

## **Amittai Aviram: From "Emily Dickinson's 'Because I could not stop for Death?': Irony and Sublimity in Theme and Rhythm."**

Unlike [the folk ballad] "Lord Randal," "Because I could not stop for Death?" is written in what is usually called ballad measure in its neat, pure form--an obvious sign of its being a literary rather than an oral product. In the ballad measure, there are four beats per line, and four lines per stanza, as in "Lord Randal"; but here, the second and fourth lines leave the fourth beat in silence, as a musical rest. Words realize a pattern of four beats, then three, then four beats, then three. The silent beat at the end of the even-numbered lines adds a sense of cadential completion to the pattern, a completion supported by the rhymes between the second and fourth lines. One might think of them as elongations of the third beat to cover the fourth, giving those lines a sense of finality and closure because of the double-long unit at the end. The ballad measure is also called the common measure because it is used for hymns in the early versions of the Book of Common Prayer; it is often used for other Christian hymns as well (such as, for example, the American hymn "Amazing Grace"). If we consider the meter of the poem in semiotic terms, as a sign of the poem's genre, then its ambiguity between the hymn and the ballad, the sacred and the profane, will be important in our reading of the poem's thematic content. Necessarily, in order to read that content, it will also be useful to glance at some other Dickinson poems for context. All of the ones to be cited will be in the ballad or common measure.

"Because I could not stop for Death--" functions clearly as an allegory. On the literal level, a woman recounts how she eloped with (or was carried off, abducted, or seduced by) a genteel gentleman named Death. She is naive to the otherworldly qualities of Death, unaware that she must leave this world behind to go with him, that his "House" is a grave, and that she must remain in that "House" forever, until, at some later moment in the day recollected in retrospect, she "surmised the Horses' Heads / Were toward Eternity." Upon leaving to go with Death, the speaker must put away both her labor and her leisure: she must give up her life in her household (or her parents' household) in order to labor for her new husband; as the mistress of his house, she will not have much of the leisure of her girlhood. On the way to Death's house, which is driven by Immortality (the coachman?), the bride and groom pass schoolchildren fighting or wrestling in the center of a circle of onlookers, and then fields of grain, which seem to gaze at them as they go by as if they were townspeople. The next stanza is the first clue, not for us (we already know) but for the speaker, that she is leaving, not her world, but the world behind: passing the setting sun is impossible before the age of jet airplanes, and the correction ("Or rather--He passed Us") renders the speaker appropriately passive, as would be a dead body. She recognizes her unpreparedness, wearing thin clothes that ambiguously connote a bridal gown or burial clothes, and the elements encroach upon her through them.

On the allegorical level, we know that the speaker is actually recounting her death. The children striving suggest the business of life, which becomes small and childlike from the distant perspective of the passage into death. The grain becomes one's townspeople as one becomes a thing of nature rather than an agent to farm or to eat the grain--and so forth. The

disparity between the somewhat belabored allegory and the obvious meaning creates a sense of intense dramatic irony.

But there is another kind of irony as well: a situational irony. If this ballad recounts a marriage, then it should end either (a) tragically, as most ballads do, with the death of one of the marital partners-but since it cannot be the speaker, it would have to be the beloved husband; or (b) happily as a celebration of the married state. If the poem should be taken as a hymn, then it should end happily, with the speaker's joy in her eternal union with God after death. These two expected patterns--marital bliss for ballads and beatific bliss for hymns--are closely related to each other, since Christianity perennially uses marriage as an allegorical figure for the relationship between the blessed soul and its maker in the afterlife, and since, in the Protestant (and especially the Puritan) tradition, earthly marriage is a typological figure for the union between the soul and God that will, for the elect, be realized in the world to come. This view of marriage would be central to the Christianity that characterizes the social milieu of Dickinson's poetry--more specifically, the Congregationalist church in New England, which was the heir of New England Puritan ideology. Thus on both counts, in both genres, ballad and hymn, in both the secular and sacred spheres, and in both the marriage and death strands of the allegory, the ending is a shock, a surprising anticlimax.

It is not that the poem ends with the opposite of our expectations--at least, not exactly. Rather, instead of heavenly jubilation or earthly satisfaction, we have--nothing at all: "Since then--'tis Centuries--and yet / Feels shorter than the Day" recounted, which is the last day the speaker lived, the day of her death. This is because her dying day was the last day in which anything happened. Centuries feel shorter than a day because there is no event to fill them up, just the recollection of the day before they began. So, to her surprise (in terms of marriage) and ours (in terms of death and the afterlife), despite everything everyone has told her and us, it turns out that the state being described is one of utter emptiness. It is negative when we expected something positive. But the very idea of centuries of such emptiness is, itself, sublime. The thought boggles the imagination, and is a suitable place for the poem to end--that is, on the word "Eternity," with all its irony, because it is not the eternity we expected, but with all its deep truth, because it is much more sublime, since it is truly without image, unimaginable. By comparison, Christian mythology crowds its sublime moments with images that reflect earthly realities--God as King, the Son at his right hand, the choruses of the blessed singing their praise, and so forth.

