

## Exploring the Metaphorical Significance of Death in Emily Dickinson's poem 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death' and its Influence on 19th-Century American Poetry

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### ABSTRACT

This research embarks on an exploration of the nuanced and evolving metaphorical representations of death within 19th-century American poetry focus on Emily Dickinson's poem 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death. The methodology integrates close textual analysis with historical contextualization, shedding light on the broader sociocultural landscape that influenced poetic expressions of death. By scrutinizing metaphorical intricacies, symbolism, and linguistic choices, the study aims to elucidate how Dickinson's portrayal of death diverges or aligns with the works of her peers. Moreover, it endeavors to discern underlying societal attitudes towards mortality, providing a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between poetic representation and cultural dynamics in 19th-century American literature. In examining the metaphorical evolution of death in poetry, this research not only contributes to literary scholarship but also unveils broader insights into the cultural zeitgeist of the time, thereby enriching our understanding of the intricate relationship between poetic expression and societal perceptions of mortality.

## INTRODUCTION

Why American poetry named by America? It belongs to America or its poets were American or it was written in American? It is Contradictory phrase from literary Criticism and by critiques. I found result that actually there most of poetry works written in poets mother tongue not commonly in English language regarding to American poets and others. (Walter Ed.1996) If took glans towards the overview of the 19th-century American Literary Landscape, the 19th century in America witnessed a rich tapestry of literary expressions, marked by significant historical events and cultural shifts (Łuczyńska-Hołodys,M (2021). Figures such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman contributed to a burgeoning literary scene, laying the groundwork for nuanced explorations of existential themes. In Cultural, Social, and Political Contexts it against the backdrop of westward expansion, industrialization, and debates over slavery, 19th-century American literature reflected the tumultuous societal transformations (Murison, J. S. (2011). The exploration of death as a thematic motif emerged as a poignant reflection of the nation's collective consciousness. Themes of mortality permeated the poetic landscape of the era (Davidson, C. N. (2004). Poets grappled with the transient nature of life, using death as a metaphor to contemplate broader questions of identity, purpose, and the human condition. Works such as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" and Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" exemplify this trend.

### Objectives

- To analyze the metaphorical representations of death in Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death"
- To compare "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" with selected contemporary works.
- By unraveling thematic nuances, stylistic choices, and cultural influences, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of 19th-century American poetry.
- the study aims to inform future research on cultural influences, thematic trends, and the enduring relevance of poetic expressions of mortality.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The exploration of death in 19th-century American poetry holds profound significance (Luciano, D. (2007). It serves as a gateway to understanding cultural attitudes, individual philosophies, and the evolving narrative of the American experience. Investigating metaphorical representations unveils layers of meaning and sheds light on the interconnectedness of literature and society (Koster, M., & Van Leynseele, Y. (2018). Emily Dickinson, an enigmatic figure in American literature, continues to captivate readers with her succinct yet profound verses. Her poems, characterized by unconventional punctuation and vivid imagery, invite ongoing exploration and interpretation. Among Dickinson's oeuvre, "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" stands out as a poetic gem. Its exploration of death as a serene journey has piqued scholarly curiosity, making it an ideal focal point for in-depth analysis and comparison. A comparative analysis is

indispensable to unraveling the unique qualities of Dickinson's portrayal of death. By juxtaposing her work with that of her contemporaries, we gain insights into shared themes, divergent perspectives, and the broader literary landscape of the time. Beyond its literary implications, this study contributes to interdisciplinary discussions on mortality, cultural shifts, and philosophical outlooks (Klein, J. T. (2010). The evolution of death representations in poetry becomes a microcosm through which we explore broader societal attitudes and values (Hale, D. J. (1998).

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology integrates close textual analysis with historical contextualization, shedding light on the broader sociocultural landscape that influenced poetic expressions of death. By scrutinizing metaphorical intricacies, symbolism, and linguistic choices, the study aims to elucidate how Dickinson's portrayal of death diverges or aligns with the works of her peers. Moreover, it endeavors to discern underlying societal attitudes towards mortality, providing a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between poetic representation and cultural dynamics in 19th-century American literature.

## RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Overview of 19th-Century American Poetry: Historical Context

Overview of significant events that shaped the 19th century in the United States. This could include periods of expansion, industrialization, the Civil War, and socio-cultural changes (Dumond, D. E. (1965). Highlight the “transitions from agrarian to industrial societies, westward expansion, and evolving social structures Delve into how the aforementioned historical events and societal shifts influenced the mindset and creative expression of writers.” For instance, the aftermath of the Civil War may have given rise to reflections on loss, while industrialization could have prompted considerations of modernity and its impact on human experience (Inglehart, R. (2020).

