**Emily Dickinson And A Summary of Because I Could Not Stop For Death**

*Because I Could Not Stop For Death*is one of Emily Dickinson's longest and most fascinating poems.

The title comes from the first line but in her own lifetime it didn't have a title - her poems were drafted without a title and only numbered when published, after she died in 1886.

* This is a 6 stanza poem with full rhymeand slant rhyme, and in typical Emily Dickinson fashion is full of dashes between and at the end of lines.
* Her subject choice, death, is dealt with in an odd, imaginative way. The poet takes the reader on a mysterious journey through time and on into a world beyond time.

So the obvious theme of the poem is death, specifically, a personal encounter with the character, Death, who is male and drives a carriage.

This is special transportation from one world to the next, with a steady four to three beat rhythm, a supernatural experience captured in 24 lines.

**Because I Could Not Stop For Death (479)**

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 –

## Because I could not stop for Death Summary

Death, in the form of a gentleman suitor, stops to pick up the speaker and take her on a ride in his horse-drawn carriage.

They move along at a pretty relaxed pace and the speaker seems completely at ease with the gentleman. As they pass through the town, she sees children at play, fields of grain, and the setting sun. Pretty peaceful, right?

As dusk sets in our speaker gets a little chilly, as she is completely under-dressed – only wearing a thin silk shawl for a coat. She was unprepared for her impromptu date with Death when she got dressed that morning.

They stop at what will be her burial ground, marked with a small headstone.

In the final stanza, we find out the speaker's ride with Death took place centuries ago (so she's been dead for a long time). But it seems like just yesterday when she first got the feeling that horse heads (like those of the horses that drew the "death carriage") pointed toward "Eternity"; or, in other words, signaled the passage from life to death to an afterlife.

**Analysis of Because I Could Not Stop For Death**

**Emily Dickinson And The Subject of Death**

Emily Dickinson wrote several poems about death, a subject she had a particular talent for exploring. In this poem Death becomes a carriage and a driver, or a driver and carriage, metaphor or personification, and arrives in taxi fashion to take the speaker on a supernatural journey beyond the grave.

We can take it that the speaker has no fear of Death. Death is kind, drives with care and has a formal politeness about him.

The most striking feature of this poem is the use of the dash (-) to temporarily pause a sentence or clause, where the reader takes a fleeting breath before continuing. This tends to isolate a phrase in a manner different to, say, a comma or colon and is used frequently by Emily Dickinson in most of her poems.

There is a regular four beat/three beat rhythm in each quatrain which helps reinforce the idea of a steady drive in a horse-drawn carriage. The rhyme scheme is ***abcb*,** each second line being full or slant with the fourth line:

*me/immortality*

*away/civility*

*ground/ground*

*day/eternity*

Note that in stanza four the rhythm is changed, three beats begin and end, suggesting a simple strange twist to proceedings as the Sun passes them and chills the scantily dressed occupant.

A *tippet* is a long cape or scarf and tulle is fine silk or cotton net. Gossamer is a delicate, light material, bringing an unreal aspect to the speaker, who may well be a spirit form.

**More Analysis Stanza By Stanza**

**Stanzas 1 - 4**

What begins in the simple past ends in Eternity, endless life after death where time has no consequence. Mortality faces Eternity. As you read through, note the focus on the passage of life. This could be the speaker's last day on earth.

The journey takes in a school where the children gather to work out their futures - seen as a ring or circle - and the grain, subject to the seasonal rounds, stands to gaze as if spellbound in the fields. The daily bread is suspended.

We are leaving the earthly sphere; diurnal rules are being broken as the Sun, a fixed star, appears to pass the carriage and the passenger suddenly feels cold as the light and warmth fade. The imagery is particularly strong at this point, the speaker a growing ethereal figure, almost spirit-like.

Note the use of **alliteration** and **assonance** in the iambic tetrameter of line 14:

*The****D****ew****d****rew q****ui****vering and Ch****i****ll* -

**Stanza 5 - 6**

In the fifth stanza the carriage pauses before what must be a considerable mound of earth, for there's a complete house part buried. Only the roof is partially visible, the crowning point is in the ground. Such a strange sight. Either a disaster has befallen the scene, or the home has turned into a grave.

Finally, the speaker tells us that this all happened hundreds of years ago but that, in this supernatural atmosphere, it hardly seems more than a day. The word surmised suggests that the speaker intuitively knew the horses were heading for Eternity, yet there was no evidence.

**Because I Could Not Stop For Death - Themes and Questions**

Death - How should we approach death?

The Supernatural - What happens to the mind when we die?

Mortality - Is this biological life the only one we can relate to?

The Afterlife - Heaven, The Spirit Realm, Life after Death?

Religion - What about the concepts of Immortality and Eternity?

Philosophical Questions - Why see life as a journey? Science can explain all?

Time - We quantify life in years but what about the quality of life?

**Three Important Contrasts**

At different points in the poem definite contrasts arise which allow for restructure of meaning and reflection.

The opening two lines affirm the reason why Death stops.

*Because I could not stop for Death -*

*He kindly stopped for me -*

The end line of stanza three and opening line of stanza four.

*We passed the Setting Sun -*

*Or rather - He passed Us -*

And in the opening two lines of the last stanza.

*Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet*

*Feels shorter than the Day*