put away both her labor and her leisure: she must give up her life in her household (or her parents' household) in order to labor for her new husband; as the mistress of his house, she will not have much of the leisure of her girlhood. On the way to Death's house, which is driven by Immortality (the coachman?), the bride and groom pass schoolchildren fighting or wrestling in the center of a circle of onlookers, and then fields of grain, which seem to gaze at them as they go by as if they were townspeople. The next stanza is the first clue, not for us (we already know) but for the speaker, that she is leaving, not her world, but the world behind: passing the setting sun is impossible before the age of jet airplanes, and the correction ('Or rather -- He passed Us') renders the speaker appropriately passive,

as would be a dead body. She recognizes her unpreparedness, wearing thin clothes that ambiguously connote a bridal gown or burial clothes, and the elements encroach upon her through them.

On the allegorical level, we know that the speaker is actually recounting her death. The children striving suggest the business of life, which becomes small and childlike from the distant perspective of the passage into death. The grain becomes one's townspeople as one becomes a thing of nature rather than an agent to farm or to eat the grain--and so forth. The disparity between the somewhat belabored allegory and the obvious meaning creates a sense of intense dramatic irony.

But there is another kind of irony as well: a situational irony. If this ballad recounts a marriage, then it should end either (a) tragically, as most ballads do, with the death of one of the marital partners--but since it cannot be the speaker, it would have to be the beloved husband; or (b) happily as a celebration of the married state. If the poem should be taken as a hymn, then it should end happily, with the speaker's joy in her eternal union with God after death. These two expected patterns--marital bliss for ballads and beatific bliss for hymns--are closely related to each other, since Christianity perennially uses marriage as an allegorical figure for the relationship between the blessed soul and its maker in the afterlife, and since, in the Protestant (and especially the Puritan) tradition, earthly marriage is a typological figure for the union between the soul and God that will, for the elect, be realized in the world to come. This view of marriage would be central to the Christianity that characterizes the social milieu of Dickinson's poetry--more specifically, the Congregationalist church in New England, which was the heir of New England Puritan ideology. Thus on both counts, in both genres, ballad and hymn, in both the secular and sacred spheres, and in both the marriage and death strands of the allegory, the ending is a shock, a surprising anticlimax.

It is not that the poem ends with the opposite of our expectations--at least, not exactly. Rather, instead of heavenly jubilation or earthly satisfaction, we have--nothing at all: 'Since then – 'tis Centuries -- and yet / Feels shorter than the Day' recounted, which is the last day the speaker lived, the day of her death. This is because her dying day was the last day in which anything happened. Centuries feel shorter than a day because there is no event to fill them up, just the recollection of the day before they began. So, to her surprise (in terms of marriage) and ours (in terms of death and the afterlife), despite everything everyone has told her and us, it turns out that the state being described is one of utter emptiness. It is negative when we expected something positive. But the very idea of centuries of such emptiness is, itself, sublime. The thought boggles the imagination, and is a suitable place for the poem to end--that is, on the word 'Eternity,' with all its irony, because it is not the eternity we expected, but with all its deep truth, because it is much more sublime, since it is truly without image, unimaginable. By comparison, Christian mythology crowds its sublime moments with images that reflect earthly realities--God as King, the Son at his right hand, the choruses of the blessed singing their praise, and so forth….

This movement from narrative to revelation and the end of narrative and of images altogether coincides with the movement of the carriage—'We slowly drove… We paused…' And both of these coincide with the movement of the meter itself, with its built-in pause, which is a silent beat, on every second and fourth line. It is as if the thematic content of the poem, its images, reproduce on large scale what the meter is doing on the smaller scale at every half quatrain. The emptiness at the end of the poem stands as an image for the rhythm of the whole, in which, at every eighth beat, one feels the rhythm go on even when there are no words."

Amittai Aviram
*Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry*
(U Michigan 1994)

"'Because I could not stop for Death' was first published in much-diminished form as 'The Chariot'--changed in several important respects to take the sting out of the lines. For Emily Dickinson, death, God, and the eternities were regarded too conventionally, even lightly, by those around her, but her poetic stance and her themes--interpretations of mortal experience--were in turn too much for her first editors, her friends Thomas Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd. The poems in the 1860 edition were trimmed down, when deemed necessary, to the Puritan dimensions that her sensibility exceeded. Sixty-five years later they were restored to the original, as written by her, and sewn into fascicles starting in 1858.

Interpreters of ‘The Chariot’ are meant to believe that death’s chariot (one that ‘swings low’?) comes to bring the dead one to everlasting life--that with death the immortal soul journeys to heaven. But for Dickinson the theological notion that Christ offers redemption was not a fait accompli, as her early letters prove—‘give up and become a Christian. It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but is hard for me to give up the world’ (letter to Abiah Root, May 1849). Her understanding remained in flux even as her girlhood friends succumbed to revival and scripture, and even as she felt strong pricks of conscience ‘I am one of the lingering bad ones, and so I slink away, and pause, and ponder...and do work without knowing why--not surely for this brief world, and more sure it is not for Heaven--and I ask what this message means that they ask for so eagerly’ (letter to Abiah Root, 1850)….

