

## Collamer M. Abbott: On 712 ("Because I could not stop for Death")

Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" (no. 712) has aroused conflicting interpretations. For example, Clark Griffith in *The Long Shadow* sees death as a "courtly lover," and "kindness" and "civility" he accepts "at face value" as describing "Death" as a "gentleman" (127-31). We can accept little at face value in Dickinson, and this is why she is so difficult to interpret.

Griffith has a point, however. "Death," in this poem, may represent the funeral director, because in modern life we find no one more "courtly" in the true sense of the word, nor anyone more full of unctuous "kindness" and "civility" while escorting "the Lady to her bridal rooms," as Griffith says. Funeral processions always proceed "slowly" and often majestically. The speaker in the poem, who is dead, has certainly put away her labor and leisure to confront Death's "courtly civility." We might take "Immortality" at face value, but immortality is not a person; it is each individual's concept of "unending existence" or "lasting fame," according to Webster's. The word then has no "face value."

Ruth Miller reads "paused" literally, and sees "no burial" (193-94). But can we take words literally? I think not. Because "Centuries [...] Feel shorter than the Day" in this poem, a "pause" can constitute a complete if brief stop for burial in what Dickinson describes precisely: an above-ground, or partly-above and partly-below-ground, burial vault; a key to the deeper meaning of the poem. We may also note that any burial in the time frame of eternity is but a pause.

Burial vaults were once formed by two parallel dry-stone walls, six to eight feet apart, six to eight feet high. The vaults had a stone slab or corbeled roof, a back wall, and a dry-stone facade with a portal closed by a door (or slab of marble or slate) inscribed, when used for burial, with the names of the interred. The entire structure was banked with earth and sod and grassed over, creating Dickinson's "Swelling of the ground." The roof was "scarcely visible," sodded over and grassed. "The Cornice" was "in the ground" because the two flanks of the mound at each side of the door sloped down to ground level, where they were, in effect, buried, or hidden. Such structures still survive in Massachusetts around Amherst and throughout New England and were also used for storage of root crops, barrels of cider or salt pork, or other winter provisions.

This interpretation expands the accurate description of a vault with its image of a "House" (capitalization is important) with architectural features, such as cornices. It also corrects the explication of Judith Farr in *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* where she sees the "House" as "a new-made grave"; the "roof" as a "tombstone [...] covered over (with grass?)" [sic]; and the "sunken cornice" as the "rectangular upper-edge of the tombstone" (329-31), an interpretation that does not conform to Dickinson's precise if metaphoric description.

Once we see that Emily Dickinson is talking about a stone burial vault, an image that expands the metaphoric power of the poem, we can appreciate more fully related imagery in her poems, "The grave my little cottage is" (no. 1743) and "I died for Beauty--but was scarce" (no.

449).

Houses had significance for Dickinson, and housekeeping and domestic chores had a special place in her life, whether she liked them or not. Making bread, the staff of life, for her Father (capitalized like the Lord), also played an important role in her sheltered, reclusive, inward-looking existence. All of this imploded into her poems.

"The grave my little cottage is" is an example of this. She is talking about life after death in a "little cottage," which is a neat description of the house-like burial vault with its mounded roof and "Cornice--in the [g]round--" as in poem no. 712. She envisions Keeping house" in her cottage, which, with its side and back stone walls and front entry, harbors a "parlor" where she "lay[s] the marble tea," which certainly suggests death. A stone vault with the names of the occupants engraved on the marble door slab can easily be visualized as a cozy cottage with a room where tea is served.

"I died for Beauty" plays on the same imagery of a loved house with rooms. The speaker is "scarce / adjusted in the tomb / When One who died for Truth, was lain / in the adjoining Room--" The "One" of this poem can represent another lover or master, a brother, or a kinsman. They talk "between the Rooms-- / Until the Moss had reached our lips-- / And covered up--our names--," that is, their names inscribed on the stone door slab.

Thus is extended the whole figurative evocation of preservation for which these structures are used, not only of vegetables in a root cellar, but of roses, and of the "Immortality" of Dickinson's speaker for "Centuries" that "feel shorter than the day"--for "Eternity." The figure of the "House" in these poems expands the symbolism immeasurably beyond the moldy receptacle of an underground grave, to a hospitable dwelling.

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