

Theodore C. Hoepfner: On 712 ("Because I could not stop for Death")

A comment by Richard Chase on Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could not stop for Death," reads in part as follows:

The only pressing technical objection to this poem is the remark that "Immortality" in the first stanza is a meretricious and unnecessary personification and that the common sense of the situation demands that Immortality ought to be the destination of the coach and not one of the passengers. The personification of death, however, is unassailable. In the literal meaning of the poem, he is apparently a successful citizen who has amorous but genteel intentions. He is also God. . . .

The trouble with this remark is that it does not present the common sense of the situation. Emily Dickinson was taught Christian doctrine?not simply Christian morality but Christian theology?and she knew that the coach cannot head toward immortality, nor can one of the passengers. Dickinson here compresses two related but differing concepts: (1) at death the soul journeys to heaven (eternity), and thus the image of the carriage and driver is appropriate; and (2) the soul is immortal, and our immortality, therefore, "rides" always with us as a copassenger; it is with us because the soul is our immortal part and so may be thought of as journeying with us. The poet's language is compact and oblique, but there is no false personification in it. Since the soul is one's true person (essence, not mask). no personification is needed, except possibly what may be involved in the separable concept of the soul itself. Both immortality and death, however, need personification and are given it. The horses' heads are toward eternity, but not toward immortality.

Incidentally, why "amorous but genteel"? To those who believe in an ,afterlife, death may be kind in taking us from a world of proverbial woe into one of equally proverbial eternal bliss; the irony is in the contrast between our fear of death and the kindness of his mission, and it seems unnecessary to call upon an amorous implication. The idea of the "Bride of Christ" may be permissible but it seems far-fetched in the context of the poem as we have it. /96/

From "'Becasue I Could Not Stop for Death,'" *American Literature*, XXIX (March, 1957), 96.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Criticism Target:

Emily Dickinson [2]

Author:

Theodore C. Hoepfner [3]

Poem:

712 (Because I could not stop for Death) ^[4]

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