Dickinson calls to mind the Christian paradigm of life's meaning, which is found in the salvation of the soul in the afterlife and not in this world, in order to reveal its failure and to propose in that very revelation an alternative source for the experience of mystical sublimity. This procedure summarizes Dickinson's project in a great many of her poems. Again and again, she explicitly defeats Christian expectations of what comes after death or of the nature of God. Again and again, she puts forth poetry itself as an alternative religious experience because of its ability to reveal the sublime within the world of the senses and within the very logic that negates Christianity. In poem no. 1545 ("The Bible is an antique Volume"), Dickinson views the Bible through an ironic lens by considering it an oppressively didactic and less than engaging romance or ballad, and then contrasts it with lyrical poetry:

Boys that "believe" are very lonesome?

Other Boys are "lost"--

Had but the Tale a warbling Teller?

All the Boys would come--

Orpheus' Sermon captivated--

It did not condemn--

What matters is the "warbling." The speaker here does not so much recommend that the behests of Christianity be clothed in the seductive garments of musical verse, but rather that verse itself--rhythm itself, is a "sermon" or a spiritual experience that affords enlightenment without the condemnation and exclusion so central to institutional religion, which is, in this case, Christianity. "I like a look of Agony," Dickinson writes elsewhere (241), "Because I know it's true-- / Men do not sham Convulsion " as they do, one may infer, sham conversion within those Christian sects, such as the Congregationalist and Holiness churches, that demand of their members a conversion experience to demonstrate their status within the elect.

That poetry itself is Dickinson's religious alternative to Christianity is clear from the conclusion of no. 657:

I dwell in Possibility--

A fairer House than Prose--

More numerous of Windows--

Superior--for Doors--

Of Chambers as the Cedars--

Impregnable of Eye--

And for an Everlasting Roof

The Gambrels of the Sky--

Of Visitors--the fairest--

For Occupation? This--

The spreading wide my narrow Hands

To gather Paradise--

The house of poetry, which is the house of "Possibility," is sublime in the infinitude of the reading experience. It defamiliarizes the world that we think we know too well--"numerous of Windows"--and it offers an infinite variety of possible ways of thinking or imagining. Its visitors are the readers, eager to explore its many mansions. But the speaker busies herself within the house, not doing mundane housework, but gathering "Paradise" with her "narrow Hands"--that is, with the sparseness and brevity of her lines. One need not wait for the afterlife to gain paradise--in fact, it would not come that way. Paradise is available "to Him of adequate desire" (370) through poetry--and, in other poems, through the keen observation of the world of the senses, as it is made possible and celebrated in poetry.

In "Because I could not stop for Death--" the relationship between poetry and the sublime is not made explicit. This is because the speaker in this case is naive, the vehicle of dramatic irony, so that she can witness the failure of the mythological dogma which she and the audience expect. In contriving such a situation, Dickinson makes possible a critique that cuts both ways, against both marriage and the afterlife as they would be understood in conventional Christian terms. Insofar as marriage should be like the afterlife, it turns out to be surprisingly empty and anticlimactic: the woman puts away her labor and her leisure in order to get, quite literally, nothing. The emphasis is not on the state of this nothingness, about which nothing really can be said, but on the process of getting there--so the act of getting married is really rather like death, and the state of marriage is a living death. Insofar as the afterlife should be like an earthly marriage, that promise, from the point of view of a woman within the framework of post-Puritan Protestant Christianity, is no great bargain. In retrospect, giving up both her own labor and her own leisure for the sake of a state of nothingness in someone else's house would not exactly be her idea of heaven. But this emptiness must be the result of both marriage and death because they are, for the speaker, the permanent loss of her own proper sphere, her own joys, her own pain, and her own voice. The moment at which she recalls the recognition of this loss is the moment at which her voice, in the present, ceases once more.

And yet at the same time, this nothingness has a positive side to it, not for the speaker, but for the reader. In clearing away the baggage of imagery that makes of religion a stick with which to beat women over the head and cause them to fall in line beneath the authority of their earthly husbands, Dickinson's poem demonstrates that these images and their earthly, political practices (such as hierarchical marriage) come in the way of the sublime experience. The poem puts away the labor and leisure of dogma and convention in order for us to experience the sublime space where they fail.

This final moment is carefully prepared by earlier images and moments within the poem. Each of them involves, simultaneously, a renunciation ("I had put away ... We passed ... We passed") and a defamiliarization. To begin with, the appearance of Death as a suitor with his carriage literalizes the overfamiliar metaphor of death being a passage to the afterlife where the innocent soul becomes a bride of Christ. Here, the suitor is not called Christ, but Death, as if to call a spade a spade. (He is called "Savior" in another, somewhat similar, poem: "A Wife-- at Daybreak I shall be--" [no. 461].) The strangeness of the situation, eloping with Death, reflects back upon the original myth to reveal its grotesqueness. At the same time, the moment brackets off, puts at a distance, and questions the supreme importance of the speaker's daily activities; her labor is, itself, her conventional service to her household.