Literary Movements: The key tenets and themes associated with movements like Romanticism, which emphasized emotion and nature, Transcendentalism, centered around self-reliance and spirituality, and Realism, focusing on portraying life as it is.

The influential poets associated with each literary movement. Their unique contributions to the development of American poetry.

For example,

#### Edgar Allan Poe:

- *Unique Contributions:*
  - Exploration of the macabre, mysterious, and Gothic themes.
  - Pioneering work in the short story genre.
  - Emphasis on the psychological and the dark aspects of human nature.

#### Emily Dickinson:

- *Unique Contributions:*
  - Innovative use of form, including unconventional punctuation and dashes.

- Exploration of themes such as death, nature, and the self
- A focus on internal emotional landscapes and introspection.
- **Notable Works:**
  - "Because I could not stop for Death"
  - "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died"
  - "Hope is the thing with feathers"

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau for Transcendentalism, and Walt Whitman for his pioneering role in free verse as part of Realism.

### Poetic Styles and Techniques:

This includes formal elements such as rhyme schemes and meter, as well as thematic considerations. How poets experimented with traditional forms or created new ones to convey their ideas. Many poets throughout literary history have pushed the boundaries of traditional poetic conventions, demonstrating innovative use of language, form, and expression. Here are examples of poets who challenged conventions and how they did so.

#### 1. Emily Dickinson:

- *Innovation: Unconventional Punctuation and Syntax*

##### Example:

- In "Because I could not stop for Death":
- "Because I could not stop for Death  
He kindly stopped for me  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves  
And Immortality."

**Discussion:** Dickinson's use of dashes and unconventional syntax allows for a unique rhythm and emphasis on certain words. The punctuation creates pauses that contribute to the contemplative and reflective nature of her poetry.

#### 2. Walt Whitman:

- *Innovation: Free Verse*

##### Example:

- In "Song of Myself" from "Leaves of Grass":  
"I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."

**Discussion:** Whitman's rejection of traditional rhyme and meter in favor of free verse was groundbreaking. The lack of a predetermined structure allows for a more natural and organic expression of ideas and emotions.

### Themes of Death in Poetry of the Period

Common Motifs and Symbols: Identification of recurring motifs and symbols associated with death 19<sup>th</sup> Century American poetry:

Death was a recurrent theme, and various motifs and symbols were used to explore and represent the complexities of mortality. These motifs and symbols were employed by 19th-century American poets to engage with the profound and universal theme of death, providing readers with a rich tapestry of images and metaphors to contemplate the mysteries of life's end. Here are some common motifs and symbols associated with death in 19th-century American poetry. Graveyards and tombs symbolize the final resting place, emphasizing the inevitability of death.

- Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" contemplates death and burial in a rural setting.
- Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" describes the carriage ride towards the graveyard.

The changing seasons and decay in nature often serve as metaphors for the cyclical nature of life and death

- In John Keats' "To Autumn," the falling leaves and ripening fruits symbolize the natural progression towards death.
- In Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," the spring landscape becomes a backdrop for contemplating the death of Abraham Lincoln.

Symbols of mourning, such as black clothing or funeral processions, express the emotional impact of death.

- In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," the raven becomes a symbol of mourning and the narrator's grief over lost love.
- In Emily Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died," the poem explores the moment of death and the emotional aftermath.

Symbols associated with religious beliefs, such as angels, crosses, or divine judgment, convey spiritual dimensions of death.

- Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" includes imagery of immortality and the afterlife.
- Anne Bradstreet's "Contemplations" reflects on the divine order of the universe and the certainty of death.

Images of fleeting or fragile beauty underscore the transient nature of life and the inevitability of death.

- In (P.B Shelly) Percy Bysshe Shelley's "To a Skylark," the skylark symbolizes the beauty and vitality of life, set against the backdrop of mortality.
- In Emily Dickinson's "A route of Evanescence," the hummingbird becomes a symbol of fleeting beauty and life's brevity.

Death is often depicted as a form of sleep or a dreamlike state, emphasizing a sense of peaceful transition. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Grave by the Lake," death is portrayed as a "long, quiet sleep." In Emily Dickinson's "Because I could

not stop for Death," the carriage ride with Death is described as a tranquil journey.

