# UNIT 8: EMILY DICKINSON: "BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


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## 8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- grasp the content of the poem
- explain the poem in details
- discuss the themes of death and immortality in Dickinson's poems
- describe the poetic techniques and style of the poem

## 8.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to the poem "Because I Could Not Stop For Death" written by Emily Dickinson. In the poem death is personified, and the idea of death is not portrayed as lonely or scared, but as more serene and contented. It may be noted that, every image is precise and connected with the central idea. They also extend and intensify each other. Dickinson's poetry is

never didactic, and probably her lack of formal intellectual training contributed to her originality. She, along with Walt Whitman emerged as the nineteenth century poets who exerted the greatest influence on American poetry to come. In this unit, you will be acquainted with the poem 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death', along with an explanation of the poem. Moreover, you will also get an elaboration on the poetic techniques and style and language used by the poet in the prescribed poem.

## 8.3 TEXT OF THE POEM

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 labour 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—



**Gossamer:** delicate, light fabric

**Tippet:** scarf for covering the neck and shoulders

**Tulle:** thin silk

**Cornice:** decorative moulding beneath a roof

## 8.4 EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

In the poem "Because I Could Not Stop For Death", behind the apparent innocence of the statement, we can notice a concerted and individualistic attempt to come to terms with the certainty of death that we mortals can never escape from. Death is personified in the poem as a courtly beau or a suitor who insists that the speaker puts aside both "labour" and "leisure" and accompany Him along with a chaperone, i.e. Immortality. The general perception of Death is something dark, frightening and foreboding, but Dickinson seems to describe Death as a gentleman coming to take her away in a carriage to Eternity. She portrays Death as a journey, and not just a single event that concludes a life. Emily Dickinson, as said earlier, was a recluse who shunned public life, and her lonely hours were often permeated by thoughts of death. However, this did not turn into an obsession as she realised that death is a fact of life, and is inevitable.

In the poem, the journey to the grave begins in Stanza 1 when Death comes calling in a carriage with Immortality as a passenger. He is a kindly escort who will never think of hurrying a lady, and this journey with Him will lead her to Immortality and beyond. Most religious literature across the world has compared human life to a journey, but Emily Dickinson very hospitably accommodates death and immortality in the same dimension of reality. We may also note romantic overtones in the poem from the fact that death is a "kind" ***beau*** who very courteously escorts his lady on a romantic journey. Thus, this is not a routine death poem, but has a freshness which stems from her subscription to the tenets of transcendentalism.



**Beau:** boyfriend or male admirer.

As the trip continues "slowly" in Stanza 2 with an easy, unhurried pace- "We slowly drove- He knew no haste",- there is a suggestion that death has arrived in the form of a disease that takes its time to kill. This drive with death could symbolise that the speaker is slowly dying or perhaps is already dead, and is moving slowly in a coffin at the speed of a funeral procession.

Dickinson has intensely meditated on the tragic finality of the human spirit. The journey obviously begins in childhood and then the poet appears to review the stages of her life; moving into maturity and the descent into death as she passes on to the other side. Childhood is the time of innocent play, but even when the children "strove/ At Recess in the Ring", there is a hint of the circularity of time where there is no beginning or end. The next stage of her journey sees her passing through the "Fields of Gazing Grain" which symbolise maturation and the area of adult labour. With the introduction of the "Setting Sun" which symbolises old age, the "Chill" of death sets in, more so because she is not warmly dressed. In fact, her "Gossamer" gown is more suitable for a wedding. There is a hint of a heavenly union with Death here. The normal human journey would stop at death, but by now we know that her fate moves beyond death towards immortality and eternity. This is her central concern in the poem, and through her use of vibrant and exclusive images, she emphasises not only the reality of death, but also the equally vital possibility of overcoming it. Her gossamer gown and tulle veil cannot withstand the chill of the evening filled with dew drops:

"The Dews drew quivering and Chill—

For only Gossamer, my Gown—

My Tippet- only Tulle—"