The strife of the children at recess provides a marked contrast with the peaceful but indescribably empty nothingness of the end. This is the only glimpse of human activity we

have in the poem's passage from the speaker's house to that of Death, and it is one of leisure ("Recess"), learning ("School"), and struggle ("strove"). What are they fighting over? Our passing by, and renouncing, this strife as we go on toward eternal nothingness challenges the necessity and importance of the small tasks and causes that, in their overfamiliarity, fill up our minds in everyday life. Since the poem was probably composed near or at the close of the Civil War, it is possible that this passage and renunciation defamiliarizes the passions and parochialisms that wrought so much destruction. They are among the social codes that the forward rhythm of the poem undermines.

The fields of gazing grain are what preoccupy people when they are adults: the labor that sustains them. These, too, seem small as they stand gazing while the speaker and her escorts pass on. Thus not only the smaller struggles of people--their strife in the ring--but the larger, more fundamental labor of survival also seems less urgent and more distant. Next, even the cosmic movement of the sun, the passage of earthly days, seems small and limited: "We passed the Setting Sun."

At the next moment, the last of the renunciation-passages, the speaker is compelled to challenge the last item of her that pertains to the social code: her own identity. In correcting herself from "We passed the Setting Sun" to "Or rather--He passed Us--" the speaker draws attention to her own having become a mute object of nature. This aspect of death, of course, makes the speech we are witnessing quite impossible--but that is the paradox inherent in the poem and in many of Dickinson's poems in which a speaker speaks from a state after death. It is also the paradox of poetry, where speech and images are attempting to address the experience of rhythm, which is, precisely, the state of being in which there is neither imagery nor speech. Likewise, the fragility of the speaker's dress comes to her attention because of the greater power of earthly elements: "The Dews drew quivering and chill-- / For only Gossamer, my Gown-- / My Tippet--only Tulle--." The speaker's clothing here provides a neat allegorical symbol for the imagery of the poem itself--a veil of illusion that simultaneously protects and fails to protect the elemental power of the bodily rhythm which it renders socially visible.

The ambiguity between the social (labor, strife, farming, gown, house) and the elemental (dews, ground) is emphasized in the next quatrain: is the grave a "House" or a "Swelling of the Ground"? The terms house and cornice, because of their ironic application to the grave, stress the inadequacy of the conventional, sentimental, and mythic metaphors we cherish and live by as compared to the elemental infinitude of earth, death, and rhythm.

In "Because I could not stop for Death--" as in most of Dickinson's poems, the principle of diachrony is to proceed from the familiar to the bizarre, from the expected to the sublime. In many poems, this process is even reflected in the syntax, which becomes increasingly tortuous and difficult to follow toward the end. But along with this movement toward the surprising and sublime--that is, toward the point at which words fail, there is a movement analogous to the one we found in the traditional ballad, "Lord Randal": a movement of revelation, from the hidden to the patent. When the secret is hidden from the speaker, she can generate stanza after stanza, figure after figure, allegorizing the process of death without knowing it. But when the secret is revealed to her as well as to us, there is nothing left to allegorize; we are left with the eternal emptiness itself. One's own nonbeing is utterly unimaginable . . . so the speaker must be driven on by the figure of Immortality; but what fills up this immortal eternity is nothing. When the sublime nothingness is revealed to her--to borrow words from poem no. 7--her "figures fail" her, and the poem must come to an end.

This movement from narrative to revelation and the end of narrative and of images altogether coincides with the movement of the carriage--"We slowly drove ... We paused . . ." And both of these coincide with the movement of the meter itself, with its built-in pause, which is a silent beat, on every second and fourth line. It is as if the thematic content of the poem, its images, reproduce on large scale what the meter is doing on the smaller scale at every half quatrain. The emptiness at the end of the poem stands as an image for the rhythm of the whole, in which, at every eighth beat, one feels the rhythm go on even when there are no words. Every eighth beat reminds us that, behind and before the words, there is the demand of rhythm. This demand is not metaphysical, it is not in the afterlife; it functions within the world of the senses, although it takes us beyond the limits of the construction of the self. And this is just what Death does with the speaker--he takes her beyond her "labor and her leisure too" to the point where she has no more words to speak her own existence. The words of the poem can only exist in retrospect, as she retraces her path to the present. But her present condition is a nonself, in which she has no words. Yet this condition is not a mere negative; it is the vastness of eternity, a powerful, sublime moment.

From *Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry*. Copyright © 1994 by the University of Michigan. Reprinted with the permission of the author.

**Publication Status:**

Excerpted Criticism [1]

**Publication:**

- Private group -

**Criticism Target:**

Emily Dickinson [2]

**Author:**

Amittai Aviram [3]

**Poem:**

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

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/amittai-aviram-emily-dickinson%E2%80%99s-because-i-could-not-stop-death%E2%80%94irony-and-sublimity-theme>

**Links**

[1] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/emily-dickinson>

[3] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/amittai-aviram>

[4] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/712-because-i-could-not-stop-death>