

## THE READER'S INTERPRETATION OF DEATH'S CONCEPT 'BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH' POEM BY DICKINSON

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### Abstract

Literature has frequently dealt with death, giving a variety of interpretations. Death is portrayed in Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* as a peaceful and unavoidable transition rather than a terrifying conclusion. This study uses the reader-response method to examine how contemporary readers understand death in the poem. Readers from a range of backgrounds participate in the study, which uses a qualitative descriptive design. Structured questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data, providing insights into the impact of readers' emotional and cultural viewpoints. To find recurrent themes in the responses, thematic analysis was employed. Results show that cultural origins and individual experiences greatly influence how people view death. The majority of readers find Dickinson's depiction of death to be serene and unavoidable, but some find it disturbing or unclear. In line with the fundamental ideas of the reader-response theory, the findings validate that readers' interactions with literature are impacted by their feelings, experiences, and social settings. By highlighting how readers' viewpoints influence literary interpretation, the study advances our knowledge of how poetry's meaning-making is dynamic.

**Keywords:** *literary analysis, death symbolism, reader-response theory, poetry interpretation.*

### INTRODUCTION

Death is one of the oldest fascinations in literary work, inspiring literature in many ways. However, numerous, varied, and comprehensive approaches exist to understanding death. During the 1800s, American poet Emily Dickinson created a distinctive depiction of death in her poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death". The poem challenges readers of all ages regarding how to understand the personification of time, death, and life after death (Kasbekar, 2017). Every reader has a different interpretation of a text, which leads to varying interpretations for each reader. Dickinson presents death as a normal aspect of life and a possible route to immortality, rather than as a final judgment or a terrifying conclusion, a departure from conventional religious beliefs (Kasbekar, 2017).

Reading literature is an adventure that entails generating meaning through emotions and histories (Rosenblatt, 1978). Meaning is created through the reader and text interaction (Mart, 2019). Readers interpret and comprehend things differently (Dewi et al., 2020). This is also relevant for readers of Dickinson's poem, who may comprehend death differently based on their experiences, cultural background, and religious views (Rosenblatt, 1978). Death, depicted as a pleasant and non-threatening character in this poem, may be viewed as a natural and tranquil process by certain readers, while others may perceive it with fear or uncertainty (Daghamin, 2017).

Reader-response theory is produced when the readers interact with the text (Dobie, 2012). This approach makes readers possible to actively interpret the meaning of the text by using the reader-response strategy. In understanding the poem, its various theories, such as constructivism, which believes that meaning is changed by environment and human experience, might affect how readers interpret the notion of death (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Prior studies of Emily Dickinson's poetry have mostly concentrated on literary, cultural, and thematic elements rather than how modern readers interpret the poem's topic. For instance, thematic analysis to examine Dickinson's nuanced view of death showed a variety of ways and exposed her contradictions to views on death (Daghmin, 2017). Moreover, readers' emotional and intellectual involvement can enhance their comprehension of literature (Mart, 2019). Dickinson's portrayal of death is revealed to be consistent with the idea that cultural context might influence how it is interpreted (Ahmadi, 2019). However, there is a dearth of research on how modern readers understand Dickinson's poetry's topic. Using a reader response methodology, this study tries to close the gap by examining how readers' varied viewpoints influence how they see death in the contemporary world. By exploiting the reader's cognitive foundation—that is, their prior understanding of the concept of death—this study is expected to highlight the emotional reactions that readers have after reading Dickinson's poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death." Nevertheless, there is a dearth of research on how modern readers understand Dickinson's poetry's topic.

This points to investigating readers' reactions to the poems' death-related subjects. The major objective of this is to decide how readers respond to the concept in Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" and whether readers' backgrounds, such as life experiences, have an effect on how they comprehend and translate the poem's topics of passage. In this way, the reason for this inquiry is to look at the relationship between personal circumstances and recognitions and how these may impact how individuals approach the topic of passing in verse.

### **Reader's Response Approach**

The reader response method to literary criticism focuses on the reader's reactions to the text, without whose attention and reactions the text would be inert and meaningless (Dobie, 2012). According to reader-response theory, meaning is produced by the readers and their relationship with the text, and also reading literature is an adventure that entails generating meaning through emotions and histories (Spirovska, 2019). When comprehending how a book generates meaning or exists in a world beyond its creator, Rosenblatt believes that the reader is just as significant as the text itself (Rosenblatt, 1978). Reader response highlights the significance of the reader-text relationship (Dobie, 2012). The reader's experiences, feelings, and background all play a role in determining a text's meaning in addition to its actual substance (Rosenblatt, 1978). As demonstrated by the various reactions to Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," readers' comprehension of the text might fluctuate based on their situation and upbringing.

