Introduction to Literary Studies

Mid-Nineteenth-Century Poetry
Emily Dickinson’s “Because I Could Not Stop for Death”

Prof. Dr. Michael Butter
Emily Dickinson
(1830–1886)
Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –
We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring–
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –
We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – ’tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses Heads
Were toward Eternity –
Quickly discuss the poem with your neighbor(s).

What is it about?
What is striking about its form?

Which words do you not know?
Which lines do you not understand?
TODAY

1. Context

2. Basic Coordinates: Central Topics and Concerns

3. Aesthetics: Literary Strategies

4. Reception and Theoretical Perspectives
1. Context
Emily Dickinson

• born in the antebellum period, died during the Gilded Age

• lived in Amherst, MA

• attended Amherst Academy and then briefly Mount Holyoke Female Seminary

• never married, spent her life as a recluse

• wrote nearly 1,800 poems, only a handful published during her lifetime
Death and Immortality

- crisis of death
  - death no longer understood exclusively in traditional religious terms
- “Dickinson’s culture, then, was permeated by [...] restless, persistent and varied explorations of death and continuity. All this energy of scientific and spiritual speculation was devoted to the intuition that some kind of life does persist, as does the mind and perhaps identity, after death.”
Situation of Women

• seen as naturally inferior

• middle-class and upper-class women seen as wives and mothers only

• cult of domesticity

• women completely dependent on their husbands
Poetry in the Mid-19th Century

• ballads and hymns extremely popular

• time of experiments with form, breaks with tradition

• “Dickinson’s poetry did differ radically from that of her predecessors and contemporaries in its extreme compression. It also differed in the density and intensity of her metaphors and the extent of the disjunction caused by its compressed syntax, punctuation, and juxtapositions.” (Christianne Miller, “Immediate U.S. Predecessors.” *Emily Dickinson in Context*. Ed. Eliza Richards. Cambridge UP, 2013, pp. 119-128, p. 126)
2. Basic Coordinates: Central Topics and Concerns
Central Topics and Concerns

• What happens after death?

• What does getting married mean for a woman?
3. Aesthetics: Literary Strategies
What Happens after Death?
Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –
We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring–
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –
We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – ’tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses Heads
Were toward Eternity –
Hymn Meter

The various subgroups of Hymn Meter all have in common a fairly strict iambic line.

Common Meter

| A | B | A | B |

Short Meter

| A | A | B | B |
| (or) | (or) |
| A | X |
| B | B |

The X indicates that the final word of the line may or may not rhyme.

Long Meter

| A | A | B | B |
| (or) | (or) |
| A | X |
| B | B |

Half Meter

| A | A | B | B |
| (or) | (or) |
| A | X |
| B | B |

This Half Meter is considered to be very rare.

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

[...]  

Since then – ’tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses Heads
Were toward Eternity –
What Does Getting Married Mean for a Woman?
“Dying Is Like Getting Married”
and
“Getting Married Is Like Dying”
Metaphor: “You are my rose.”
Extended Metaphor in Dickinson

Source/Target Domain: DEATH

perceived similarity: passivity, deception, waiting for salvation, etc.

Source/Target Domain: MARRIAGE

process of mutual transfer
Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
And Immortality.  

We slowly drove – He knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,  
For His Civility –
We passed the School, where *Children* strove
At Recess – in the Ring–
We passed the Fields of *Gazing Grain* –
We passed the Setting Sun –
Or rather – *He* passed *Us* –
The Dews drew quivering and chill –
For only *Gossamer, my Gown* –
My *Tippet* – only *Tulle* –

- images of fertility, images of different stages of life
- wedding dress
- death/suitor as deceiver
We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – ’tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses Heads
Were toward Eternity –

move into a new home,
into the grave

marriage as
death in life,
death as sitting
forever alone at home
4. Reception and Theoretical Perspectives
First Publication in 1890
Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –
We passed the School, where Children played
Their lessons scarcely done
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –
We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling but a mound –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – ’tis Centuries – but each
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses Heads
Were toward Eternity –
Critical Reception

• New Criticism

• seen as anticipating modernist aesthetics

• Feminist Criticism