An Analysis of Poetic Devises and Symbolism Used in Emily Dickinson's 'Because I could not stop for Death'

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson's 'Because I could not Stop for Death' is one of the most celebrated and researched poems in American literature. This research paper not only aims at analyzing the poem stylistically by exploring the figurative language and poetic devices used by the poet to portray the themes of death and immortality; but it is also an attempt to find out the contextual meaning of each figure of speech used in the poem. Descriptive qualitative research method is used in the current study to analyze the poem. The findings revealed that while writing her poems Emily broke the norm of conventional style of composing poetry by adopting a unique form. One such example is the use of half rhyme instead of full rhyme. Moreover, figures of speech such as Personification, metaphor, metonymy, antithesis, symbolism etc. are used which will help the reader understand the poem.
Key words: style, stylistic analysis, poetic devices, figurative language, symbolism, form

1. Introduction

"Because I Could Not Stop for Death" is generally considered to be one of the great masterpieces of American poetry. Written in around 1863, the poem was published in Dickinson's first posthumous collection, *Poems by Emily Dickinson,* in 1890. It has also been printed under the title "The Chariot." (1)
In this poem 'death' is portrayed as a gentleman who comes to give the speaker a ride to eternity. Throughout the poem, Dickinson develops her unusual interpretation of death and, by doing so, composes a poem full of imagery that is both unique and thought provoking. Through Dickinson's precise style of writing, effective use of literary elements, and vivid imagery, she creates a poem that can be interpreted in different ways. (2)

1.1. Style

In literature **'style'** can be described as a literary aspect that illustrates the ways in which a poet or a writer uses words — the author's word choice, sentence arrangement, figurative language, rhyme scheme and meter etc. all act collectively to create the mood, images, and meaning in the text. According to Leech (1969) the characteristic manner in which a writer expresses him- or herself or the particular way of a literary work, is style. (3)
Carter (1989) thinks that style generally depends on the linguistic levels. Because of this reason every text and writing is different from the other. (4) Crystal (1987) also regarded style as a distinctive use of language. (5)

1.2. Stylistics

Stylistics is a branch of linguistics which studies the style of a literary piece of writing/text to interpret it. Collins English Dictionary defines stylistics as a branch of

linguistics concerned with the study of characteristic choices in use of language, esp. Literary language, as regards to sound, form, or vocabulary, made by different individuals or social groups in different situations of use.

According to Widdowson (1975 p.3), 'Stylistics is the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation. He believes that stylistics is a link between literary criticism and linguistics.' (6)

1.3. Literary stylistic Analysis

In literary stylistic analysis, also called New Criticism, you don't look at the life or times of the poet. Instead, you focus entirely on the text—the words on the page—that are right in front of you. Here you are examining how the poet expresses his theme and tone through the stylistic devices he uses: his <u>imagery</u>, his use of rhyme, <u>alliteration</u>, assonance, point of view, etc. It means trying to squeeze all possible juice out of poem simply based on the words in the poem and how they are arranged, without regard to the poet's life or times. (8)

1.4. Figurative Language

According to Perrine (1982) "Figurative language – language using figures of speech- is language that cannot be taken literally. "Figures of speech are a way of saying something and meaning another. They serve the function of giving extended meaning to words, phrases or sentences from their literal expressions." Different figures of speech such as simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole etc. are used to convey that extended meaning. Perrine (1982) (9)

According to Kennedy (1983:479), Figurative language refers to words, and groups of words, that exaggerate or alter the usual meaning in figures of speeches of the component words. A figure of speech may be said to occur whenever a speaker or writer, for the sake of freshness or emphasis, departs from the usual denotations of words." (7)

2.   About the poet

Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1830 and lived there all her life. She began writing verse at an early age, practicing her craft by rewriting poems she found in books, magazines, and newspapers. She wrote close to 1800 poems in her lifetime but only seven poems were published in her life time, and these were all done anonymously, and often were heavily edited. Her poems are often extremely short, waste no words, and subvert the traditional forms of the day. She is also fond of the dash as a tool to signify a pause or provide emphasis. Her poems, though short, are usually complex in theme, form, and execution, and are often impossible to paraphrase. She deals with themes of death, faith, nature, love, as well as the difficulty of finding truth, fame, and grief, throughout this massive collection. (10)