Dickinson's calm acceptance of death and her comfort in talking about it can be seen in her description of the grave as the "House". From the beginning to the end, the chariot and the horse continue to dominate the scenes and the passage to the world of eternity is made logically clear. The poet calls the grave her house because this is where her body will rest for eternity. In eternal time, human division of times ceases to apply and what had happened centuries ago

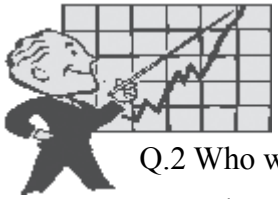
may feel shorter than a day- "Since then- 'tis Centuries- and yet/ Feels shorter than the Day". This is perhaps what the poet feels in her last moment in this world; and to her, this moment seems to last forever. Thus, by this analogy, she changes an individual premonition to a universal human experience.

The overall theme of the poem is centered on Death as it is not something to be feared owing to the inevitable and endless cycle of nature. Though the poem is only one of a series of death poems written by Emily Dickinson, it is one of the most significant poems as it underscores the possibility of an afterlife after death. Her view of death may also reflect her reclusive personality and religious beliefs. Moreover, her spirituality does not avoid death as a reality rather it makes her face it squarely.



**LET US KNOW**

Emily Dickinson like Donne, Cowley and other metaphysical poets before her combined thought and emotion in poetry and created a unified sensibility. John Donne's poem, "Death, Be Not Proud" also personifies death and creates a feeling that death is less powerful than we think. He does this by highlighting the idea of death as being bound to the rules of "fate, chance, kings and desperate men". Thus, the all-powerful and frightening experience of death is negated and a euphoric victory over death is asserted.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q.1 What is death compared to in the poem?

Q.2 Who was Death's companion in the carriage?

Q.3 What are the stages of life mentioned in the poem?

Q.4 What do the "Gazing Grain" and "Setting Sun" symbolise?

Q.5 Why does the poet call the grave her house?

Q.6 Gossamer is a heavy wedding gown. True/False.

Q.7 How does Dickinson treat death in the poem?

Death, "that lonesome glory", is one of the abiding themes of Emily Dickinson's poetry. It has been estimated that nearly a third of Dickinson's poetry centres round the theme of death. Her treatment of death has attracted the largest critical response, and it is not only one of the most frequent themes, but also the one that occupies her lifelong attention. Death was a central problem of her life and she accepts it as a physical fact and a material truth. She had to suffer a lot of personal bereavements in life and this acquaintance with mortality may account for the fact that the theme of Death looms large in her poetry. We may say that her preoccupation with death may be due to her Puritan surroundings. In the Puritan doctrine of existence, death occupies a solemn place and as it is the end of the living process, it must be taken in a solemn way. Dickinson's treatment of death is characterised by a psychological insight and powerful observation.



**Elegiac:** elegy is a mournful, melancholic or plaintive poem, especially a funeral song or a lament for the dead.

Thomas Wellborn Ford has grouped her Death poems into four categories:

i. Poems dealing with death and immortality
ii. Poems dealing with the physical aspects of death
iii. Poems personifying death
iv. Poems with an **elegiac** tone

You will realise that 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death' belongs to the third category of poems. From her early poems, we can notice the personification of death, sometimes as a fairy or a ghost, sometimes as a despotic king and at times as a cultured, gentle and ever-accompanying suitor who escorts his beloved on a joy-ride. And it is as a suitor that death attracts the most attention from the reader. That Emily Dickinson could imagine death as a suitor and lover bears testimony to the fact that she was able to conquer her fear of death. The poem is remarkable for the restraint which gives a poignant feeling to the last ride of our mortal life. We have already seen that since death has shown her great "civility" in coming to take her away in a carriage, she must put aside her "labour" and "leisure" to be with him. She passes the children playing in the school, the ripe harvest in the fields, and finally the "Setting Sun", shivering in her light gown and scarf as the evening "Chill" begins to drop imperceptibly over the scenes. When they came to the grave, she lost count of time, marking her transition from timeliness to timelessness as she realises:

"Since then- 'tis Centuries- and yet

Feels shorter than the Day

I first surmised the Horses' Heads

Were toward Eternity-"

Death thus becomes a gateway towards Immortality, and hence it is to be welcomed rather than shunned.