Through the advancement of her transactional theory, it is believed that readers must "compensate" for a particular text for a poem to exist (Rosenblatt, 1978). By emphasizing the interaction between the text and the reader, her reader-response theory is rooted in meaning production in the lived experience through the quality of literary work.

### **Concept of Death in Literature**

Death is used not only as a theme but also as a part of the evolutionary cycle in literary genres and forms (Fowler, 1974). Death in this context does not only refer to a biological event, but also as a symbol of change, transformation, or the end of a certain phase in human life or in the narrative form itself (Hadimadja, 2016). In general, death in literature is a complex phenomenon involving cycles of birth, death, and rebirth of ideas and forms of literary expression. This underscores that the concept of death is not a definitive end, but rather part of the creative process and continuous development in the literary world (Fowler, 1974).

Death in literature is a concept that is frequently depicted with multiple connotations; it may be portrayed as a serene conclusion or as a terrifying end (Lobo, 2015). This idea can be applied to Dickinson's poetry to comprehend how readers understand the passive "death" that Dickinson depicts using journey-reflective imagery.

Furthermore, the idea of death and literature are closely related, particularly when considering Romanticism as a philosophical movement (Syofyan, 2023). Given that Emily Dickinson was a poet of the Romantic age, the poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" is conceptually frequently linked to the idea of romantic literature. In that era, death was an interpretation of the grief, loss, and longing that they subsequently poured into their works; the idea of death served as inspiration (Hadimadja,2016).

### **Symbolism in the poem**

Symbolism is the art or practice of employing symbols to express abstract ideas or convey particular meanings (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Symbolism in literature enables authors to use metaphors and imagery to convey difficult feelings and ideas (Faur,2012). This approach is particularly clear in poetry, where symbols can enhance the reader's experience by arousing emotions and stimulating thought (Dobie, 2012).

Symbolism in Emily Dickinson's 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death' reveals several levels of significance that fall into four categories (Freedman,2015). A personal emblem that expresses Dickinson's own belief that death is a normal part of existence, death is depicted as serene and peaceful. Additionally, the carriage serves as a cultural icon, portraying death as a passage to the afterlife—a notion that is prevalent in many cultures. While ambiguous symbols can evoke varying interpretations of mystery or tranquility based on individual perspectives, universal symbols, such as the image of twilight, signify the duality of death and immortality, illustrating that death is merely a transition within the continuum of existence (Faur,2012). To reflect on more general issues of identity, purpose, and the human condition, poets used death as a metaphor to address the fleeting aspect of existence (Raza & Zahra, 2024).

### **Reader's Experiences: Background in Poem About Death**

Reading is a transactional process between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1978), in which meaning is not just found in the text's words but is also co-created by the reader's background, experience, and emotional reaction. According to this theory, readers connect dynamically with the text on an emotional level and interpret it according to Rosenblatt's perspectives. For instance, readers' experiences with loss and their emotional reactions to Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" influence their interpretations of death in different ways (Rosenblatt, 1978).

The portrayal of death in Emily Dickinson's poetry captures readers' individual experiences as well as their cultural background. Death was viewed by readers in the nineteenth century as a normal aspect of life that should be patiently and sincerely accepted. However, readers of today can perceive death as more distant or avoided due to the effect of contemporary social conventions.

### **Previous Research**

Previous research on Emily Dickinson's poetry has often focused on literary, historical, and biographical aspects, rather than on how contemporary readers engage with the issue of death in her writing. Dickinson's approach to death is complex, containing emotional, intellectual, and social elements influenced by her childhood and life experiences. Research on Emily Dickinson's perception of death was conducted to understand its implications in Western philosophy with a focus on the theme of death. One example is research conducted by Daghamin (2017). The study used qualitative methods and thematic analysis to describe death in Dickinson's work, presenting death in various complex forms, uncovering its contradictions, and attempting to understand the inevitable aspects of life.

In the context of education, the influence of the reader's context on the interpretation of meaning in the interaction between the reader and the literary text has also been studied. Using reader response theory through literary discussion, this research shows that readers' emotional and intellectual engagement can enhance their understanding and appreciation of literature (Mart, 2019). Other approaches also show that the concept of death can be interpreted diversely depending on different cultural contexts, experiences, and the psychology of death (Kara,2023). This research highlights how characters in fiction deal with death and the associated emotional responses, ranging from anxiety to

acceptance. This is in line with themes in Dickinson's poetry, which depicts death as a serene figure accompanying the human journey and can open up new perspectives on how different cultures interpret death (Ahmadi,2019).

