

Learning to Appreciate Poetry

Presented by Paul Rogers

Emily Dickinson



Because I Could Not Stop For Death

A few words in advance

“My business is to love. ... My Business is to Sing.”

Emily Dickinson was born and died in Amherst, Massachusetts (1830-1886). Not widely recognised in her own lifetime, her family members found nearly 1,800 poems after she died. Though a first selection of her work was published in 1890, a complete volume did not appear until 1955. Incredibly, it was not until a definitive version of Dickinson’s poems appeared in 1998 that her original word order, unusual punctuation and spelling choices were completely restored.

The Poem

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rhyme Scheme

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

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

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

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

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

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

There are 6 stanzas, each of 4 lines, with a metre of alternate iambic tetrameter and trimeter throughout. This regular rhythm leads us to expect an a b a b rhyme scheme, but in fact the poem is in blank verse, with occasional use of similar sounding words.

Imagery

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

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

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

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

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

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

As with much of Dickinson, this is a deceptively simple poem. Death is metaphorically treated as a civilised gentleman and immortality as a known state of existence. There are a couple of simple metaphors: the field of grain appears to be gazing at the poet, while her thin gown is seen as gossamer (spider's web material). The one simile uses the verb "seemed" to suggest the passage of time as a house sinks into the ground.

Basic Meaning

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

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

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

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

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

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

A famous anecdote of Dickinson's life occurred when she was a student. All her colleagues were invited to stand if they considered themselves Christian; she was the only one to remain seated. We sense an ambivalence in her towards organised religion or established practice of faith – she certainly reacted against her Calvinist background. Yet, despite this, many of her poems examine the concept of faith and are particularly interested in an afterlife. In this poem, Death itself is portrayed as an actual (rather polite!) person. The implication is that she has died and in the company of Death, spends Eternity travelling and observing her surroundings. The last stanza suggests that when she first got into his carriage, she didn't know what was in store for her or what had actually happened.

Concluding Remarks

I have to confess my personal feelings about Dickenson are rather conflicted. She is able to convey profound feelings and ideas within a strict format, and her voice is both unique and fascinating. However, as a student of literature, I cannot help feeling that when we compare her work with other 19th century poets, she doesn't come over too well.

Perhaps it is better to consider her wholly on her own terms and not have her stand side by side with her peers. Hers is an original and occasionally quirky voice and, as we have seen from the layout of the poem quoted here, she has some very idiosyncratic views on punctuation.

Use of simple language alone is not necessarily a bad thing, of course. As we'll see later with Robert Frost, a very profound and meaningful poem can be written using extremely plain vocabulary and syntax.

Preparing for the Next Unit

