

Bernhard Frank: On 712 ("Because I could not stop for Death")

Although the poem "Because I could not stop for Death--" (no. 712) may seem to have been picked clean by extensive and repeated dissections, that jewel in the crown of Emily Dickinson's poetic oeuvre can still surprise us with some facets which have eluded scrutiny.

Analyzing the poem sequentially, line by line, has tended to obscure some structural patterns. From a satellite view, however, two significant features stand out: verbs of uncertainty and phrases of reversal.

The former, like too many unknowns within an equation, both lead to the multiplicity of meanings that encumber the poem and attest to the speaker's confused state of mind. "We paused before a House that seemed/A Swelling of the Ground--" (17-18, italics added) poses more questions than it answers: Was the "House" actually entered, or not? Conceivably, the grave was inspected, yet proved not to be the final destination. Or, was the speaker indeed deposited in the "House," while the horses continued their journey toward eternity without her? And why "seemed"? Is the speaker losing her worldly spatial sense with the onset of death? Lastly, in the lines

Since then--'tis Centuries--and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity--(21-24)

the speaker assumes what the horses' destination may be, but is far from certain.

This sense of the speaker's confusion becomes accentuated in the three reversals of opinion she undergoes in the course of so brief a poem:

1. Because I could not stop for Death--
He kindly stopped for me-- (1-2)
2. We passed the Setting Sun--
Or rather--He passed Us-- (12-13) (stanza break)
3. Since then--'tis Centuries--and yet

Feels shorter than the Day (21-22)

These reversals offer three stages in the speaker's metamorphosis from her human state back into the universal: They are her period of adjustment.

At poem's opening the speaker is, to say the least, naive. She sees Death as kind and gentlemanly, readily getting into his carriage to journey to destinations unknown. She does not even have the foresight to dress warmly; her gown and tippet are the sheerest of the sheer, and there is no luggage. Her first realization is that she is at the mercy of Death--she cannot call on him.

The second reversal has always been given much attention. Thomas H. Johnson took a rational approach, sensing that the speaker "now conveys her feeling of being outside time and change, for she corrects herself to say the sun passed them, as it of course does all who are in the grave" (72). Bettina L. Knapp offers "the dichotomy existing between linear and cyclical time, mortality and immortality" (90). The speaker, in correcting herself, may have come to understand that whereas the sun, depicting circular time, will keep revolving, her own journey is destined to come to an abrupt, irreversible halt.

In her final temporal adjustment, the resetting of her internal clock, the speaker comes to realize that in death, as in a black hole (to use an anachronism), time is collapsed and compacted. With that realization, her adaptation to the eternal is complete.

WORKS CITED

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From *The Explicator* 58.2 (Winter 2000)

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Criticism Target:

Emily Dickinson [2]

Author:

Bernhard Frank [3]

Poem:

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

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/bernhard-frank-712-because-i-could-not-stop-death>

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