Research adopting reader response theory suggests that readers' emotional and intellectual engagement can enhance their understanding of literary texts, including poetry about death. This research supports the findings that looked at how readers' emotional, cultural, and experiential backgrounds affect their interpretation of death in Dickinson's poetry. It underlines the variation in the perception of death, with some readers perceiving it as a peaceful experience, while others see it as a threat.

## **METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach to gather detailed and meaningful information. By looking at each character's background and personality as part of a larger whole, this method aims for a holistic understanding (Sembiring et al.,2024). Emily Dickinson's 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death' was selected for this study because Dickinson personifies death as patient and respectful, portraying it as a presence that waits for individuals to complete their life's purpose before guiding them to the afterlife (Alqaryouti,2016). The primary instruments employed in this study are questionnaire and in-depth structured interviews with participants to learn how they respond to Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death"'s depiction of death and to examine whether readers' backgrounds—such as age, education, culture, and life experiences—impact how they understand the concept. The structured interview is one kind of interview in which researchers pose a set of pre-planned questions to every respondent (Arianto,2024). These inquiries were predicated on narrowly defined groups of responses. The interview process starts with the following steps: (1) choosing respondents, specifically literary readers who were familiar with Dickinson's poetry; (2) preparing the interview's topic; (3) openly conducting the interview; (4) ensuring a smooth conversation; (5) validating and concluding the interview; (6) documenting the findings in field notes; and (7) identifying follow-up collected data, (Lincoln & Guba, cited by Sugiyono, 2019).

Data from questionnaires were also collected to supplement the findings in this investigation. Questionnaire instruments were employed in qualitative approaches to assist in analyzing data derived from research objects (Ardiansyah et al.,2023). Open-ended and closed-ended questions were included in the mixed questionnaire used to collect responses from respondents. According to their viewpoints, respondents can complete the replies. They can also offer analysis in the form of numerical values, such as a percentage of the results, which makes it simpler to investigate and evaluate the responses (Kwik Kian Gie School of Business, 2024).

The data analysis strategy employed in this study follows the five-phase approach developed (Bingham (2022). The first phase is data organization, which gathers and classifies the information from the earlier literature study. This aimed to comprehend how meaning is created through the interaction of readers and texts (Rosenblatt, 1978). This phase concentrated on gathering the key ideas in the theory that have been presented, such as the theory of reader response and the concept of death in the literature (Lobo, 2015). The second phase focused on categorizing the data into relevant subject categories for creating topical codes, as described in the literature review, such as Dickinson's "reader-text interaction," "concept of death," and symbolism in "Because I Could Not Stop for Death". To complement the analysis of Dickinson's poems, these topical categories assisted in classifying pertinent information.

Next, the third phase, "understanding the data," employed open code to identify themes and patterns in the data. This phase examined people's views about death through Dickinson's poetry's symbolism and how death is perceived in the social and cultural contexts involved. In the fourth phase of the analysis process, the data was interpreted following the discovery of patterns and themes. The findings were developed according to the specified themes. In this study, memorization has been employed to document readers' opinions regarding how contemporary readers have responded to

Dickinson's poetry. The fifth phase was applying theory and placing findings, which described the last step in this study's data processing process. The findings were linked to the ideas covered in the literature review during this phase. This phase also covers how Dickinson's poetry depiction of death tells the reader's own experience and how the data findings enhance comprehension of the reader's engagement with the work.

The five-phase data analysis paradigm helps researchers analyze qualitative data (Bingham, 2022). It includes preparation, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination. While thematic coding highlights important similarities, interpretation combines themes to provide a complex view of Dickinson's poem's depiction of death.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Reader Response to Personification of Death in the Poem 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death' by Dickinson**

#### ***Death as A Peaceful Experience***

According to the questionnaire findings, 58% of participants believed that Dickinson's poem depicted death as tranquil and normal. They reacted to this poem's portrayal of "Death" as a journey that unites people and fosters acceptance and serenity. Regarding the excerpts from the interview, the respondents also said, "The poem 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death' represents Dickinson's view of death as a peaceful experience through diction and metaphors that have deep meaning for the reader, changing the view of death which is typically viewed with fear and loneliness." Dickinson was able to take readers to a new place where they were not only reassured but also motivated to see death more optimistically by combining the personification of death with soothing diction. According to this view, readers could relate to this poetry on a deep level and realize that dying need not be a frightening process. This illustrates how poetry could affect emotions and perspectives on life, particularly through the way poets use language to alter perceptions.