On the surface, the first lines of ‘Because I could not stop for Death’ appear to invoke orthodox reassurance against the fear of death. Death is portrayed as sensitive to the ordinary busy life of mortals--too occupied with life to stop--when he ‘kindly’ stops and invites her for a carriage ride. In reality, the lines offer the first of several ironic reversals of what Dickinson suggests might be but isn’t. If the conditional phrase seems to suggest that the dead one has rights and options in the matter--a choice of when to die--the main clause is the reminder of death’s absolute nature. He stops, and that’s that. The sentence points to the very human capacity to fool ourselves when we are afraid. Faced with the large unknown, we pretend it is manageable. Because it is unacceptable in its brute form, we make it governable. We whistle in the dark. That death, ‘kindly’ and civil, is really in charge is pointed out in lines 2 and 5. He is in the driver’s seat, and he drives as slowly as he likes.

There is a third occupant in the carriage, Immortality--shadowy, and if not a person, a condition to be desired. Immortality is consoling and recognizable, what one hopes will come with death. With Immortality as a companion, the speaker can accede to the trip in death’s carriage; it becomes a leisurely afternoon drive--a gentleman taking a lady and her friend (a chaperone?) for a ride in the country. ‘And Immortality,’ on a line by itself, helps to emphasize the importance of the presence of the other passenger. Without Immortality present, might not the speaker have been afraid? Perhaps she’d have refused to go along to the otherwise undisclosed destination…. Who would go along willingly with death, forgetting all terror, unless a promise were offered? Dickinson offers the reader Immortality, as the Congregational ministers once offered it to her in their sermons. Is it a ruse? The reader, like a member of the congregation, will have to wait to see….

The word choice seems clearly ironic, with Dickinson playing reality against the romantic view of childhood and death, where one’s salvation is so little in danger that a schoolyard is solely for play…. The speaker enters the carriage as a believer, immortal soul intact, but the adult Dickinson was not such a one in the conventional sense. The poem is informed ironically with theology; it is the inexorable law of time’s direction that the little narrative uncovers: the carriage seems to be going where God’s chariots are supposed to go, but it ends up in the graveyard.

I had been perplexed by the line, ‘We passed the Setting Sun,’ turning over all its possible implications and a little in awe of Dickinson's ability to make the situation of the poem seem both commonplace and ominously strange. Perhaps the carriage had turned heavenward after all and made a celestial pass by the sun. But wasn’t the sun setting, which meant that the point of perception was on earth? How could one pass the sun? Surely the line was not there only to set up the next line’s reminder of nature’s significant power over us, ‘Or rather -- He passed Us’…. The poet’s essential task isn't to hold up a mirror to nature, but even when Dickinson is altering reality--bringing the dead to life, condensing and stretching time and space--her oblique language contains the necessary details to make her readers believe that what they’ve read has happened.

The third stanza takes note of the daily routine of the life the speaker is passing from, starting with children at recess and ending with the setting sun. The day seems to have gone down quickly, in part because of the dual suggestion of both a day's cycle and the cycle of the seasons. How clever the mixture of details that suggest both beginnings and decline, youth and ripeness. Time speeds, in part because of the insistent echo, in the short lines, of the verb (‘passed’) as the carriage travels through realms of living--human, animated nature, and nature becoming passive--the ‘setting sun,’ which seems even more passive in contrast with the striving children.

The imaginative reach in this stanza is for me most evident in the phrase ‘Gazing Grain,’ with all its implications about what it is like to be alive and dead at the same time--the condition of the speaker throughout the poem. The phrase emphasizes the speaker’s passivity, assigning the human task to nature, animating the grain. By its placid and constant presence, it seems to stare. But it is the speaker, who has gone with death, who takes note of this. She watches from the carriage as mortality slips by--though with death, and passive, she still registers sensory details. She sees, and as long as she does, she still is. This sense of an unwillingness to relinquish the world and the self--of being--carries throughout Dickinson’s work; and if death offers, as here, immortality, immortality had better provide an experience like the one life offers: it had better let her see….

Gossamer brings to mind the light gauze used for veils (Is she to be Christ's bride?)… The details are consistent with death: autumn and winter are death’s perennial seasons. The subtle emphasis in the poem on a growing cold mimics both the process of dying, as if the dead one were dying even more, and our earthly answer to the mystery that separates the warm living from the cold dead…. The supernatural journey ends in the graveyard, where the carriage pauses by a ‘House that seemed / A Swelling of the Ground,’ with its cornice ‘in the Ground.’ By rhyming ground with itself Dickinson emphasizes the carriage’s destination and the body’s disposition. For her even death is a physical experience--the dead experiencing the cool damp air after the sunset and hard on that arriving at the tomb where one imagines a similar quality of air. In the Todd/Higginson version of the poem the rhyme is altered to ground/mound, softening Dickinson's thematic intentions and nudging the verses toward conventionality, as indeed the editors tried to do throughout.

