

Thomas H. Johnson: On 712 ("Because I could not stop for Death")

. . . In 1863 Death came into full stature as a person. "Because I could not stop for Death" is a superlative achievement wherein Death becomes one of the great characters of literature.

It is almost impossible in any critique to define exactly the kind of reality which her character Death attains, simply because the protean shifts of form are intended to forestall definition. A poem can convey the nuances of exultation, agony, compassion, or any mystical mood. But no one can successfully define mysticism because the logic of language has no place for it. One must therefore assume that the reality of Death, as Emily Dickinson conceived him, is to be perceived by the reader in the poems themselves. Any analysis can do no more than suggest what may be looked for .

In "Because I could not stop for Death" Emily Dickinson envisions Death as a person she knew and trusted, or believed that she could trust. He might be any Amherst gentleman, a William Howland or an Elbridge Bowdoin, or any of the coming lawyers or teachers or ministers whom she remembered from her youth, with whom she had exchanged valentines, and who at one time or another had acted as her squire. . . . /222/ The carriage holds but the two of them, yet the ride, as she states with quiet emphasis, is a last ride together. Clearly there has been no deception on his part. They drive in a leisurely manner, and she feels completely at ease. Since she understands it to be a last ride, she of course expects it to be unhurried. Indeed, his graciousness in taking time to stop for her at that point and on that day in her life when she was so busy she could not possibly have taken time to stop for him, is a mark of special politeness. She is therefore quite willing to put aside her work. And again, since it is to be her last ride, she can dispense with her spare moments as well as her active ones. . . .

She notes the daily routine of the life she is passing from. Children playing games during a school recess catch her eye at the last. And now the sense of motion is quickened. Or perhaps more exactly one should say that the sense of time comes to an end as they pass the cycles of the day and the seasons of the year, at a period of both ripeness and decline. . . . How insistently "passed" echoes through the [third] stanza! She now conveys her feeling of being outside time and change, for she corrects herself to say that the sun passed them, as it of course does all who are in the grave. She is aware of dampness and cold, and becomes suddenly conscious of the sheerness of the dress and scarf which she now discovers that she wears. . . . /223/

The two concluding stanzas, with progressively decreasing concreteness, hasten the final identification of her "House." It is the slightly rounded surface "of the Ground," with a scarcely visible roof and a cornice "in the Ground." To time and seasonal change, which have already ceased, is now added motion. Cessation of all activity and creativeness is absolute. At the end, in a final instantaneous flash of memory, she recalls the last objects before her eyes during the journey: the heads of the horses that bore her, as she had surmised they were doing from the beginning, toward?it is the last word?"Eternity." . . . Gradually, too, one realizes

that Death as a person has receded into the background, mentioned last only impersonally in the opening words "We paused" of the fifth stanza, where his services as squire and companion are over. In this poem concrete realism melds into "awe and circumference" with matchless economy. /224/

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