#### ***Death as a Frightening Thing***

There is a noticeable shift, as seen by the findings of the questionnaire, that roughly 23% of respondents thought that death was a terrible and alienating part of human life. Some people may still find it difficult to accept "death" as a benign concept because they have a history of terrible death-related events, even if Dickinson personifies it as such. The respondent's statement during the interview, "I have become numb to death because I have faced the pain of losing someone very precious, so this poem is only considered as a literary work that tell about death with beautiful words," validates the results of the questionnaire. Even though Dickinson's poem aims to present a kinder view of death, readers' interpretations of death are nonetheless influenced by their own experiences of loss and grief. This demonstrates how life experiences and intense emotions may have a significant impact on how people react to literary works, making the meaning of death extremely subjective.

#### ***Death as Neutral***

Death as neutral is another personification that roughly 11% of respondents identified. They view death as merely continuing the previously described course of life when life's journey naturally comes to an end. There's nothing to dislike or be afraid of. Death is merely a natural passage and another aspect of life. The number of interviewees who stated that "Death will come at any time, whether you are satisfied with this life, death cannot be avoided," supports the questionnaire's findings. According to the findings, a small percentage of respondents believe that death is a normal part of life and a neutral, inevitable phenomenon. According to this perspective, death will arrive in due time fearlessly. In Dickinson's poetry, death is also viewed by some readers as a peaceful and inevitable conclusion that should be accepted with understanding and acceptance rather than as a dramatic conclusion.

#### ***Death As a Threatening***

About 5% of respondents said that death is menacing in this personification of "death." This is rather disconnected from Dickinson's poem's depiction of death for those who interpret it through a formalist and linguistic perspective. However, after reading this poetry, some people would find this viewpoint quite realistic since it reminds them that death might strike at any time. The interviewees compared Dickinson's poem, which expresses tranquil poetry, with other literary works that portray death as a terrifyingly dangerous idea. This has a significant impact on the context of one's conception of death. Although this poem normally depicts death more mildly, certain readers who are particularly sensitive to the subject of death may experience tension or anxiety when reading it. This demonstrates how one's perception of death can vary greatly depending on their personal beliefs, culture, and life experiences.

### ***Discussion***

It can be concluded from the data exposure of the aforementioned findings that Dickinson's poetry is open to subjective and individualized interpretations. Depending on their knowledge or experience of life and death, readers' perceptions of death will vary (Rosenblatt, 1995). Following Rosenblatt's view, the meaning of literary texts can be formed through the interaction between the reader and the text, where the reader plays a role in creating meaning based on emotional and cognitive experiences. This reveals that readers' reactions to the interpretation of the meaning of death in Dickinson's poetry vary substantially. Most participants respond to death as a serene experience, while others perceive death as terrifying, neutral, or even as dangerous. It is also implied that death is a notion that is frequently articulated with multiple connotations and is supported by the difference in meaning that results from the personification of death. Death can be summed up as either a peaceful finale or a terrifying end, according to the findings (Lobo, 2015).

## **The Influence of The Reader's Experience Background on The Concept of Death in The Poem 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death' by Dickinson**

### ***Personal Experience Backgrounds***

The results of the questionnaire have revealed that nearly every respondent had lost a loved one. 82% of the respondents believed that Dickinson's depiction of death was unavoidable in light of this tragic event. About 11% of respondents said that death is a frightening and unpredictable event, while a smaller percentage said that death in this poem signifies the beginning of the next stage of life. One of the respondents argued that "the experience of death is quite descriptive, intersecting with the experience of losing a loved one due to death". Another respondent said that "for people who rarely have experiences related to death, interpreting the concept of death in this poem as a peaceful end for people who are ready to leave the world and to transition to the death phase."

As the explanation above demonstrates, literature, especially poetry, can provoke thought and give readers a place to process their feelings. People can use this poem's special features to cope with important literary issues like death. Literature gives readers a safe and contemplative place to face their sentiments about death, grief, and uncertainty through the use of well-chosen words, metaphors, and personification, like in Dickinson's poem 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death'.

### ***Symbolism in the Poem***

No.	Symbolism	Explanation
1.	<i>The Carriage</i> held but just Ourselves – And Immortality.	Described as a coffin as the last vehicle to the last resting place, or as a vehicle or voyage to death, as the culminating stage of life.