Emily Dickinson's interest in Death is often criticised as being morbid, but modern critics have appreciated her sensitive and imaginative treatment of this rather painful subject which reveals her deep understanding of human life.



**LET US KNOW**

Dickinson's obsession with death can be seen in her detailed and detached reproduction of situations where she imagines her own death. The best of the poems of this group is "I heard a Fly Buzz- When I Died". It combines the description of death from both the outside and the inside. She emphasises the background and notes the tense silence in the room resembling the lull before the storm. People are done with the crying and drying their tears, they wait for the moment when death, the "King", would appear. She assigns her keepsakes, and just then, a "Fly" butts in between her and the light. Let us read the poem now:

"I heard a Fly buzz- when I died-

The Stillness in the Room

Was like the Stillness in the Air-

Between the Heaves of Storm-

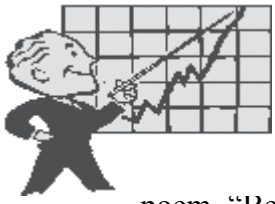
The Eyes around- had wrung them dry-

And Breaths were gathering firm

For that last Onset- when the King

Be witnessed- in the Room-

I willed my Keepsakes- Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable- and then it was
There interposed a Fly-
With Blue- uncertain- stumbling Buzz-
Between the light- and me-
And then the Windows failed- and then
I could not see to see-"



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q.8 Describe, in about 50 words, how Emily Dickinson treats the concept of "Death" in her poem, "Because I Could Not Stop For Death".

Q.9 What are the four categories of death poems of Dickinson as specified by Thomas Ford?

Q.10 What does coming to the grave symbolise in the poem? Old age/end of the journey/ death of a person. Choose the right answer.

Q.11 Emily Dickinson never had to face bereavements in life. True/ False.

Dickinson's poems, as we have understood, are concerned with the themes of mortality and immortality. Her preoccupation with death and immortality stems from her religious bent of mind and her Puritan upbringing. She was confident that love would endure beyond the grave and this supported her belief in immortality and the belief was that the soul cannot be lost. The idea that death is a threshold to an immortal existence is frequently expressed by Dickinson, and in one of her poems, death is compared to a pilot which takes the human soul to the land of eternity. Immortality is the reward that awaits human beings who face death with a calm and bold attitude. Our focus

therefore, should be on immortality rather than death. Dickinson's most typical approach to the problem of immortality can be seen in the poem, 'The World is Not Conclusion'.

"The World is not conclusion.
A Species stands beyond-
Invisible, as Music-
But positive, as Sound-
It beckons, and it baffles-
Philosophy, don't know-
And through a Riddle, at the last-
Sagacity, must go-
To guess it, puzzles scholars-
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown-
Faith slips- and laughs, and rallies-
Blushes, if any see-
Plucks at a twig of Evidence-
And asks a Vane, the way-
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit-
Strong Hallelujahs roll-
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul-"

There is a definite assertion of the belief that death is not the end of the road when she says "The World is Not Conclusion". It, however, also explores the perplexity of philosophers, saints and scholars in proving the truth of immortality. The opening lines are double-edged and the final lines satirise the empty gestures that orthodox religion substitutes for faith; a religion which is like a narcotic that "cannot still the Tooth/ That nibbles at the soul-". The

question of immortality was embedded in her consciousness and her poems affirm her faith in the immortality of the soul. Her poems typified the moral earnestness of the old Puritans and she remained a mystic in the sense that she was forever trying to experience and perceive the Divine force.