Her poetry was stunningly original, ignoring or working against many of the traditions and conventions of the time. Her poems are almost all short, using the traditional hymnal stanza of quatrains of Verses alternating between four and three beats long.She largely used simple language, many off-rhymes, and unconventional punctuation to deal with a small set of themes that she returned to again and again. Each time she revisits one of these threads, she comes at it differently, never allowing her interpretation of truth to become entrenched or oversimplified. (10)

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 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 –

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 –

4.   Theme of the Poem

Theme of the poem 'Because I could not stop for Death' revolves around issues of death, immortality, final destination, limited power of human beings and mysterious nature of death. Death is a mystery because it does not show any plans rather embraces one all of a sudden. As narrator, in the poem, was busy in her life but suddenly death came and took her away. Death can come any time and catches any one it likes whether one is busy in merry making in this mortal world or surrounded by troubles. Immortality is an ambiguous idea given by Emily that is left to multiple interpretations by the readers, as it could be paradise, heaven, and hell or may be in between. The very title of the poem Because I could not stop for Death implies that one is too busy in worldly pursuits and does not have time to die even. (11)

5.   Stylistic Analysis of the poem

5.1   Analysis of the Figurative language Used in 'Because I could not Stop for Death'

 Not only rhythm and rhyme but figures of speech are also used as poetic devices which are tools that equip the writers to make their language of a literary piece of writing persuasive and stylish. They convey their feelings, ideas, and emotions effectively through these devices. Dickinson has also employed some literary devices in this poem. The analysis of some of the literary devices used in this poem has been stated below.

5.1.1. Personification:

Verse 2 of the poem 'He Kindly stopped for me' shows that Dickinson has personified 'Death' as a kind gentleman or may be a suitor who has come to take her with him. The human attribute of 'kindness' is given to death. The use of Pronoun 'He' further strengthens the image of death as a human being because 'he' is generally used for a man.

"The Carriage held but just Ourselves –   And Immortality"

<u>Verses 3 and 4</u> indicate that not only 'death' is personified but 'Immortality' is also personified; because the poet says when death came to take her on a ride, she noticed a third being sitting in the carriage and that was Immortality. Personification of death continues in <u>Verse 5</u> "We slowly drove -He knew no haste" and <u>Verse 8</u> "For His Civility" Emily has personified 'Sun' by giving it a human quality In <u>Verse 13</u> "- - **He** passed us- -".

5.1.2. Metaphor

Metaphors are one of the most extensively used literary devices. A metaphor refers to a meaning or identity ascribed to one subject by way of another. In a metaphor, one subject is implied to be another so as to draw a comparison between their similarities and shared traits. In the first stanza one example of a **metaphor** can be found i.e. 'The Carriage'. The **carriage** driven by Death is not literally a carriage rather it is a metaphor for life's journey towards death. Then in the fifth stanza she has used the metaphor of house for the grave. In Verses 16-17 she says,

> "We paused before a House that seemed
> A Swelling of the Ground – "

The house is reflected as a "grave" in a metaphorical sense indicating that from now on this grave is her permanent residence. (12)

5.1.3. Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same Verse. In this poem alliteration is found in <u>Stanza 2.</u> HE--haste, labor--leisure,
<u>Stanza 3</u>. School--strove, Recess--Ring, Gazing—Grain, Setting--Sun
<u>Stanza 4.</u> Dew—drew, Gossamer—Gown, Tippet—Tulle
Stanza 6.Horses—Heads, Since--Centuries

5.1.4. Antithesis

An antithesis is used when the writer employs two sentences of contrasting meanings in close proximity to one another. Whether they are words or phrases of the same sentence, an antithesis is used to create a stark contrast using two divergent elements that come together to create one uniform whole. (13) Emily uses an antithesis in her poem as follows. .
> "Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
> Feels shorter than the Day"

Here it means that though she has been in her grave for centuries but she feels that this whole time was less than a day. She wants to indicate that sense of time is lost once a person dies because it is eternity where time never ends.