### **Use of symbolism to convey complex ideas about mortality:**

Delve into the ways poets utilized symbolism to communicate deeper insights into mortality.

*The layered meanings behind chosen symbols and motifs in 19th-century American poetry adds depth and complexity to the poets' contemplation of mortality.*

Here's an exploration of how certain symbols and motifs convey nuanced meanings:

#### **1. Graveyards and Tombs:**

*Layered Meanings:* Symbolizing the final resting place, graveyards and tombs carry dual meanings. On one level, they represent the physical reality of death and burial. On another level, they serve as metaphors for the passage of time and the cyclical nature of life and death. Graveyards become spaces where the living confront the inevitability of their own mortality.

#### **2. Nature's Decay:**

*Layered Meanings:* The changing seasons and decay in nature evoke the transient nature of life. While on the surface, the symbols of autumn or withering flowers may represent death and decay, they also signify the beauty inherent in the cycle of life. The imagery of nature's decay reflects a deeper contemplation on the interconnectedness of life and death, emphasizing the beauty within impermanence.

### **Nature and Transcendence:**

#### **Exploration of the connection between death and nature in poetry:**

During the 19th century, poets often interconnected themes of death with nature, exploring the relationship between the two in various ways. Nature served as a powerful backdrop for contemplating mortality, with poets depicting it as both a serene setting and a metaphor for the cyclical nature of life and death. Nature as a Serene Backdrop for Death.

In Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," nature is portrayed as a serene and contemplative setting. The speaker reflects on the lives of ordinary people buried in the churchyard, and the peaceful rural landscape becomes a backdrop for contemplating the universality of death. In Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death," the carriage ride with Death occurs in a calm and tranquil setting. The scenes of nature, such as the school, grain fields, and setting sun, contribute to a sense of serenity as the speaker journeys toward death.

*Analysis:* Poets often used serene natural settings to create a reflective atmosphere, emphasizing the peaceful aspect of death. Nature, with its beauty and quietude, provides a comforting backdrop for contemplating mortality, suggesting a harmonious connection between the natural world and the inevitability of life's end.

**Nature as a Metaphor for the Cyclical Nature of Life and Death:** In Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," nature becomes a

metaphor for the cyclical nature of life and death. The poem, written in response to the death of Abraham Lincoln, uses natural imagery, such as lilacs and the hermit thrush, to explore the ongoing cycles of birth, death, and renewal. In **John Keats' "To Autumn,"** the changing seasons serve as a metaphor for the life cycle. The poem reflects on the ripening fruits and falling leaves, capturing the cyclical and transient nature of existence.

**Analysis:** By using nature as a metaphor, poets emphasized the interconnectedness of life and death. The changing seasons, blooming flowers, and natural processes become symbolic of the continuous cycle of birth, decay, and rebirth. This perspective aligns with Romantic ideals of finding meaning and solace in the eternal rhythms of nature.

### **Examination of how poets grappled with themes of transcendence and the afterlife:**

Explore how poets addressed the idea of life beyond death. Did they envision an afterlife, and if so, how did they articulate it in their verses? Discuss the influence of transcendentalist beliefs on the portrayal of death and the potential for spiritual growth or transformation.

### **Exploration of Human Condition**

Poets throughout history have often used death as a thematic lens to explore profound existential questions and delve into the complexities of the human condition (**Orr, G. (2002)**). The portrayal of death in poetry goes beyond a mere exploration of mortality; it becomes a means to reflect on universal experiences, identity, and the meaning of life. Emily Dickinson often used death as a lens to explore existential questions. In "Because I could not stop for Death," she contemplates the purpose of life and the journey toward death, framing it as an inevitable part of the human experience. Poets frequently employ death to pose questions about the meaning and purpose of life (**Aspiz, H. (2004)**). The inevitability of death becomes a catalyst for contemplating one's own actions, relationships, and the pursuit of a meaningful existence (**Shaw, S. (2023)**).

### **Discussion of the philosophical and psychological dimensions of death in poetry:**

The exploration of death in poetry delves into profound philosophical and psychological dimensions, offering poets a canvas on which to examine the nature of existence, the human psyche, and the mysteries of mortality. Poetry often serves as a vehicle for contemplating the philosophical nature of existence in the face of death. Poets ponder questions about the purpose of life, the meaning of individual actions, and the transient nature of human experience. *Example:* Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Mont Blanc" explores the vastness of nature and the human struggle for meaning within the context of mortality.

