

Emily Dickinson – Because I could not stop for death – Summary & Analysis

Emily Dickinson one of the foremost women poets in American literature, she wrote more than 1800 poems during her lifetime and many are being found increasing the count often. Her poems are honest, penetrative and psychologically precise with a great deal of adventure in every single piece. Unfortunately, only a handful of her poems are published and it is the posthumous anthologies that made her famous as a poet. In the poem – Because I could not stop for death – Dickinson deals with the afterlife and the speaker's travel with the personification of death. The poem is written in six stanzas and in the form of a lyric dealing with the theme of death.

Because I could not stop for Death – Summary of the poem

The speaker in the poem is too busy to approach death; therefore, death comes in the form of a gentleman to pick her up on a chariot. The carriage included no other and the speaker travelled with death alone. The civility of death is praised as he drives the chariot with a relaxed and steady pace which provides ease to the poet.

The chariot crosses a town where children are seen playing and there are fields with full of grain. They witness the serenity of the setting sun. But, as the sun sets the speaker feels the chill of the night and believes that she is not properly dressed for the occasion (date with death).

They halt before a house that appears to be a small mound emerging from the ground (the grave of the speaker). She could not clearly see the roof of the house and the cornice was nothing but the mound of earth. The speaker realizes that it's been centuries since he death and it feels to her like yesterday that she was eternally taken by death.

Because I could not stop for Death – Analysis of the poem

Stanza-1: The speaker represents the human race when she declares that she is too busy to think about death. It has become our primordial instinct to survive through all the difficulties posed by the community. But death never forgets and comes after those whose time in this realm is over. To the speaker Death is kind and it offers a chariot to take her away. There is a lot of perplexity about the inclusion of "Immortality" in the last line of the stanza (as the speaker says that the chariot has Death, her and Immortality). The reason for the inclusion of the word can be only understood from the meaning of the last stanza.

Stanza-2: The speaker considers Death as wooer who shows civility in his manners. She expresses pleasantness about the steady handling of the chariot by Death. In response, she forgets all her labour and leisure to enjoy the ride. This description of the chariot ride can be interpreted as a smooth passing of the soul after death and the person has left the world without having to struggle too much nor with pain.

Stanza-3: The third stanza in the poem – Because I could not stop for Death – through three various descriptions gives a complete cycle of life. The chariot passes children playing joyfully indicating the innocent childhood, the grazing grain attaining fruitfulness indicating manhood and the setting sun dawning light indicating the old age where one waits for the darkness to take over.

Stanza-4: The speaker shows uncertainty about the passing of the sun as she feels that they didn't pass over, but it was the Sun who crossed them. This glimpses that the speaker is resting somewhere and it is her soul travelling in the chariot. The realization slowly creeps into the speaker as she feels the chill and understands the way she dresses, which is inappropriate for a pleasant chariot ride and feels as if it is an abrupt gesture (from Death).

Stanza-5: The chariot pauses at her grave, which she calls as her “house” and it is nothing but a swelling on the ground. It is indeed no house but the speaker's grave where she rests and watches the world eternally. The journey of the speaker after witnessing different marvels of the world pauses at the grave and goes on, indicating that there is an after-life for her (human race) and she must continue her journey. The grave is only the resting place.

Stanza-6: The first line of the last stanza in “Because I could not stop for Death” reveals that it has been centuries since the death of the speaker. Although, it was so many years ago she feels the memory as fresh and it feels as if it happened on that very day. She believes that it is the day she died when the horses' of the chariot were pointing her towards eternity. It is the reason for the inclusion of “Immortality” in the first stanza, as death though appears to be a gentleman apprehends the soul for eternity and one has to journey through without any respite.

The poem – Because I could not stop for Death – deals with heavy subjects such as death, time and eternity. But Emily Dickinson deals with them in a simple manner so that the idea or intention of the poem is clearly visible to the reader. One can comprehend infinite meanings on the poem and this is one of the crowning pieces of Dickinson; because of the way Death is personified as a gentleman and how the true nature of death causes a realization in the speaker about the eternity of being in a grave.