

# Because I Could Not Stop for Death

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 labour 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 –

## Notes

- 1...gossamer my gown: Thin wedding dress for the speaker's marriage to Death.
- 2...tippet: Scarf for neck or shoulders.
- 3...tulle: Netting.
- 4...house: Speaker's tomb.
- 5...cornice: Horizontal molding along the top of a wall.
- 6...Since...centuries: The length of time she has been in the tomb.

## About the author

Emily Dickinson was a reclusive poet from Massachusetts, USA. She wrote a lot of poetry during the 1800s that wasn't published much until after her death. Death and dying were among her favourite subjects.

## The Title

"Because I could not stop for Death" is actually not the title of this poem. Dickinson didn't title any of her poems, because she never meant to publish them. In collections, sometimes this poem is given a number, either 479 or (712). These numbers were assigned to the poems after Dickinson's death and indicate the order in which Thomas Johnson (1955 edition) and R.W. Franklin (1998 edition) think they were written. Nowadays, the Franklin number, which is not in parenthesis and appears first, is usually the more trusted.

## Type of Poem

“Because I Could Not **Stop** for Death” is a lyric poem with death as theme. The poem contains six stanzas, each with four lines.

## Analysis

### Stanza 1

#### Line 1

*Because I could not stop for Death –*

- Dickinson immediately lets the reader know that the poem is going to be about death.
- "Because" immediately assumes the speaker is giving some sort of an explanation to an argument or to a question. This makes the poem seem active and alive.
- Stating that she could not stop for death means that the speaker didn't have a choice about when she was to die.
- Dickinson personifies Death as a gentleman suitor who drives a horse-drawn carriage.
- The line ends with a dash that is both characteristic of Dickinson's work and also connects with the next line.

#### Line 2

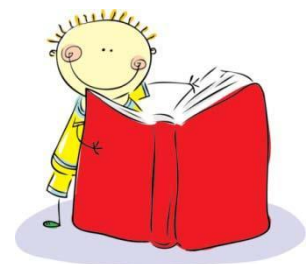
*He kindly stopped for me –*

- This line establishes the tone of most of the poem: one of calm acceptance of death.

### Lines 3-4

*The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
And Immortality.*

- Pay attention to the line break here. Line 3 says it's just her and Death in the carriage, but line 4 complicates things by adding immortality. The break after "Ourselves" creates suspense until we read line 4.
- Dickinson often capitalizes nouns, and she might have capitalized "Carriage," "Ourselves," and "Immortality" for emphasis. By capitalising "carriage", she makes it more specific and more important.
- By "Ourselves" we can assume she means her and Death. The emphasis she places on the word also strengthens the relationship between the speaker and Death. It's almost like a foreshadowing, so we know something serious is going to happen between them.
- "Immortality" is the most complicated and interesting word of these three. This is the first hint we get that the speaker doesn't think of death as The End, but as a step on the way to eternal life.



## Stanza 2

### Line 5

*We slowly drove – He knew no haste*

- They're slowly getting to wherever they're going. "He knew no haste"
- The shift from "We" to "He" in the same line is important as the "We" might make it seem as if the speaker has some control over the pace, but Dickinson quickly reminds us that "He" is the one in control and that the speaker's just along for the ride.
- While we've already established that the speaker is not afraid of Death, this slow pace creates a drawn-out suspense.

### Lines 6-8

*And I put away  
My labour and my leisure too,  
For his Civility –*

- In lines 6-7 she has given up work and free time.
- Line 8 shows that the speaker thinks of Death as a gentleman ("Civility").

## Stanza 3

### Line 9-10

*We passed the School, where Children Strove  
At Recess – in the Ring –*

- They see children playing in the schoolyard during recess. The poet sees this as a stroll down memory lane, looking back at her own life and things that have past.

### Line 11-12

*We passed the Field of Gazing Grain –  
We passed the Setting Sun –*

- The sun and field are much more general descriptions of the scene than the previous lines, yet have symbolic significance. The field of grain symbolises work (labour), her life's work. The setting sun signifies the end of the day, but also symbolises the end of life.
- Note the repeated phrase, "We passed". It mimics the slow progression of the carriage. You can almost hear the echo of clomping horse hooves in the repeated phrase.



## Stanza 4

### Line 13

*Or rather – He passed Us –*

- He is the sun. Quite literally, the sun passes her because it falls below the horizon but she suggests that that's what death is like – the sun, light, and warmth leaving you to the cold darkness that is death.
- Dickinson uses personification again as she refers to the sun.
- The long pause between stanzas foreshadows the shift away from the sunny ordinary day into something more grave.

