

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

In this ingenious allegory, as compactly visualized as a screenplay, a proper, respectable lady is courted and then kidnapped and murdered by a smooth gentleman caller. The “I” of the poem is obviously not Emily Dickinson but a coy role she is toying with, a persona (mask) as intricate as the one created by William Blake for his exploited chimney sweep. Dickinson’s protagonist shares the sweep’s dangerous naivete: both are cheerful, chatty innocents who meet but never comprehend the dark forces at work in the world.

“Because I could not stop for Death – / He kindly stopped for me”: the poem begins with the singsong rhythms and perfect rhyme that Dickinson uses to signal a character’s childlike confidence in life’s benevolence, sometimes symbolized by imagery of springtime beauty. We too are sucked into a receptive mood by the pat social formulas. The trusting speaker fails to see that her suitor’s good manners (“Civility” 8) are a ruse. He is a seducer and cad, a trickster or confidence man—a common archetype in nineteenth-century American folklore and literature. A pleasant ride in the country will end in horror.

The first stanza’s punning wordplay was inspired by seventeenth-century Metaphysical poetry, a then-unfashionable style that Dickinson deeply admired. On the literal level, the mysterious visitor has “kindly stopped” by to give the lady a lift because she’s too engrossed to take a break from her busy workday (2). On the symbolic level, things are more disturbing: her reluctance to “stop” is peremptorily overridden by his superior force. Death comes, in other words, when we least expect it. His “kindly” behavior is merely natural for mankind in its kinship of mortality. (Puns on “kin”/“kind” are a staple of seventeenth-century literature; for example, *Hamlet* I.ii.65.) “The Carriage held but just Ourselves – / And Immortality”: the lady is lured from home by the promise of “Immortality,” who acts in the allegory as a prim, spectral chaperone (3–4). Their carriage is a hearse (perhaps borrowed from Blake’s “London”) with just one destination. “We slowly drove – He knew no haste”: Death’s courtly consid-

eration is really the solemn pace of a funeral procession (5). The speaker is automatically, unthinkingly gracious, deferring her own pressing schedule: "And I had put away / My labor and my leisure too, / For His Civility" (6-8). Dickinson's genius for concision and economy is illustrated in the great line "My labor and my leisure too," which movingly sums up all of human life with its strains and satisfactions.

Stanzas three and four track Death and the maiden on their village tour. At first crisp and specific, the images blur as the speaker's senses weaken and contract. "We passed the School, where Children strove / At Recess - in the Ring": the lively scene, seemingly so simple and innocuous, is contemplated over a melancholy distance of space and time (9-10). This passage shows how Dickinson's archaic, Anglo-Saxon capitalizations (which, along with her innovative, syncopated dashes, were condescendingly "corrected" and removed in the first posthumous collections of her work) give her nouns concreteness as well as philosophical breadth. In literal terms, the school is just a school, like those that introduced the poet to the larger world. Symbolically, however, the school is society itself, indoctrinating the masses and erecting its frail barrier against implacable reality. Thus the "Children" are all of humanity, who crave verities or absolutes in order to survive. Their lack of independence (as seen by the fiercely agnostic Dickinson) keeps them in a juvenile condition. The prior stanza's "labor" and "leisure" are reprised in the way the students oddly "strive" at recess. Work and achievement are child's play in the eyes of the gods; honors and wealth evaporate at death's arrival. The "Ring" is the competitive arena of earthly life, a gated paddock where men are schooled like horses. It's also a communal circle dance, like the one ending Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," suggesting order and regularity on the one hand but conformity and entrapment on the other.

"We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain": an eerie army of mute bystanders stretches out on every side (11). Arrayed by the millions, the wheat stalks with their eyelike heads become human beings waiting for gathering by the Grim Reaper or Christ himself, who wields a sickle on doomsday (Revelation 14.14-16.) Are they staring patiently toward heaven, or accusingly at her? If the latter, the lady recalls Marie

Antoinette in her tumbril, rattling through mobbed streets toward the scaffold. (Metaphors about the luckless Bourbons occur elsewhere in Dickinson.) The carriage's path is methodically charted by the tripled phrase "We passed," which also counts off dwindling time (9, 11, 12). Progression becomes regression as the carriage leaves civilization: we follow the travelers from house to school to farmland (agriculture = nature ordered), until we reach pure, unreconstructed nature, the ominous "Setting Sun," where the lady and her escorts seem to drop off the end of the earth (12).

At the poem's exact midpoint, there is a hesitation or stutter ("Or rather -"), as the personified Sun obliviously vanishes ("He passed Us") and the lady's mental powers start to dim (13). Movement slows, and the imagery shifts downward from the sharply visual to the numbly tactile: "The Dews grew quivering and chill" (14). The lady suddenly finds herself underdressed, disastrously unprepared for nightfall: her pretty "Gossamer" gown is stitched of wispy cobwebs, and her tulle "Tippet" (shawl) is light as chiffon (tulle is fine netting for veils and ballet costumes; 15-16). She's decked out for a wedding that will never happen: the soul as bride of Christ is clad in filmy illusions, a false optimism about salvation and resurrection. The inescapable reality is the cold, damp grave, where she is abandoned. By metonymy (rhetorical displacement), "quivering" actually describes not the dews, of course, but the fearful lady herself, who no longer recognizes her body as her own.

A "pause" turns full stop: the end of the parade is "a House that seemed / A Swelling of the Ground"—like a cozy, thatched honey-moon cottage covered with vines (17-18). But "the Roof was scarcely visible - / The Cornice [a wall's molded upper rim] - in the Ground": we're suddenly in a Gothic novel, with its gloomy, decaying, haunted mansion (19-20). The indecipherable roof is probably a cemetery mound—just a heap of slowly subsiding dirt. The word "Ground," ending two lines in the same stanza, brings the rhyme scheme to a grinding halt (18, 20). After the first stanza's carefree regularity, the rest of the poem uses unsettling, daringly modern off rhymes to hint at the speaker's loss of control as well as the gradual breakdown of meaning ("away"/"Civility"; "Ring"/"Sun"; "chill"/"Tulle"). The

insistent repetition of "Ground" (its very sound conveying grungy nondifferentiation and obscurity) dramatizes the return of all earthly things to dust. As in Shelley's "Ozymandias," we are left amid ruins in a barren landscape.

"Since then - 'tis Centuries": the happy patter opening the poem seems eons away (21). Yet because of the atrophy of the lady's faculties, elapsed time "feels shorter than the Day" of her fateful journey (22). History is over for her but not through a Second Coming; on the contrary, it was Christ's rosy offer of an afterlife that cruelly duped and defrauded her. God himself is the suave kidnapper. That the carriage's apocalyptic "Horses' Heads" are steering "toward Eternity," however, raises the question of whether God is the driver or the driven, himself a victim of larger, impersonal forces (23-24). The lady is Everyman: males too don the gauzy, feminine gown of sentimentality and self-delusion. The speaker's hazy recollection of when she "first surmised" she was booked on a one-way trip to the underworld lets us fleetingly share her moment of terror. But it's the last thing she or we can think, as the poem ends in extinction of consciousness.