In "Because I Could Not Stop for Death", Dickinson, like her contemporary, G. M. Hopkins made an attempt to sensuously apprehend the spiritual experience. Immortality creeps into the poem as the carriage with Death and Immortality as companions takes the poet through the country and finally to a house, and the empty "Centuries" of "Eternity". Her poems on the abstract concepts of Death, Immortality etc. are vividly dramatised, and her firm belief in immortality had earlier sustained her in her love which could not be fulfilled on this earth. There always remains the eternal hope of its being fulfilled in the other life. The introspective Puritan conscience that Dickinson inherited may be found in her intense fixation with pain, death, and immortality. The idea of immortality saves her musings on death from becoming morbid.



**LET US KNOW**

Dickinson's poems on immortality, as we have already seen, records the progress of the poet's journey from doubts and questioning to an ultimate faith, i.e. immortality. Let us read the following poem:

"Behind Me- dips Eternity-
Before Me- Immortality-
Myself- the Term between-
Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,
Dissolving into Dawn away,
Before the West begin-

'Tis Kingdoms- afterward- they say-
In perfect- pauseless Monarchy-

Whose Prince- is Son of None-
Himself- His Dateless Dynasty-
Himself- Himself diversify-
In Duplicate divine-

'Tis Miracle before Me- then-
'Tis Miracle behind- between-
A Crescent in the Sea-
With Midnight to the North of Her-
And Midnight to the South of Her-
And Maelstrom- in the Sky-"

You can see that the pristine light of immortality shines in the poem and this is one of the finest and most impressive poems dealing with the subject.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q.12 Discuss within 50 words, Dickinson's belief in Immorality.

Q.13 Is it possible to prove the existence of an immortal life?

Write your observations on the concept.

Q.14 G. M. Hopkins is a contemporary of Dickinson. True/ False.



**ACTIVITY**

Read more poems by Emily Dickinson in order to understand better her attitude towards death and immortality. Some notable ones are "A Clock Stopped", "I Felt a Funeral in my Brain", "Though the Great Waters Sleep", "My Cocoon Tightens", etc.

## 8.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

We have already noticed that Emily Dickinson's style and poetic techniques make her poems distinctly original and appealing to readers and critics throughout the ages. As mentioned earlier, her poetry is full of startling figures of speech, familiar words in unfamiliar uses, learned expressions, sudden shifts of tone, metrical irregularities, deliberately imperfect rhymes and grammatical difficulties. Some of the other features of her style include her technical restraint, her bold imagery, her experimentation with words and her concern for ideas, her cryptic brevity and her rebellion against sentimentalism and poetic diction. Her poetry is peppered with sharp, intense images which are complex and functional, and are drawn from many diverse sources. Of these, "Nature" is paramount. Her "Nature" poems consist of sharp, precise observations, but they are as much about psychological and spiritual matters as about the specifics of Nature. Most of her images are drawn from Nature such as flowers, bees, spiders, wars, voyages of exploration, lightening and volcanoes, domestic activities, industry and warfare, law and economy. In extreme flights of imagination, her images become almost surrealistic in content. Her images sometimes create natural or social scenes, but are also more likely to create psychological landscapes, generalised or allegorical scenes. She can convey more meaning through her metaphors, symbols and images than through direct statement.

*"We passed the School, where Children strove*

*At Recess- in the Ring-*

*We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain*

*We passed the Setting Sun-"*

Dickinson's most impressive stylistic method is her quaint love of paradoxes which spring from her attempt to blend apparently incongruous modes of experience. Her lyricism also breaks new ground in modern American poetry. We find all the major qualities of the great Romantic lyrical poets in her poetry. Although she mostly wrote about death, the lyrical romanticism is evident, as can be seen in the poem, in which she compares death to a lover or suitor appears to take her for a ride.

Dickinson's private and at times eccentric style sometimes makes her poems difficult to read, but such a style is the result of her unusual and unorthodox treatment of themes. She had a curious habit of talking about divinity, soul, immortality, death and like concepts in the vocabulary of ordinary speech. She anticipates the modern poets in her boldness and experimentation. A blend of tradition and modernity, she is the prophet and representative of cultural conflicts destined to contribute more and more to the problem and character of creative expression in America-

"Of all the souls that stand to create

I have elected one

When sense from spirit flies away

And subterfuge is done."