### Lines 14-16

*The Dews drew quivering and Chill –  
For only Gossamer, my Gown –  
My Tippet – only Tulle –*

- The dew of night is setting in because the sun has gone down. She's now getting cold because she isn't wearing warm enough clothing.
- "Gossamer" is a thin wedding dress for the speaker's marriage to Death. Her gown is made of very thin and delicate material.
- "Tippet" is an old-fashioned shawl or shoulder cape, and this one's made of "tulle," which is silky and thin like gossamer.
- The fact that she is under-dressed for this journey also reflects that she is under-prepared. This stanza echoes the beginning line – this is not her choice and she was not planning this trip with Death.

## Stanza 5

### Line 17-18

*We paused before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground –*

- The speaker is going to die. Death just led her to her burial spot.
- The "we paused" marks the second stop in the poem. The first instance was the beginning of the journey when Death stops to pick up the speaker. So this second stop could end their journey.
- Using the word "House" indicates the place of burial.
- "A Swelling of the Ground" eliminates any possibility that we might think this is *not* a grave.



## Line 19-20

*The Roof was scarcely visible –  
The Cornice – in the Ground*

- These lines continue to explain this burial house.
- A cornice is the pointed part of the roof, and here it's in the ground.



## Stanza 6

### Line 21-22

*Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day*

- The poem seems to be telling a recent memory, but this all actually happened a really long time ago. Thus, the speaker has been dead the whole time.
- "Feels shorter than the Day" means "feels like just yesterday." So this memory remains vivid for the speaker.

### Line 23-24

*I first surmised the Horses' Heads  
Were toward Eternity –*

- These final lines recall the very first time the speaker encountered the horse-drawn carriage and had a feeling that they were more than just regular horses – that they signified her journey to the afterlife.

## Commentary and Theme

"Because I Could Not Stop for Death" reveals Emily Dickinson's calm acceptance of death. It is surprising that she presents the experience as being no more frightening than receiving a gentleman caller—in this case, her fiancé (Death personified).

The journey to the grave begins in Stanza 1, when Death comes calling in a carriage in which Immortality is also a passenger. As the trip continues in Stanza 2, the carriage trundles along at an easy, unhurried pace. Then, in Stanza 3, the author appears to review the stages of her life: childhood (the recess scene), maturity (the ripe, hence, "gazing" grain), and the descent into death (the setting sun)—as she passes to the other side. There, she experiences a chill because she is not warmly dressed. In fact, her garments are more appropriate for a wedding, representing a new beginning, than for a funeral, representing an end.

Her description of the grave as her "house" indicates how comfortable she feels about death. There, after centuries pass, so pleasant is her new life that time seems to stand still, feeling "shorter than a Day."

The overall theme of the poem is that death is not to be feared since it is a natural part of an endless cycle. Her view of death may also reflect her personality and religious beliefs. On the one hand, as a spinster, she was somewhat reclusive and introspective, tending to dwell on

loneliness and death. On the other hand, as a Christian and a Bible reader, she was optimistic about her ultimate fate and appeared to see death as a friend.

Mortality and Immortality – occupy this poem. We find out that the memory of the speaker's death day is being told centuries into the afterlife. In this poem there is life after death, which offers an explanation as to why the speaker's so calm about everything. Death's not the end, just one step closer to eternity.

## Characters

**Speaker:** A woman who speaks from the grave. She calmly accepted death. In fact, she seemed to welcome death as a suitor whom she planned to "marry."

**Death:** Suitor who called for the narrator to escort her to eternity.

**Immortality:** A passenger in the carriage.

**Children:** Boys and girls at play in a schoolyard. They symbolize childhood as a stage of life.

## End Rhyme

- The second and fourth lines of stanzas 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 rhyme.
- In the third stanza, there is no end rhyme. This stanza does not deal with death but rather with memories of the poet's life stages.

## Symbols

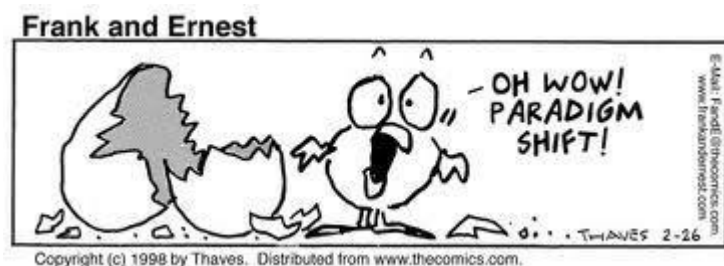
In the third stanza, the school symbolizes the childhood; the grain, adulthood and the working years; the setting sun, the end of life or death.

