Preparing to Read

Because I could not stop for Death

by Emily Dickinson

LITERARY SKILLS FOCUS: IRONY

In general, irony is a contrast between appearance and reality. The success of “Because I could not stop for Death” depends on irony, gradual comprehension, and a light-hearted, witty tone (attitude) that contrasts with the serious subject of the poem. In Dickinson’s work, a seemingly typical carriage ride turns into a trip through eternity. As you read, pay careful attention to details that differ from your expectations and create an ironic twist.

READING SKILLS FOCUS: SUMMARIZING A TEXT

A summary presents the general idea of a reading in brief form. Pausing to summarize main ideas and events can help a reader better understand a challenging work of literature. “Because I could not stop for Death” can be confusing because Dickinson uses time in an unusual way. As you read, pause after each stanza, summarize it, and note when the events described are occurring. An example of this process is provided on the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stanza</th>
<th>Summary of the stanza</th>
<th>When the events take place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Death graciously stops the carriage to pick up the speaker, who is seemingly in a hurry.</td>
<td>at the end of the speaker’s life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading Standard 2.4
Make warranted and reasonable assertions about the author’s arguments by using elements of the text to defend and clarify interpretations.

3.3 Analyze the ways in which irony, tone, mood, the author’s style, and the “sound” of language achieve specific rhetorical or aesthetic purposes or both.

3.4 Analyze ways in which poets use imagery, personification, figures of speech, and sounds to evoke readers’ emotions.
Because I could not stop for Death

SELECTION VOCABULARY

immortality (IHM AWR TAL UH TEE) n.: unending existence.
   In addition to herself, the speaker says that the carriage held Death and Immortality.

civility (SUH VIHL UH TEE) n.: courteous or polite behavior.
   According to the speaker, death behaves with great civility.

surmised (SUHR MYZD) v.: guessed or inferred with little supporting evidence.
   The speaker surmised from the clues on her journey that she, like all humans, was traveling toward death.

WORD STUDY

DIRECTIONS: Decide if the following word pairs are synonyms (words with the same or nearly the same definitions) or antonyms (words with opposite definitions). Write your answers on the blank lines.

1. immortality; timelessness ______________________
2. civility; impoliteness ______________________
3. surmised; inferred ______________________
Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality. A B

5 We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor 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— C

A LITERARY FOCUS
Underline the word in this stanza that characterizes Death in an ironic way.

B LANGUAGE COACH
People often confuse the words immortality and immorality. Although their spellings are similar, their meanings are very different. Briefly explain the difference between the two. Use a dictionary if necessary.

C VOCABULARY
Academic Vocabulary
What happens subsequent to (following) Death stopping for the speaker?
Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer\(^1\), my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle\(^2\)—

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice\(^3\)—in the Ground—

Since then—’tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity—

Select the Vocabulary in the final stanza:

A. What do you think the “House” is in line 17?

B. Selection Vocabulary

In the final stanza the speaker talks about figuring out where the carriage is heading. Knowing this, what do you think *surmised* means?

C. Summarize the final stanza.

---

1. gossamer: thin, soft material.
2. tippet . . tulle: shawl made of fine netting.
3. cornice: molding at the top of a building that sticks out.
**Use a Summary Table**

**Directions:** Complete the chart below by **summarizing** the second and third stanzas of “Because I could not stop for Death.” To help you decide when the events take place, use the first stanza as a reference point.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stanza</th>
<th>Summary of the stanza</th>
<th>When the events take place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Death graciously stops the carriage to pick up the speaker, who is seemingly in a hurry.</td>
<td>at the end of the speaker’s life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because I could not stop for Death

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

DIRECTIONS: Write “Yes” after each sentence if the vocabulary word is being used correctly. Write “No” if it is being used incorrectly, and rewrite the sentence so that the vocabulary word is used correctly.

1. In the poem, Death possesses *immortality*; he is able to drive his carriage forever. ______

2. Surprisingly, Death was quite polite and acted with respectful *civility*. ______

3. The speaker was *surmised* when Death stopped the carriage for her, as she wasn’t expecting it. ______

LITERARY SKILLS FOCUS: IRONY

DIRECTIONS: Write a brief paragraph that answers the following questions: In the poem, what is *ironic* about Death? How might you expect him to act? How does he actually act? What *tone* is used when talking about Death?

READING SKILLS FOCUS: SUMMARIZING A TEXT

DIRECTIONS: Write a brief paragraph discussing pausing and *summarizing* “Because I could not stop for Death” helped you better understand the poem.