

BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH

Through a chivalrous personification of Death, Dickinson subverts the fearsome and sinister connotations that typically accompany death, initially gratifying a glorified perception of it by the reader. She ascribes him gentlemanly characteristics; he “kindly stop[s]” to let her onto the carriage and knows “no haste”, making the journey comfortable for Dickinson’s subject. The narrator is not surprised or disconcerted by Death’s appearance as she has already “put away {her} labor and {her} leisure” indicating that she has come to terms with her own mortality with inclusive language like “ourselves” and “we” illustrating the unity the narrator already feels she has with him. The three- beat / four- beat rhythm further exemplifies the steady, predictable nature of the journey towards death. Additionally, Dickinson’s employment of hyphens as a more abrupt method of separation than commas or line breaks encourages the reader to participate in a slow, thoughtful reading of the poem, mimicking the slow carriage ride. The narrator then reminisces on the experiences and, in particular, hardships of her lifetime. “We passed” acts as a double entendre, representing both the literal meaning of the carriage and a euphemism for the subject’s death. Reminded of her childhood by “the school”, “strove” suggests that it was not full of innocence and joy but instead, the need to overcome difficulties. The “Grazing Grain” marks the peak of the narrator’s life, Dickinson imploring her reader to reflect not only on the negative but also the positive moments of their life, as “the Fields” stand tall in their prime stage of their maturity and flourishing, The “Setting Sun” correlates to her old age and concluding journey to death, but also foreshadows the true nature of Death; light and beauty dissipate, and she is soon to be left in darkness.

The continued motif of the sunset in stanza four assists the drastic change in tone, from lighter to sombre one. The mood is no longer light, but eerie and mysterious, highlighted by the assonance and alliteration of “Dews drew quivering”, evoking a shivering feeling and creating a colder atmosphere. The narrator discerns that she is underdressed for the “chill”, wearing only light materials like her “Gossamer” “Tippet” and “Tulle”. She is overexposed and has been tricked into wearing a “Gown” and marrying Death, thus stepping into the afterlife. Death is no longer a desirable gentleman caller, for he has seduced her with grandiose promises of the afterlife that are actually just factors of manipulation. The “House” is no more than a “Swelling in the Ground” and the narrator is clearly disappointed by this as she specifies its shortcomings, like the “Scarcely visible” “Roof”. To Dickinson, regardless of the preparedness one believes they have for dying, the physicality of the event will always be shocking and often disillusioning, especially for members of a society that inclines towards a romanticised perception of death.

However, Dickinson abates her reader’s consternation at this, insisting that the lack of fulfilment and glory in death can still be followed by an ultimately satisfying immortality. The revelation that the poem’s subject has been in her isolated grave for “Centuries” is coupled with her observation that it still “Feels shorter than the Day”, signifying both the importance of the journey to death and the implication that she is not suffering slowly in a cold and dark grave. In the end she is still able to savour the “Eternity” she has spent so long coveting.