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### Dickinson on Death: Time After Death in Poems

The majority of Emily Dickinson's poems are cryptic and short, and filled with particular punctuation, capitalization, and metaphors. Every aspect of her poems, from the unique and varying forms they take to the themes they discuss, show Dickinson grappling with the idea of death and the afterlife. Specifically, in her poems relating to death, Dickinson displays a confusion with the passing of time, a somber and calm acceptance of death, and a fixation with the unknown state that follows. Her poems, "Because I could not stop for death" and "I died for beauty" relate in subject, but differ in form, content, tone, and attitude towards death. Throughout these poems Dickinson demonstrates her perspectives on death and the afterlife, and the situations surrounding them.

"Because I could not stop for Death" portrays the speaker of the poem going on an evening date with death, who comes in the form of a kind and chivalrous suitor. Death "kindly" stops for the narrator, and takes her in a carriage that holds her, her suitor, and immortality. This is the first indication in the poem that there is something after death waiting for her, this immortality that is accompanying them on their carriage ride relates to the narrator; the immortality is soon to be hers. They drive slowly, "He knew no haste," indicating that death is not fought when it comes, nor is it violent (Dickinson 5). The images depicted of school-children at recess, calm fields of "Gazing Grain," and the setting sun simply add to the serenity and innocence of the encounter thus far. Line 9, signifies the end of death and the narrator being

referred to as individuals, at this point in their journey they are transformed into a “We.” From this point forward, the places in the poem where the narrator and death are referred to as “he” and “I” are only to reference moments in time before they passed the school on their journey. In line 16, the only “My” after the adjustment to “we” occurs, as the narrator remarks “My Tippet – only Tulle,” describing her garment that is inadequate for the cold weather, a garment that was adorned before embarking on their journey. In the fifth stanza, they happen upon a house, whose “Roof was scarcely visible” (Dickinson 19). The roof, with its “Cornice – in the ground,” evokes the image and feeling of a tombstone, and the final stanza is reached and it is revealed that the narrator of the poem died centuries ago:

“Since then – ‘tis Centuries – and yet  
 Feels shorter than the Day  
 I first surmised the Horses’ Heads  
 Were toward Eternity - ” (Dickinson 21-24)

But the narrator is almost nostalgic about her encounter with death. The final line, “the Horses’ Heads Were toward Eternity” relates back to the immortality that accompanied the narrator and death in their carriage at the beginning of the poem (Dickinson 23-24). This brief mention of immortality and eternity coupled with the speaker of the poem telling her story from beyond the grave indicate that Dickinson believes all does not end with death.

“I died for Beauty” is a conversation between two deceased individuals regarding the values and purposes for which they died. One who died for beauty, the narrator, was promptly joined in her multi-room tomb by one who died for truth. They discuss the causes of their deaths, beauty and truth, and the one who died for truth proclaims that truth and beauty are one, “‘Themselves are One / We Brethren, are’, He said,” (Dickinson 7-8). They talk between their rooms until moss covers up both their lips and the names on their tombstones. This poem

examines a desire for companionship, the loss of identity, and the importance of values in life and death. Both individuals in the poem “failed” in their pursuits of truth and beauty, failures that resulted in their respective deaths. Yet despite truth and beauty being declared as one there maintains a distinction between the two, revealed by the one who died for truth being “laid / in an adjoining room” and not in the same room. Truth and beauty may be the same but in death there must remain a division between the two. Further, this poem portrays a desire for companionship, as the two find each other in death and speak until they lose this ability. This poem has an almost comforting tone, until the last two lines when the two must suffer a second death, a loss of identity. The tone contrasts with the subject of the story; every part of human life is erased by time and depicted calmly, which portrays a peace with death and eventual fate.

A comparison of the poem yields insight into the Dickinson’s wrestling with the idea of death. The poems have different and vague stances on temporality. The passing of time is unclear in each of the poems, although in “Because I could not stop for Death” it is assured that centuries have passed and in “I died for Beauty” enough time has passed for moss to grow over a significant space. Helen Vendler, in *Poets Thinking*, offers an interpretation to Dickinson’s choices regarding the passage of time, and how this changed in her writing throughout her career. In the poems, “Dickinson’s invention of poetic temporal structures ... mimic the structure of life as she at any moment conceives it. By those structures she channels our reactions and stylizes our pace to hers, and constructs our thinking after her own,” (Vendler 64). While analyzing Dickinson’s portrayal of time through an alternative poem, Vendler concludes that Dickinson has a narrative to write, and she has slots to fill with milestones to create the feeling of passing time. Further, “although the poet is in fact *making* up the “slots” she is *filling* up, the early poems wished to obscure that constructive invention, and to appear merely