## The Carriage

The carriage in which Death and the speaker ride is a metaphor for the way in which we make our final passage to death as it also carries Immortality.

## The House

The house is a metaphor for the grave. Dickinson wants to enforce the idea that the speaker accepts and is comfortable with dying.



## Figures of Speech

### Alliteration

**M**y labour, and **m**y leisure too (line 7)  
At recess, in the ring  
**g**azing **g**rain (line 11)  
**s**etting **s**un (line 12)  
For only **g**ossamer my **g**own (line  
15) My tippet only tulle (line 16)

### Repetition

**We passed the** school, where children strove  
At recess, in the ring;  
**We passed the** fields of gazing grain,  
**We passed the** setting sun. (lines 9-12)

### Paradox

Since then **'tis centuries**, and yet each  
Feels shorter than the day  
I first surmised the horses' heads (lines 21-23)

### Personification

Immortality (line 4)  
We passed the setting sun.  
Or rather, **he** passed us (lines 12-13)  
**D**eath is personified throughout the poem. (Extended metaphor)

<http://www.shmoop.com/because-i-could-not-stop-for-death/analysis.html>

<http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides2/Dickinson.html>

in student language:

“no question” means  
“i don't really understand  
anything”

<http://asdfghjkllove.info>



The following has been compiled and added by Imbila:

### **BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH - QUESTIONS**

Read all the notes on the web page about the relevant poem.

Answer these following questions.

#### **QUESTIONS:**

1. Reading the title of the poem, it starts with a conjunction 'because'. Explain the significance thereof. 2.
2. Why would 'Death' in line 1 be written in capital letters. 1
3. What is the significance of the use of so many dashes in so many verse lines or even within? 2
4. What is the tone throughout the poem and what is the poet achieving by this? 2
5. Who is their companion or chaperone throughout this journey? Why do you think would she invite the chaperone to accompany them.
6. The topic in stanza 3 is vastly different from the rest of the poem. What is mentioned in the other stanzas in contrast to stanza 3? Discuss. 3
7. Describe the scene in lines 14 -16 in your own words. 4
8. Explain the metaphor in line 18. 2
9. Clearly describe the symbolisms for the following: school, grain, setting sun. 3

**TOTAL 20**



## BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH - MEMORANDUM

### QUESTIONS & ANSWERS:

1. Reading the title of the poem, it starts with a conjunction 'because'. Explain the significance thereof. 2

*'Because' is mostly used to explain an argument and as a conjunctions something had to happen before this. So the reader wonders why she could not stop death.*

2. Why would 'Death' in line 1 be written in capital letters. 1

*Death is personified as a gentleman therefore it would be the way she introduces him as her companion.*

3. What is the significance of the use of so many dashes in so many verse lines or even within? 2

*The dashes are used to connect with the next line and to slow the thoughts down. The topic covered is 'death' and the thoughts about is slowed down by using so many pauses with dashes.*

4. What is the tone throughout the poem and what is the poet achieving by this? 2

*The tone is calm thus the poet shows her acceptance of death as part of the cycle of life.*

5. Who is their companion or chaperone throughout this journey? Why do you think would she invite the chaperone to accompany them. 1

*immortality, she believed in life after death therefore she was not afraid and followed the journey with immortality with them.*

6. The topic in stanza 3 is vastly different from the rest of the poem. What is mentioned in the other stanzas in contrast to stanza 3? Discuss. 3

*Throughout the whole poem the poet describes different activities of death on their journey but in stanza 3 she has a flashback and reminisce about her childhood and clearly calls up the memories she has.*

7. Describe the scene in lines 14 -16 in your own words. 4

*The sun has set and the dew is causing the temperature to drop, she is now getting cold because she isn't warmly dressed. She is actually more dressed for a wedding 'gossamer' is a thin wedding dress and 'tippet' an old fashioned shawl made from 'tulle' which is a fine netting. This shows that she is under dressed and not prepared for the journey. This can also be reference to the 'because...' as the title of the poem.*

8. Explain the metaphor in line 18. 2

*'swelling of the ground', The ground has been dug up to make a heap on one side as a swelling which on the other side would have her grave.*

9. Clearly describe the symbolisms for the following:  
school, grain, setting sun. 3

*school – symbolises her childhood*

*grain – symbolises her adulthood and working years*

*setting sun – would symbolise the end of life or death*

TOTAL 20