Death can evoke fear and anxiety, and poets use language to delve into the emotional and psychological impact of mortality (**AlKhrisheh, A. S., Abuhammam, E. A., & Al-Rbehat, W. R. (2023)**). The unknown aspects of death and its existential implications can instill a sense of unease. *Example:* Edgar Allan Poe's macabre and Gothic poems, such as "The Raven" and "The Masque of the

Red Death," explore the psychological dimensions of fear and the human response to mortality. Poets often express the emotional turmoil associated with death, delving into the profound grief and loss experienced by those left behind. *Example:* Walt Whitman's elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," written in response to the death of Abraham Lincoln, is a poignant exploration of grief and the emotional aftermath of loss.

The focus is on uncovering the thematic intricacies surrounding death in 19th-century American poetry. (Saksono, S. T., Wardhono, A., & Salikin, H. (2023). By examining common motifs, symbols, and overarching themes, readers gain insights into how poets engaged with mortality as a central aspect of their creative expression.

### **Overview of the critical reception of 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death':**

Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" initially received mixed reactions from critics and readers when it was first published. It's important to note that during Dickinson's lifetime (1830-1886), only a few of her poems were published anonymously, and the vast majority of her work remained unknown to the public until after her death. The poem under discussion was published posthumously. During Emily Dickinson's lifetime, her unconventional style and themes made her work challenging for the literary establishment of the time. Her poems, including "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," did not gain widespread recognition. After Dickinson's death in 1886, her complete works began to be compiled and published. Thomas Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd played significant roles in editing and publishing her poems. "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" was first published in its current form in 1890 in the collection "Poems" edited by Todd and Higginson.

Critics noted the profound exploration of death in Dickinson's poetry, particularly in "Because I Could Not Stop for Death." The poem's themes of mortality, the afterlife, and the passage of time were subjects of interest and discussion.

### **Dickinson's unique style contributes to the poem's meaning:**

Dickinson is known for her brevity, using concise language to convey profound ideas. The poem's succinctness forces readers to engage with each word carefully, extracting layers of meaning from seemingly simple phrases. Dickinson's frequent use of dashes creates pauses and interruptions within the lines, contributing to a unique rhythm. The dashes invite readers to pause and reflect, emphasizing each word and creating a sense of contemplation. This deliberate pacing mirrors the measured pace of the carriage ride with Death, drawing attention to the inexorable progression toward mortality. (W. Howard, 1957).

In summary, Emily Dickinson's distinctive stylistic choices in "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" contribute significantly to the poem's meaning. The use of dashes, unconventional punctuation, and compact language enhances the thematic depth, emotional resonance, and ambiguity of the work, inviting readers to engage with the complexities of mortality and the journey toward the afterlife.

**Analysis based conceptual metaphors used in Because I could not stop for death**

In First Stanza, the context of anthropological poetics, the initial stanza of the poem establishes two distinct referential domains: the Anthropos, denoted as RF A, and the Cosmos, referred to as RF C. The minimal semantic-imagistic units, designated as referential quanta or rq, that delineate these realms can be categorized as follows:

Table 1. The Minimal Semantic-Imagistic Units

RF A	RF C
rq1: Because I could not stop (line 1)	rq1: for Death (line 1)
rq2: for me (line 2)	rq2: He kindly stopped (line 2)
rq3: The Carriage held but just... (line 3)	rq3: and Immortality (line 4)

Initially, a cursory examination suggests a lack of semantic tension between RF A and RF C. However, numerous scholars express surprise at Emily Dickinson's perspective on death. Some argue that the personification of Death as a "gentlemen caller or suitor" implies that Death is perceived as an inevitable conclusion following the natural order of existence. This interpretation aligns with Dickinson's portrayal of death's imagined action as "kindly." While this observation may not be entirely accurate, given that the poem does not intend to address the empirical person of the poet, it offers profound insights for interpreting the poem.

The inherent tension in Dickinson's poem becomes apparent from its inception. Correlating Dickinson's portrayal of Death as a "pleasant" and "benevolent" suitor (RF C) with the image associated with the self's engagement in everyday life (RF A) highlights the semantic tension. The use of "couldn't" instead of "wouldn't" to stop for Death accentuates the dramatic aspect of one's demise, as death inherently signifies the cessation of life. This choice of language underscores the poem's exploration of the dramatic nature of death, where dying equates to the fundamental act of "stopping materials".