Critics in the twentieth century have been lavish in their praise for Emily Dickinson's style. R. P Blackmur and Allen Tate have found that she anticipates the modernist trend in poetry in its quality of irony, metaphor, symbols, etc. Thus, with the 20th century, Dickinson has enjoyed an ever-increasing critical reputation, and she is now widely regarded as one of America's best poets.



**LET US KNOW**

Emily Dickinson is very fond of using conceits like John Donne and her poetry possesses Donne's wit and **epigrammatic** quality. In her metres and broken rhythms, she resembles the metaphysical poets, and uses metaphysical paradox and poignancy. A metaphysical conceit makes an ingenious comparison between two apparently incongruous things or concepts. The term 'conceit' originates from the Italian "concetto", and it was developed by the metaphysical poets, particularly Donne, whose conceits are sometimes extended throughout an entire poem.



**Epigrammatic:** In the style of an epigram, which is a brief, interesting, memorable and sometimes surprising or satirical statement.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q.15 Discuss in about 60 words, the basic features of Emily Dickinson's style.

Q.16 Write a small note on Emily Dickinson's Nature poems.

Q.17 Emily Dickinson can convey more meaning through direct statement than through images. True/False.

Q.18 How does Emily Dickinson anticipate modernity in her poetry?

Q.19 Write a few lines on conceit.

## 8.6 POETIC TECHNIQUES

Emily Dickinson's poetry is known for its notable irregularities, which were a cause of alarm for early editors and reviewers. Dickinson's poetry was of a very new kind, with a distinctive voice, style, and transformation of traditional form. A characteristic stanza in her poem consists of four lines, and most of her poems consist of just two stanzas. However, this poem has six stanzas.

As mentioned earlier, Dickinson wrote on a variety of topics ranging from religion, science, music, nature, books and contemporary events. Her poetic ideas were presented as terse, striking definitions or propositions, or dramatic narrative scenes, in moments which are highly abstract and in settings which are at the boundaries of life and death. The resultant poetry thus focused on the speaker's response to a situation rather than the details on the situation itself. In her poetry, she is aided by what may be called her eccentricities in her sporadic capitalisation of nouns and punctuations. Besides this, some of her technical irregularities include the frequent use of dashes, (as is evident from the poems you have read above), use of synonyms, use of broken metres and rhythms, off-rhymes her brevity and conciseness of expression, her use of colloquial expression, convoluted and ungrammatical phrasing, bold, unconventional and often startling metaphors, and her aphoristic wit. A critic

commented that: "In her half-rhymes, her irregularities of speech and rhythm, her spasmodic quality, she mirrored the incongruities and frustrations of human experience."

In the poem, we can see the use of dashes and enigmatic expressions. Commonplace words come alive in new contexts and she packs the lines with cryptic meanings. She glorifies death and through the tight structure of the poem, she encompasses the whole range of macroscopic experiences in her life. There is neither rhyme nor rhythm, but the emotion is recreated through the evocation of appropriate images.

Although, critics are divided in their views on the experimentation in poetic technique in her pursuit of truth, this technical imperfection of her verse has also contributed to her present-day popularity. It has greatly influenced 20th century poets and contributed to Dickinson's reputation as one of the greatest and most innovative poets of 19th century American literature.



**LET US KNOW**

Emily Dickinson is often bracketed with Walt Whitman as being one of the pioneers of nineteenth century American poetry. Although she is highly original in her writings, it is often said that she was influenced by Whitman's style. However, this is not quite true. One critic, while comparing her to Whitman, opined that both write as though no one had written poetry before. This is both a fair criticism and a great compliment. However, there is also a suggestion that her verse **smacks off** Emerson's poetry.



**Smacks off:** to be reminiscent of something or to imply something



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q.20 Discuss, in about 50 words, the technical irregularities in the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

Q.21. Mention some topics that Dickinson often wrote on.

