

## Eunice Glenn: On 712 ("Because I could not stop for Death")

The central theme [of "Because I could not stop for Death"] is the interpretation of mortal experience from the standpoint of immortality. A theme stemming from that is the defining of eternity as timelessness. The poet uses these abstractions? mortality, immortality, and eternity? in terms /585/ of images. How successfully, then, do these images fulfill their intention, which is to unite in filling in the frame of the poem?

In the first two lines Death, personified as a carriage driver, stops for one who could not stop for him. The word "kindly" is particularly meaningful, for it instantly characterizes Death. This comes with surprise, too, since death is more often considered grim and terrible. The third and fourth lines explain the dramatic situation. Death has in the carriage another passenger, Immortality. Thus, in four compact lines the poet has not only introduced the principal characters metaphorically, but she has also characterized them in part; in addition, she has set the stage for the drama and started the drama moving. It may be noted; in passing, that the phrase, "And Immortality," standing alone, helps to emphasize the importance of the presence of the second passenger.

In the first line of the second stanza, "slowly drove" and "knew no haste" serve to amplify the idea of the kindness of the driver, as well as the intimacy which has already been suggested by "held just ourselves." In the fourth line, "For his civility" further characterizes the polite, kindly driver. The second, third and fourth lines tie in perfectly with the first two lines of the poem: she who has not been able to stop for Death is now so completely captivated by his personality that she has put away everything that had occupied her before his coming.

The third stanza contains a series of heterogeneous materials: children, gazing grain, setting sun. But under the poet's skillful treatment these materials, seemingly foreign to one another, are fused into a unit and reconciled. How? Not, obviously, by simply setting them side by side, but by making them all parts of a single order of perception. They are all perceived as elements in an experience from which the onlooker has withdrawn. In its larger meaning this experience is Nature, over which, with the aid of death, the individual triumphs. "Gazing grain," shifting "gazing" from the dead woman who is passing to a common feature of Nature at which she is astonished, gives the grain something of the fixity of death itself, although the grain is alive. /586/ This paradox is highly significant in the context of the poem: "grain" symbolizes life, mortality; "gazing" suggests death, immortality. "Setting sun" is no less powerful in its suggestion of the passage of time; and "the school where children played, / Their lessons scarcely done" makes a subtle preparation for it.

In the next stanza the house, appearing as a "swelling of the ground," the roof "scarcely visible" and the cornice, "but a mound," suggest the grave, a sinking out of sight. "Paused" calls to mind the attitude of the living toward the lowering of a coffin into the ground, as well as other associations with the occurrence of death.

"Centuries" in the last stanza refers, of course, to eternity. "Each feels shorter than the day" ties in with "setting sun" in the third stanza and suggests at the same time the timelessness of

eternity. Indeed, an effective contrast between the time of mortality and the timelessness of eternity is made in the entire stanza.

"Horses' heads" is a concrete extension of the figure of the carriage, which is maintained throughout the poem. The carriage is headed toward eternity, where Death is taking the passenger. The attitude of withdrawal, or seeing with perspective, could not have been more effectively accomplished than it has been by the use of the slowly-moving carriage. Remoteness is fused with nearness, for the objects that are observed during the journey are made to appear close by. At the same time, a constant moving forward, with only one pause, carries weighty implications concerning time, death, eternity. The person in the carriage is viewing things that are near with the perspective of distance, given by the presence of Immortality.

The poem could hardly be said to convey an idea, as such, or a series of ideas; instead, it presents a situation in terms of human experience. The conflict between mortality and immortality is worked out through the agency of metaphor and tone. The resolution of the conflict lies in the implications concerning the meaning of eternity: not an endless stretch of time, but something fixed and timeless, which interprets and gives meaning to /587/ mortal experience. Two seemingly contradictory concepts, mortality and immortality, are reconciled, because several seemingly contradictory elements which symbolize them are brought into reconciliation.

The interaction of elements within a poem to produce an effect of reconciliation in the poem as a whole, which we have observed in these analyses, is the outstanding characteristic of "Metaphysical" poetry. This poetry Cleanth Brooks defines as that in which "the opposition of the impulses which are united is extreme" or, again, that "in which the poet attempts the reconciliation of qualities which are opposite or discordant in the extreme." I have no intention of forcing this classification upon the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Indeed, I have no intention of forcing any classification upon her; I have tried to focus more upon the mechanics of her poetry. It seems fairly clear however, . . . that she is free from the limitations of the romantic poet, which she is generally mistaken to be. She does not employ metaphor only for illustration or decoration of some "truth," as the romantic poet usually does. She does not merely introduce an element of paradox, as the romantic poet tends to do; rather she succeeds in bringing it to the surface and in reconciling seemingly contradictory concepts. She does not use disparate materials sparingly and put them down in juxtaposition without blending them, as the romantic poet is often inclined to do. And her liberty in the use of words would hardly be sanctioned by the typically romantic poet, for fear of being "unpoetic" and not "great" and "beautiful."

The kind of unity, or reconciliation that we have been observing at work in these poems is chiefly responsible for their success. Proof of this is found in the fact that the few poems of Emily Dickinson's that are not successful show no evidence of the quality; and some others that are only partially successful show less of it. In this sense we are justified in referring to Emily Dickinson as a metaphysical poet. /588/

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