

Name: _____ Class: _____

Because I could not stop for death

By Emily Dickinson
1890

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was an American poet. Dickinson lived a mostly reclusive and introverted life in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she wrote about 1800 poems. The following poem, which was published after her death, was originally titled "The Chariot." As you read, take notes on how Dickinson uses figurative language to describe Death.

[1] Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.

[5] 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 played,
[10] Their lessons scarcely done;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.

We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
[15] The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice¹ but a mound.

Since then 'tis centuries; but each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised² the horses' heads
[20] Were toward Eternity.



"Untitled" by Christian_Birkholz is licensed under CC0.

"The Chariot (Because I could not stop for death)" from Poems: Series One by Emily Dickinson (1890) is in the public domain.

1. A cornice is an ornamental molding around the wall of a room just below the ceiling.
2. **Surmise (verb):** to suppose that something is true; to deduce or guess

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. How do the first 2 lines of the poem frame the speaker's tone and perspective towards death?

2. What effect does the speaker's use of personification have on the theme of the poem? Cite evidence in your answer.

3. Which of the following best describes how the structure of the poem contributes to its meaning?
- A. The poem's upbeat meter makes death appear playful rather than ominous.
 - B. The variation in the meter mimics the speaker's uncertainty about death.
 - C. The lack of a rhyme scheme shows that the speaker is mournful.
 - D. The poem's absence of meter shows that the speaker is carefree about death.

4. Which of the following best explains how stanza 3 contributes to one of the major themes of the poem?
- A. The repetition of “passed” alludes to the phrase “to pass on” or to die, thus contributing to the theme of overcoming death.
 - B. The repetition of “passed” alludes to the past, indicating the speaker sees memories from her own life, thus contributing to the theme of having an un-lived life.
 - C. The narrator passes representations of life (children, crops, and the sun), symbolizing a journey through life and portraying the theme of mortality.
 - D. The narrator passes representations of life (children, crops, and the sun), suggesting a theme of regret for not having appreciated all of life’s gifts.
5. Which statement best describes how the setting in stanza 4 impacts the meaning of the poem?
- A. The speaker does not want to pause at the “house,” suggesting the setting frightens her and she is eager to move on.
 - B. The speaker describes her grave as a “house,” suggesting she needs shelter from death, contributing to her desperate and scared tone.
 - C. The speaker’s final “house” or tomb has collapsed into the earth, contributing to the poem’s theme that human lives are unimportant to nature.
 - D. The speaker describes her tomb as a “house,” showing she views her body’s final resting place as one of comfort rather than fear.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. How do we as humans imagine death? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
2. How do people face death? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.