Q.22. Emily Dickinson is a nineteenth century American poet. True/ False.

Q.23. Dickinson never faced criticism because of her experimentation in poetic technique. True/ False.



## 8.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you will be acquainted with Emily Dickinson's poetry who is one of the famous American poets of the nineteenth century and along with Walt Whitman, is deemed as the pioneer of 19th century American poetry. You have learnt about the short life and numerous beautiful poems written by her. She wrote on a great variety of subjects like life, death, the contemporary social scenes, mortality and immortality, pain and pleasure, hope and fear, love, nature, God, religion, and virtue as seen through her Puritan perspective, or, as she described it, 'New Englandy'. A very striking quality about her poetry is its originality.

Her poems are quite short and she has nearly eighteen hundred surviving poems which looked at collectively, have an epic feeling and bear the stamp of being written by a woman who had devoted her entire life to her art. This is one of the most significant poems as it underscores the possibility of a life after death. The theme of death and immortality is a common theme in Dickinson's poetry which was of a very new kind, with a distinctive voice and style. Dickinson's poetry is full of startling figures of speech, familiar words in unfamiliar uses, learned expressions, sudden shifts of tone, metrical irregularities, deliberately imperfect rhymes and grammatical difficulties. Although, earlier critical views regarding her poetry were not very encouraging, Dickinson remains one of America's and the world's best loved poets.



## 8.8 FURTHER READING

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## 8.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Ans to Q 1:** Death is addressed as a courtly beau who courteously escorts his lady on a romantic journey

**Ans to Q 2:** Death's chaperone immortality.

**Ans to Q 3:** Childhood, moving into maturity and the descent into death

**Ans to Q 4:** "Gazing Grain" symbolises maturation and the area of adult labour "Setting sun"symbolises old age.

**Ans to Q 5:** Because this is where her body will be interred for eternity.

**Ans to Q 6:** False

**Ans to Q 7:** As an endless cycle of nature.

**Ans to Q 8:** Attempt on your own

**Ans to Q 9:**

i. poems dealing with death and immortality

ii. poems dealing with physical aspects of death

iii. poems personifying death

iv. poems with an elegiac tone

**Ans to Q 10:** Death of person

**Ans to Q 11:** False

**Ans to Q 12:** Attempt on your own

**Ans to Q 13:**Attempt on your own

**Ans to Q 14:** True.

**Ans to Q 15:** Attempt on your own

**Ans to Q 16:** Religious, science, music, nature, books and contemporary events.

**Ans to Q 17:** True.

**Ans to Q 18:** False.

**Ans to Q 19:** Her poetry is full of startling figures of speech, familiar words in unfamiliar uses, sudden shifts of tone, metrical irregularities, deliberate imperfect rhymes and grammatical difficulties.

**Ans to Q No 20:** Her nature poems consist of sharp precise observations but they are as much about psychological and spiritual matters as about the specifics of Nature.

**Ans to Q No 21:** False.

**Ans to Q No 22:** Her lyricism also breaks new ground in modern American poetry.

**Ans to Q No 23:** The term 'conceit' originates from the Italian "concetto" and it was developed by the metaphysical poets particularly, Donne whose conceits are sometimes extended throughout an entire poem.



## 8.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Q.1** Write what you know about personification in Dickinson's poems.

**Q.2** How does Dickinson portray death in her poems?

**Q.3** What are some of the irregularities in Dickinson's poetry?

**Q.4** Comment on the theme of death and immortality in Dickinson's poetry.

**Q.5** Discuss the language, technique and style of Dickinson's poetry.

**Q.6** Explain the following passages:

a. “The Carriage held but just Ourselves-

And Immortality.”

b. “For only Gossamer, my Gown-

My Tippet- only Tulle-”

c. “Since then- ‘tis Centuries- and yet

Feels shorter than the Day

I first surmised the Horses’ Heads

Were toward Eternity-”

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