

## “Because I Could Not Stop for Death”: 1936 to the Present

### A Limited Critical Summary

“Because I Could Not Stop for Death” is often considered one of the pinnacles of Emily Dickinson’s literary career. The poem is both strong and mystical, enticing generations to a new understanding of death and our symbiotic relationship with it. By taking a chronological summary of scholarship for this poem, one should be able to see the changing attitudes and social mores that lead to a variety of interpretations of the meaning and significance, both of this poem, and of death.

A limited selection of Emily Dickinson’s poetry was published in 1860, entitled The Poems of Emily Dickinson, and edited by Thomas Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd (Fox). Initial reviews were ambiguous, some finding the poem to be illogical and grammatically incorrect, while others appreciated the intrinsic worth of the artistry. As the years passed, and more poems were printed, along with revised editions of earlier poems – corrected to reflect Emily’s original specifications – Ms. Dickinson’s literary reputation became firmly established as one of the greatest poets in American literature. The definitive edition of her poems was published in 1955 by Thomas H. Johnson in The Poems of Emily Dickinson (McMichael 148).

Poem 712, also known as “Because I Could Not Stop for Death,” was originally published as “The Chariot.” A much pared-down version of the original, the editors of the 1890 edition of Emily’s poetry made free to change the word

structure and choices, punctuation, and, ultimately, the meaning of the poem in order to reconcile the work to 19<sup>th</sup> century New England literary ideals. This particular poem was published in corrected form much earlier than most of the other works, appearing as the author originally intended in 1925 (Fox).

The earliest criticism easily available dates from 1936, when Allen Tate published a book titled Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas. In this book, he called “The Chariot” “perfect” and “flawless” (Tate 15). He found the imagery to be precise, with each image fitting perfectly well with the central tenets of the poem, which he saw as the problem of having to die in order to achieve immortality (Tate 15-16). He found the poem even more astonishing because it offers no solutions or explanations; rather, it is a simple, evocative glimpse into the experience of death, and an insightful exploration of the difficulties surrounding the idea of death (Tate 16.).

In 1939, Richard Chase took a somewhat different view of the poem. Finding it to be an overall good poem, he nonetheless took issue with the personification of immortality, calling it “meretricious and unnecessary” (Chase 249). Apparently, he believes that immortality is a place noun, is only a place noun, and should always be a place noun (Chase 250). In 1957, Theodore C. Hoepfner responded to Chase’s criticism, saying that the personification of immortality was perfectly acceptable if one considered the religious setting of Dickinson’s era. The Christian religion teaches that the soul is inherently immortal, and thus immortality always “rides” with us (Hoepfner 96). Chase enjoyed the personification of death as a genteel, aristocratic lover, and, in his

opinion – and, of course, reflecting his implicit world-view – as God. To Chase, the theme of the whole poem is that “Life is to be understood as the slow labor of dying” (Chase 250).

In 1947, Yvor Winters called the poem “a remarkably beautiful poem on the subject of the daily realization of the imminence of death” (289). However, Winters says the final portion of the poem defaults when it ventures to experience the immortal world, since poets, having never experienced the immortal, certainly cannot write with any kind of authority on the subject. Using somewhat twisted logic, Winters dismisses the metaphors referring to the immortal as “flawed” and shallow,” although how she would know, having never experienced the immortal, is open to question (Winters 289). Of course, numerous other critics throughout time have questioned this narrow and ultra-realistic interpretation of this poem.

One of those critics is Thomas Johnson, the same Thomas Johnson who published the definitive edition of Dickinson’s poems in 1955. Johnson sees the poem both as a journey into the grave, a ride accompanied by death and immortality, and as journey from concrete realism to subjective mysticism (Johnson 223-4). Johnson reads the personification of death as ambiguous, believing that Dickinson intended for the reality of Death as an entity to be subject to the reader’s interpretation (Johnson 222). Echoing and expanding this thought, in 1985 B. N. Raina read this poem as a defiance of the reality of death: Emily did not allow death, so it stopped, as in ceased to be a possibility. Thus,

Dickinson achieved immortality, and so it rides with her to eternity, with a subjugated Death as her servant (Raina 11-12).

Referring also to the personification of death, in 1957 Theodore Hoepfner saw a theological logic in death as an “amorous and genteel” aristocrat (96). The Christian religion teaches that death is a vehicle or bridge whereby eternity is reached, a change from the temporal, painful, human existence of this life to the beautiful and splendid existence of the next. Following this interpretation, death is not to be feared, but embraced, as it is only through death that a Christian can achieve the blessed promise of paradise (96). Whether this poem is intended to be ironic or not is not addressed.

Similarly to earlier critics, in 1960 Charles R. Anderson was also fascinated by the portrayal of death as a suitor. Referring to the social history of the era, he remarked that carriage rides were often a means of courtship between young couples, and Anderson saw in the last stanza several wedding references. For example, he read the gossamer imagery as referring to a wedding dress, and the “tippet,” which is similar to the cowl worn by nuns, as her veil (Anderson 246). In contrast to earlier critics, however, Anderson was one of the earliest persons to espouse the view that it is not a physical death that the speaker is riding toward, but a social one. The wedding with death and immortality substitutes for a wedding to a real person. Anderson finds it significant that Emily travels toward eternity but never reaches it, implying a continuing journey (Anderson 224, 248-49).

In 1985 Jane Donahue Eberwein offered a similar interpretation of the poem, seeing it as an argument for the visionary world of the artist over the physical world of ordinariness. Uniquely, however, Eberwein makes a point of differentiating from the point of view of the speaker and Emily Dickinson's point of view. For example, the speaker is caught up in the daily ministrations of life, while Emily was always focused on the artistic nature of the world. The speaker is so caught up that she mistakes death as a suitor, something Emily would never do, having met him in many poems. The speaker is a person unconcerned with visionary ideals at the beginning of the poem, and undergoes a transition to appreciation of those ideals, while Emily was always, first and foremost, an artist.

Most other critics, however, believe that the poem does, at least on some level, refer to a transition by Dickinson. In 1991, John M. Green revisited this point, holding forth the idea that Dickinson's poem signifies a social death, rather than a physical or spiritual one. He read the work as Dickinson coming to terms with her vocation – as poetess – which will ultimately give her immortality. This journey, however, is a lonely one, and will cost her many things, including a typical love as a woman and a typical life as a mother and wife (Green 218-19).

Carol Frost and Martha Nell Smith reflect much more modern views of poetic interpretation. Writing in 1996, Frost saw the poem as an attack on the religion of Emily's era. That religion, Christianity, uses the fear of death as a prod to piety and subservience on the part of its parishioners. The poem's expression of death as a gentle lover, and the journey as a pleasant carriage ride, goes against this idea, rejecting a central tenet of the orthodoxy. Similarly,

writing in 1993, Martha Nell Smith saw the poem as Emily's private joke on those who desperately believe in a transitional death to heavenly eternal bliss. The union of the holy – i.e. immortality, eternity, and death – with the crass and mundane – carriage rides, playing children, and fields of grain -- worked as a sort of dryly humorous comment on this belief (Juhasz, et. al).

As one can see, the interpretation of this poem has varied, sometimes considerably, over the years. Often reflecting social changes, the critics tend to see the poem differently depending on their era and their presuppositions. This is, of course, a natural tendency, and this summary should serve as a gentle reminder that everyone should check the tint of their glasses occasionally.

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\***Note**: the starred sources are excerpted on the following website. Where page numbers are provided for the original text, page numbers are cited.

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