5.1.5. Simile

A **simile** can be found in the fifth stanza in which she describes the house they stopped at as "seemed a Swelling of the Ground--," meaning a house that looked like swollen ground, like a mound, more specifically, a **burial mound**. Hence by using the verb "seemed," she is comparing the house to a burial mound.

5.1.6. Anaphora

In writing or speech, the deliberate repetition of the first part of the sentence in order to achieve an artistic effect is known as Anaphora. The examples of Anaphora are found in stanza 3, (Verse 9, 11, 12)

We passed the school, where children strove
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.

5.1.7. Synecdoche

Synecdoche is a literary device in which a part of something represents the whole, or it may use a whole to represent a part. Following is the example of synecdoche in this poem.

> "I first surmised the horses' heads
>   Were toward eternity—"

Here the phrase 'Horses' Heads ' does not refer to the heads only rather it refers to the horses that were moving towards eternity. Thus 'head' is a part which is referring to the 'body' which is a whole.

5.1.8. Symbolism

Symbolism is the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities, by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense. Symbolism can take different forms. Generally, it is an <u>object</u> representing another, to give an entirely different meaning that is much deeper and more significant. Dickinson uses the final literary element of symbolism to help the reader to understand the meaning that she is trying to convey. In the first stanza 'Carriage' symbolizes a journey from life to death. The carriage carries the speaker, who is symbolized as humanity, and her suitor, who is symbolized as death. The two characters create the third passenger of the carriage, who is immortality. Their carriage ride is also symbolic of time, since, like time, it moves slowly. In the third stanza 'School' symbolizes the first stage of one's life i.e. childhood. The phrase 'Fields of Gazing Grain' symbolizes another stage of life and i.e. the Youth and maturity. 'Setting sun' symbolizes the old age when a person becomes very feeble and is to death; the sun of his life is about to set. 'The Ring' symbolizes the cycle of time/life. In the fourth stanza 'quivering and chill' symbolizes that the death is cold and bitter and a person becomes cold once he dies. In the fifth stanza 'A Swelling in the Ground' represent the grave and 'cornice' refers to the tomb of the grave. [14]

5.2 Analysis of poetic Devices/Form of the Poem

Generally speaking poetic devices are quite the same literary devices; but there are a few that can only be used in poetry. Following is the analysis of some of the poetic devices used in this poem.

5.2.1. Stanza: In poetry, a stanza is a dividing and organizing technique which places a group of Verses, usually four or more, in a poem together, separated from other groups of Verses by Verse spacing or indentation. Stanzas are to <u>poetry</u> what paragraphs are to prose. Stanzas can be <u>rhymed</u> or unrhymed and fixed or unfixed in meter or syllable count. There are four stanzas with four Verses each in this poem. Because I could not stop for Death' is written in a stanziac form. There are six stanzas in the poem. [15]

5.2.2. Quatrain: A quatrain is a four-Versed stanza borrowed from Persian poetry. In this poem each stanza is a quatrain.

5.2.3 Meter: 'Meter is a stressed and unstressed syllabic pattern in a verse or within the Verses of a poem. Stressed syllables tend to be longer, and unstressed shorter.'[16] Because I could not stop for death" is written in iambic meter (meaning the Verses are made up of feet with two syllables in an **unstressed**-**stressed** pattern). Mostly, the poem alternates between tetrameter (four iambs per Verse) and trimeter (three iambs per Verse). The third stanza is a good example of this at work:

We **passed** | the **School**, | where **Chil**- | dren **strove** |
At **Re**- | cess – **in** | the **Ring** –
We **passed** | the **Fields** | of **Gaz**- | ing **Grain** – |
We **passed** | the **Sett**- | ing **Sun** – |

This particular metrical form is sometimes called common meter, and can often be found in ballad stanzas and church hymns. Verse 14 contains an interesting metrical variation. Whereas usually the metrical scheme would demand a Verse of iambic trimeter, this Verse packs in a few more syllables, gaining an extra foot:

The **Dews** | drew **quiv**- | er**ing** | and **Chill** –

In a way, this makes it seem as though a "Chill" runs throughout the Verse, briefly making it shiver and waver away from the usual metrical scheme.
All in all, however, the poem sticks remarkably close to its meter. This strong rhythmic quality, combined with its striking narrative and Dickinson's unusual turns of phrase, helps make the poem so memorable. (17)

5.2.3. Rhyme scheme:
The Rhyme scheme followed by Emily in this poem is ABCB. One can notice that second and fourth Verses of all stanzas rhyme. Dickinson has opted for '**Half Rhyme'** also known as slant or imperfect Rhyme. It is a rhyme in which the stressed syllables of ending consonants match; however, the preceding vowel sounds do not match. (17)

6. Analysis and summary of the Poem

In "Because I could not stop for Death—,"death is personified. He is not frightening; rather he is a courteous and gentle guide, leading her to eternity. The poet who is a narrator died long time ago. Now she recalls the day of her death as she was busy doing her daily work when suddenly a carriage stopped for her and a figure came out of the carriage to take her with him. This figure is in fact Death (Personification) that has come to take her to her final and permanent destination. It is noticed that here death is not an intimidating rather it's a gentle and kind figure. The poet was so engrossed in her day to day activities that she didn't have time to stop for death. But the death being very gentle and kind stopped for her. She was impressed by the kindness of death and sat with him in the carriage. The Carriage is a metaphor referring to the journey from life to Death where she is accompanied by death and immortality, a third figure in the carriage, whom she noticed after sitting in the carriage. So her journey towards death and immortality started this way. They were moving slowly now as the death was not in haste. A possible interpretation for this can be that concept of time ends the moment death arrives because time is an earthly concern. After death timelessness prevails. She put away her labour and leisure meaning all worldly pursuits for the civility of death.
In the third stanza it is observed that before arriving at her destination, they pass through different places. These places in fact refer to different stages of life that she recalls while moving to her final abode. She saw children playing at school which refer to the childhood. She passed by the' Field of Gazing Grain' that refers to youth or maturity. Setting sun refers to the old age, the time when one is near the end of his life and he can sense the death approaching him any time.
In the fourth stanza she says that chilly dew is settling in as the night is approaching near. It is too cold and she is wearing very thin clothes. The references to the thinness of the woman's clothing (her gossamer gown and her tulle tippet, or cape) suggest that she is growing cold—another reminder that she is now "dead."

In the fifth stanza she says that finally they have reached her destination and stopped before a house that looks like a swelling in the ground. This house is in fact the grave where the narrator / the woman will be laid to rest. She can hardly see the roof, and the "Cornice," or ornamental molding near the roofline, is only just visible above the pile of earth.

The final stanza shows a glimpse of this immortality. That immorality is the goal that is hinted at in the first stanza, where "Immortality" is the only other occupant of the carriage, yet it is only in the final stanza that we see that the speaker has obtained it. Time suddenly loses its meaning; hundreds of years feel no different than a day. Because time is gone, the speaker can still feel with relish that moment of realization, that death was not just death, but immortality, for she "surmised the Horses' Heads/Were toward Eternity –." By ending with "Eternity –," the poem itself enacts this eternity, trailing out into the infinite. (18)

7. Conclusion

After the analysis of the data found from the poem 'Because I could not stop for Death', it can be concluded that Emily has used a number of stylistic devices (including the figures of speech like metaphor, simile, personification, synecdoche, alliteration, antithesis and symbolism) and poetic devices (like half rhyme, iambic meter). Emily has used these poetic techniques so brilliantly that it enables the readers to interpret the poem. Emily Dickinson provides a unique perspective on death. She helps the reader imagine in advance what the experience of dying will be like.

Often poems about death focus on the emotions one feels as death nears or they focus on the afterlife. Not as many poems deal with the actual emotions *during* the process of dying, and this is the part that makes this poem so persuasively remarkable.

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