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Moving “Passed” Life for Death

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Emily Dickinson's poem #479, "Because I could not stop for Death," emphasizes the concept of movement through the word “passed.” This movement, although enviable, isn't linear. The poem's periodic stopping points drive the idea that motion remains until it ceases entirely, allowing a new cycle to begin. The paradoxical nature of moving and stopping work in tandem as the pauses made along the way highlight life's motion and allow readers to reflect alongside the speaker. Dickinson's radical use of the word “passed” suggests progression over one's journey through existence, but more importantly, indicates a continuance of life after death. Dying is often looked at in a threatening and fearful light, but the poem's thoughtful use of language alters readers' perception of Death.

The contradictory qualities of movement, accompanied by life, and stopping, accompanied by death, are interchanging throughout the poem. The fifth quatrain presents the speaker as "paused before a House that seemed / A Swelling of the Ground –" (17-18). For the first time, the vehicle has come to a complete stop with the speaker inside. “A House that seemed” gives the impression that this isn't the home she left behind since the term “seemed” indicates a sense of unfamiliarity. Rather, she arrived at a burial ground, where “A Swelling of the Ground” illustrates the freshly dug patch of land meant to hold her remains. Before the pause, Dickinson painted an active and lively setting in which the speaker moves along, but her fate is subtly introduced as the carriage halts. The speaker doesn't display any symptoms of worry in response to this realization of fate. She refers to the grave as a “House,” granting it a warm and welcoming feel instead of one that's morbid. Although Dickinson could have written this poem

with the speaker in a fixed location, she decided not to; remaining stagnant would not align with the true nature of living. All people experience life as constantly moving and changing, as found in the poet's illustrative language concerning the transforming setting; readers envision the speaker's view from the carriage as it advances, and it prompts us to reflect on our own timelines.

When expressing the ongoing journey of life, Dickinson portrays forward motion using "passed" to display moments of physical movement from one location or time to another. The poem observes the speaker's move across land. Early on, the speaker describes how a "Carriage held but just Ourselves" (3). This carriage serves as our speaker's vehicle and what brings her to the afterlife. The speaker goes on to explain that when riding inside the carriage, she "passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –" (11). At first glance, the reader may mistake “Gazing” for “Grazing" because it is typical for livestock to graze amidst a grain field. To graze also refers to the act of briefly touching some surface as one passes, promoting the idea of closeness in proximity. “Gazing” pushes our speaker outside the scene, and she is seen experiencing a movement in perspective. Having the ability to gaze from an exterior viewpoint momentarily gives the speaker the means to look at life's progression in a new light.

A shift occurring, not only in the perception of space proximity but in the speaker's comprehension of time, permits movement in the perception of her journey through life. In lines 21 and 22, readers hear the speaker reminisce about all the years that have gone by, saying, "Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet / Feels shorter than the Day.” She suggests that although a lengthy amount of time has passed, it feels as if it's been a much shorter period. Four words are capitalized: Since, Centuries, Feels, and Days. When put all together, “Since Centuries Feels Days” suggests that the speaker feels as though Centuries and Days are equal. Dickinson instills a classic symbol of dying when writing, "We passed the Setting Sun –" (12). Readers understand

that the day is coming to an end. The source equated to life fading away, enabling darkness and an essence of death to present themselves. The natural cycle of day and night parallels the mortality of our speaker. She is witnessing this natural transition of the sky while undergoing personal life changes. Dickinson's speaker has been made aware of how far along she is on her journey. She understands the ever-moving course of time and that life on Earth must eventually reach its end, and as a result, readers themselves reflect on how life is passing by faster than we know.

Dickinson's exhibiting various states of experience, from childhood to arriving at a post mortal condition, shows she understands the inevitable circuit of life and death and how "passed" has the potency to mark a change from one condition to another. Dickinson's writing expresses a transformation in human biological development, specifically from a preadolescent state. The speaker mentions that she had "passed the School, where Children strove" (9). Students playing illustrates the paradoxical standing of our speaker's life compared to the kids she observes. As our speaker experiences her last moments, these children simply go about their lives since they possess an innate naivety to humankind's inescapable fate. Meanwhile, the speaker has aged past her once youthful state and understands that she is reaching the end of her life. The final lines of Dickinson's work say, "I first surmised the Horses' Heads / Were toward Eternity –" (23-24). The speaker has realized that the horses drawing her carriage are proceeding toward the afterlife. It is important to highlight the phrase "Horses' Heads." Horses are typically characterized as courageous and free, traits that reflect the speaker's final moments. The horses and the speaker exemplify courage as they continue on their way despite death being seen as scary to many. "Heads" can be depicted as having a double meaning in this line. The word is recognized as being a body part of the horse; however, it also can be understood as a movement towards death,

bringing the reader's attention to the idea that freedom from her life on earth is coming soon. Then, the poem comes to its final stopping point, signifying the speaker's final advances toward death.

The poem conveys the speaker's reaction and acceptance of her inevitable death because “passed" can reference an exchange between two individuals. In her writing, Dickinson makes death a manifested being rather than an intangible phenomenon. Our speaker states, "Because I could not stop for Death – / He kindly stopped for me –" (1-2) when opening this poem. The word “Death” is capitalized and is referred to as a “He” to insinuate that death displays humanlike qualities, including autonomy and authority. The personification of Death allows it to interact directly with the speaker, and Death is the one who ultimately passes and gives our speaker her fate. Dickinson chooses the term "kindly" to characterize how the speaker perceived the initial delivery of her fate. The speaker's acceptance of death is apparent when, after settling in Death's chariot, she tells readers, "I had put away / My labor and my leisure too, / For His Civility –” (6-8). By emphasizing that the speaker's actions are “For His Civility,” she offers Death a sort of courtesy despite his reasons for consulting her. The speaker doesn't fight her inevitable end; she lets go of her old commitments to embrace and make her last few moments on Earth pleasant and reflective.

It's one thing for Dickinson to have embedded dashes repeatedly throughout the poem, as it alludes to the continual movement of the speaker's life while on Earth. Still, her choice to have a dash end her poem suggests a continuation of the speaker's journey after her death. Within the poem, dashes break up her journey, similar to how existence is broken up into different stages and walks of life. The dashes also slow down a reader's movement through the poem, representing how distinct periods can feel as if they are moving at different rates up until death.

Ending the work with a dash instead of a period has readers questioning whether there is more to come after death. The poet intentionally chose to use this punctuation mark; it creates a long, abrupt pause in a line or sentence. Similar to how the speaker was made to pause and reflect deeply during the final moments of her journey.

In this poem, death has a positive connotation, unlike many depictions in other media. The speaker recognizes death as something that shouldn't be our worry. Instead of fearing death, something we can't control, humanity should focus on how we live in the present and what we can do to better ourselves and our community with our time on Earth. Dickinson inspires readers to reflect and realize that living a life dictated by fear should be seen as scarier than our inevitable end.

Works Cited

Dickinson, Emily. Poem 479: “Because I could not stop for Death.” *The Poems of Emily Dickinson,* edited by R.W. Franklin, Harvard University Press, 1999.