However, this interpretation encounters challenges when considering the third companion to Death's journey: Immortality. The juxtaposition of these two seemingly incompatible images already signals a departure from conventional metaphorical mappings. While Dickinson employs the journey schema, her metaphor diverges from our ordinary language, utilizing the DEATH IS DEPARTURE metaphor as a starting point to construct her unique poetic vision. Contrary to cognitive poetics' claim that generic-level parameters for Death are preserved, Dickinson's metaphor subverts these parameters to serve the specific poetic function. Cognitive poetics invoke religious traditions to explain Dickinson's metaphor, suggesting an "extension" from death-as-departure within the religious context. However, this explanation fails to align with Dickinson's actual poem. Freeman argues that Dickinson's metaphors defy the Calvinist theological model prevalent in the 19th century, presenting a "scientific" model

that challenges linear progressions toward predetermined destinations like heaven.

In essence, Dickinson's heterogeneous portrayal of Death supports interpretations that reject conventional views of life as a predetermined path leading to a specific destination, such as heaven. Instead, Dickinson's vision suggests that Eternity is embedded within time, challenging traditional notions of death and the afterlife.

In the subsequent stanzas of the poem, the tension between the referential fields of the Anthropos (RF A) and the Cosmos (RF C), as seen in the first stanza, is mitigated by a retreat within RF A. This attempt to alleviate the tension is evident from the second stanza, where the departure is portrayed as a pleasant journey, and Death is depicted as perpetual existence throughout eternity, contrasting with the mortality of human beings. The departure is no longer dramatic, but a momentary lapse from everyday activities, allowing the interruption of labor and leisure.

The journey commences slowly, with scenery reminiscent of various stages of human life, symbolizing childhood, adulthood, and old age. While Lakoff and Turner emphasize conceptual metaphors like PEOPLE ARE PLANTS and LIFETIME IS A DAY in their analysis of the third stanza, it's crucial to note that the sequence of events is not a mere review of past experiences. Instead, it is an imaginative construction, progressively preparing for the articulation of the third referential field.

The third stanza contributes to the endophoric strategy, mediating the tension by framing the lyric self's journey within the context of life. In contrast, the fourth stanza reverses the perspective, suggesting that the setting sun is passing the travelers. This change in viewpoint signifies a shift from life itself to a temporal point within eternity. Life is portrayed as a momentary point detached from the temporality of eternity.

Cognitive poetics interprets the fourth stanza as an occurrence of the LIFETIME IS A DAY metaphor, asserting that "Or rather - He passed Us" refers to the onset of death. However, this interpretation faces challenges, as Dickinson's poem does not conform to conventional expectations of death. Instead, the poetic journey seems to continue beyond death, challenging the idea that death marks the end of existence.

The destination is not the grave but a mere pause, suggesting futurity and the continuity of the journey. The subsequent lines clarify that the chill and dew, often associated with the onset of death, symbolize the light attire worn for a marriage, emphasizing death-as-wedding. This contradicts cognitive poetics' claim that death implies destruction, presenting it as a joyful new beginning that expands and fulfills being.

The image of a house superimposed on a grave is not aligned with the conventional understanding of the grave as a final destination. Dickinson's portrayal of the grave as a comfortable house suggests a pleasant and safe abode, emphasizing the comfort felt in the new life with Death. This marriage with Death is associated with Immortality, challenging the conventional notion that the grave is the final resting place for the human body. The poem's unique

background and imaginative world cannot be fully grasped by reducing it to ordinary experiences or cognitive metaphors.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the analysis of death representations in 19th-century American poetry, particularly focusing on Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," has provided valuable insights into the multifaceted and nuanced ways in which poets grappled with mortality during this period. The study has illuminated the intricate interplay of themes, symbols, and metaphors, shedding light on the evolving perceptions of death in the literary landscape. Explore the reception of poems like "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" among contemporary readers and subsequent generations. **Limitation:** Investigate how these works have influenced popular culture, shaped literary canons, or contributed to broader discourses on mortality.

## ADVANCED RESEARCH

In writing this article the researcher realizes that there are still many shortcomings in terms of language, writing, and form of presentation considering the limited knowledge and abilities of the researchers themselves. Therefore, for the perfection of the article, the researcher expects constructive criticism and suggestions from various parties.

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