transcriptive...If, by contrast, we felt the poem were being “made up,” we would feel anxiety that the train-journey might be prolonged forever in other landscapes, new stops,” (Vendler 66). This is demonstrated in the way the poems appear “transcriptive” in their details and happenings, and this creates both a comforting tone that contrasts with the discomfort in the mystery of death and the sense of completion at the conclusion of the poems. In “Because I could not stop for Death” the events are chronicled with realistic description, which helps to mark the passing of time and combats the feeling that the events in the journey “might be prolonged forever,” (Vendler 66). This relates as well to the discrepancy between the detail given in the description of the house and final resting place of the narrator in “Because I could not stop for Death” and the description of the school. A vivid picture is painted of death as a chivalrous suitor, while the house, the narrator’s tomb, receives a vague glance. The suitor and school are explained in detail while the house is kept in the distance, forcing the reader to interpret the meaning behind the house while still maintaining the realistic narrative. “I died for Beauty” uses a similar method when describing the passing of time. Although in “I died for Beauty” the poem explicitly spans a conversation, the passing of time is extended into at least decades, as moss grows over the two tombstones. This finishing note leaves a tone of hopelessness, and dark despair as there is an end to all that was established in the poem.

The two poems also share in their mystery. What morals do the poems offer to teach us? What is the purpose of them being written? Both poems have baffling aspects:

“He questioned softly ‘Why I failed’?  
 ‘For Beauty’, I replied -  
 ‘And I — for Truth — Themselves are One -  
 We Brethren, are’, He said - ” (Dickinson 5-8)

It is unclear as to how the two individuals can die for beauty and truth, as well as whether they died defending these ideals or in pursuit of them; both failed in life and will never succeed in their pursuits but the details of their death are not revealed. Similarly, in “Because I could not stop for Death” the death does not seem particularly violent, as the journey with death is described pleasantly, but the details of the death remain hidden. Death portrayed as a kind and charming suitor informs the readers that the speaker’s death likely was not unpleasant or shockingly unusual, but why is death described specifically as a suitor, as opposed to another kind figure? The enigmatic nature of these poems reinforces the spontaneity and mystery of death. The poems are not clear, and do not have one defined and clearly identified intended meaning; they are to be interpreted by the reader and these interpretations are as unpredictable as death itself.

The striking difference between the two poems is the clear end of life in “I died for Beauty” and the clear continuation of life in “Because I could not stop for death”. “I died for Beauty” gives a false sense of hope, as the speaker is speaking from beyond the grave, insinuating that there is an afterlife of sorts where one has the ability to continue communicating and seeking companionship with others who have passed. This hope is maintained throughout the poem until it is conveyed that the two talked “between the Rooms / Until the Moss had reached our lips / And covered up – our names” (Dickinson 10-12). The immortality that is assumed in the first two stanzas of the poem is destroyed by the reveal that the two in the poem eventually lose the ability to speak and their identities as they are reclaimed by nature.

Alternatively, in “Because I could not stop for Death” there is no clear end to life. In line 4 there is a mention of immortality in the carriage with the speaker and death, relating to the last line with the mention of eternity. This account, paired with the narrator speaking from the dead, fails

to give a conclusive end to life, communication, and identity like the end offered in “I died for Beauty”.

The poems Dickinson writes on death differ from her poems that are likened to riddles. These poems cannot be deciphered to be perfectly clear, and they do not contain a hidden but clear message. The poems are confusing and difficult to understand because that is the nature of their subject. Death cannot be understood completely by anyone, and that is what Dickinson achieved in her poems. Another consideration when analyzing and interpreting Dickinson’s poetry is her use of dashes, rhyming, and meter. The entirety of “I died for Beauty” and “Because I could not stop for death” are written with the first and third lines of every stanza in iambic tetrameter and the second and fourth lines in iambic trimeter. The dashes are used in similar ways to break up the flow of the poems in strategic methods, and there is no rhyme scheme throughout either of the poems. Dickinson’s motivations for these stylistic choices remain unclear but are important when understanding her work. Her vague yet poignant poetry is so layered that with every read there is a new element discovered and a deeper interpretation realized.

Works Cited:

Dickinson, Emily, and R. W. Franklin. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

Vendler, Helen. *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats*. Harvard University Press, 2006.