2. We passed <i>the School</i> , where <i>Children strove</i> <i>At Recess</i> – in the Ring – We passed <i>the Fields of Gazing Grain</i> – We passed <i>the Setting Sun</i> –	As Dickinson walks past the school, the kids sleeping, the rice fields, and the sunset, it seems as though she is attempting to describe the tranquil stage of life.
3. We slowly drove – He knew <i>no haste</i> .	Since death is an eternal fate, it arrives "unhurriedly." No one knows that death is a natural, enigmatic aspect of existence, thus, it is not in a rush to occur.

This reading of Dickinson's poem's symbolism portrays death as a normal progression toward the conclusion of life. A vehicle that transports one to eternal life is shown in the sentence "The Carriage held but just Ourselves - and Immortality," implying an unavoidable end voyage. Before reaching the destination, the reader is encouraged to reminisce about the wonderful moments in life. The carriage can also be viewed as a coffin, a means of transportation to an eternal resting place.

The lyric "We passed the school, where Children strove" follows. As though Dickinson wishes to portray a tranquil trip of life, "At Recess - in the Ring - We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain - We passed the Setting Sun" illustrates the phases of life from happy childhood to luscious maturity to the maturity of life. Dickinson emphasizes that death is a part of life that need not be feared because it comes with calm and follows the natural flow of life in the final line, as shown in the line "We slowly drove - He knew no haste," which depicts death as an eternal destiny that arrives quietly and without speed.

### ***The Influence of the Reader's Background on Understanding Death***

According to questionnaire data, around 47% of participants said that this poem affected their perception of death as the idea of passing away and entering the next stage of life. According to a religiously inclined interviewee, "The understanding of death-themed literary works from a religious perspective, which states that in the perspective of faith and piety, death is a reminder for us to prepare ourselves to meet the Almighty," was the quote's conclusion.

In the previous explanation, respondents discovered some symbolism and interpreted it in light of their perspectives on death, which were shaped by their prior experiences with death. This relates to Rosenblatt's idea, which holds that the reader's cognitive understanding and prior knowledge are more important in determining changes in interpretation than their engagement with the text.

### **Discussion**

It is evident from the data collected from the respondents that their personal experiences, particularly those involving the death of a loved one, have an impact on how they understand death in Emily Dickinson's poems. For people who have suffered less loss, death may be viewed differently. They are more inclined to view death as a natural transition, whereas most others view death as an unavoidable fate. The poem is, therefore, more than just a work of literature; it is a tool for in-depth introspection since it allows readers to engage with their conception of death.

Respondents' understanding of Emily Dickinson's poetry's depiction of death is influenced by their individual experiences. According to the results of the study, 82% of respondents who had experienced the loss of a loved one tended to view death as an inevitable fate, whereas only 11% thought it was a frightening and unpredictable event. Some respondents also believed that death was a normal part of life. During the interviews, some participants disclosed how their personal experiences, like losing a significant other, had affected how they understood the poem's depiction of death, making it seem more immediate and pertinent. Conversely, those who had encountered fewer death-related incidents were more inclined to believe that death was a natural and tranquil part of life. Readers' interpretations of the poem are significantly influenced by their cognitive understanding and personal

experience (Rosenblatt, 1995).

The subject of serenity in death is reinforced by Dickinson's meticulous use of symbolism, such as *The Carriage*, which represents the coffin or the last voyage to everlasting life, and lines that portray peaceful stages of life, including school, fields, and sunset. Readers are prompted to consider their thoughts and feelings about dying. Dickinson emphasizes the everlasting and natural aspect of death in this poem, making it appear gradual and unhurried, giving readers the impression that dying is nothing to be dreaded.

The information also demonstrates that readers' religious backgrounds have an impact on how they understand death in this poem. The poem served as a reminder to those respondents who identified as Islamic to be spiritually prepared for death. This viewpoint demonstrates the power of literature to encourage in-depth religious contemplation. Poetry can be a safe space for readers to engage with sentiments of death, grief, and uncertainty, and this conclusion supports the significant influence of personal experience in forming readers' perceptions of literature.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that readers' personal experiences have a significant impact on how they understand Emily Dickinson's poem 'Because I Could Not Stop for Death's depiction of death. Death is perceived as either a natural transition or a frightening event by most people who have lost a loved one, while others tend to see it as an unavoidable fate. Rosenblatt (1978), which holds that the reader's interaction with a literary work shapes its meaning and is impacted by their individual emotional and cognitive experiences, is consistent with this. The understanding of how readers' individual experiences impact how they interpret literary texts can be furthered by this research. A more thorough understanding of how literature works will likely be provided by future studies that include a larger range of reader groups with varying ages, ethnic backgrounds, and religious beliefs.

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