What a shock it was to first open the first edition of *Poems by Emily Dickinson* after having known the poem first in the version published in 1955. How could you? I heard myself think. When ever was Dickinson’s emphasis on the peace that passeth all understanding? How could they not see that hers was no romantic sensibility but one capable of writing about death as it is? The carriage isn’t a chariot, it’s a hearse. How could they change the extraordinary rhyme? The ground/ground rhyme had always been a favorite of mine, unusual, I thought, in poetry, though not unheard of, and pretty unusual in Dickinson. The *Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson* (S. P. Rosenbaum, Cornell University Press, 1964) shows how rarely she used a same-word rhyme. Though death is an important word and concept in Dickinson, the rhyme never appears. Out-of-stanza both die and dead are rhymed with each other once. Other such rhymes occur with the words passion, noon, dark, day, green, sky, night, rose, soul, grave, and god (once in-stanza and four times out-of-stanza). Excluding refrains, then, the in- and out-of-stanza same-word rhymes occur infrequently except for the words me, which rhymes with itself in fifty-three of her poems, and be, rhyming with itself sixteen times….

The speaker is in the cemetery, left to wonder at her progress from the moment of her first encounter with Death, with his promise of immortality, to her present situation. Immortality has changed into Eternity--an uncomfortable change, one would think, from everlasting life to a long time of waiting for redemption. The final stanza is written in the present tense, which emphasizes the hereness and withness (the existence) of the speaker after death and also suggests that the implied questions cannot be answered. What is Immortality like? We don’t know--he has disappeared. Death and his carriage also recede. Only snatches of memory are left and a little narrative in stanza three representing life and also death.”

Carol Frost
*Touchstones: American Poets on a Favorite Poem*
(Middlebury College 1996)

“Burial vaults were once formed by two parallel dry-stone walls, six to eight feet apart, six to eight feet high. The vaults had a stone slab or corbeled roof, a back wall, and a dry-stone facade with a portal closed by a door (or slab of marble or slate) inscribed, when used for burial, with the names of the interred. The entire structure was banked with earth and sod and grassed over, creating Dickinson’s ‘Swelling of the ground.’ The roof was ‘scarcely visible,’ sodded over and grassed. ‘The Cornice’ was ‘in the ground’ because the two flanks of the mound at each side of the door sloped down to ground level, where they were, in effect, buried, or hidden. Such structures still survive in Massachusetts around Amherst and

throughout New England and were also used for storage of root crops, barrels of cider or salt pork, or other winter provisions.

This interpretation expands the accurate description of a vault with its image of a 'House' (capitalization is important) with architectural features, such as cornices. It also corrects the explication of Judith Farr in *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* where she sees the 'House' as 'a new-made grave'; the 'roof' as a 'tombstone [...] covered over (with grass?)' [*sic*]; and the 'sunken cornice' as the 'rectangular upper-edge of the tombstone' (329-31), an interpretation that does not conform to Dickinson's precise if metaphoric description. Once we see that Emily Dickinson is talking about a stone burial vault, an image that expands the metaphoric power of the poem, we can appreciate more fully related imagery in her poems, 'The grave my little cottage is' (#1743) and 'I died for Beauty -- but was scarce' (#449).

'The grave my little cottage is' is an example of this. She is talking about life after death in a 'little cottage,' which is a neat description of the house-like burial vault with its mounded roof and 'Cornice -- in the [g]round --' as in poem #712. She envisions 'Keeping house' in her cottage, which, with its side and back stone walls and front entry, harbors a 'parlor' where she 'lay[s] the marble tea,' which certainly suggests death. A stone vault with the names of the occupants engraved on the marble door slab can easily be visualized as a cozy cottage with a room where tea is served.

'I died for Beauty' plays on the same imagery of a loved house with rooms. The speaker is 'scarce / adjusted in the tomb / When One who died for Truth, was lain / in the adjoining Room --' The 'One' of this poem can represent another lover or master, a brother, or a kinsman. They talk 'between the Rooms -- / Until the Moss had reached our lips -- / And covered up -- our names --,' that is, their names inscribed on the stone door slab. Thus is extended the whole figurative evocation of preservation for which these structures are used, not only of vegetables in a root cellar, but of roses, and of the 'Immortality' of Dickinson's speaker for 'Centuries' that 'feel shorter than the day'-- for 'Eternity.' The figure of the 'House' in these poems expands the symbolism immeasurably beyond the moldy receptacle of an underground grave, to a hospitable dwelling."

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