



 Prestwick House

Free Lesson Plan

NATIONAL POETRY MONTH:

“Because I could not stop for Death”—Visualizing Meaning and Tone

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1,2,4,5,7,106 | TEKS 110.30-34 (b).3,7

By Douglas Grudzina

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Objectives:

- Introduce tone in poetry and examine how a poet can achieve a particular tone
- Evaluate the effectiveness of a graphic image in conveying a poem’s overall tone
- Learn to understand connotative, allegorical, and metaphoric meanings and use these meanings to draw inferences
- Learn to support all inferences and non-literal interpretations with textual evidence

Time:

60 Minutes or 1 Class Period

Materials:

Handouts:

“Because I could not stop for Death” – Poem Text

(sufficient copies for each student to have one)

“Because I could not stop for Death” – Chart 1 – Literal Meaning

“Because I could not stop for Death” – Chart 2 – Allegorical Meaning

(sufficient copies of each for at least every other student)

Poster: *Prestwick House National Poetry Month Poster: “Because I could not stop for Death”*

(Click [here](#) for free download)

Procedure:

- 1. Distribute copies of the poem to each student.**
- 2. Read the poem aloud or select a student to read the poem aloud.**



3. Before discussing tone and mood, help students interpret the literal meaning of the poem.

Distribute “Because I could not stop for Death” – Chart 1 – Literal Meaning

Have students work individually to paraphrase and summarize the surface meaning of the poem using the provided chart; OR you may choose to do this as a full-class activity.

4. Distribute “Because I could not stop for Death” – Chart 2 – Allegorical Meaning

Have students work individually or in pairs to examine the most likely non-literal interpretation of the poem; OR you may choose to do this as a full-class activity.

5. Reconvene the class and discuss the non-literal (allegorical and metaphoric) significance of the journey.

Briefly explain the metaphoric significance of the narrative.

In the midst of human life, when it is not expected and certainly not convenient, we will die. Rather than being a grim force to be feared, Death is pleasant and gentle. In fact, while death might be the end of what we are doing in this life, it is really nothing more than the means to everlasting life. The grave is merely the repository for our physical remains; the final destination is Eternity.

What do the third and fourth stanzas contribute to the metaphor introduced in the first stanza?

- What is the literal plot of the third stanza?

During her carriage ride with Death, the speaker passes a school where children are playing and a field where grain is ripening.

- What common association with Death does this simple plot recall?

It is said that while a person is dying, his life “passes before his eyes.”

- What image do the lines

We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—

convey? To what metaphorical event might this image refer?

The image is not altogether clear: the speaker passing the setting sun. Perhaps, we are supposed to see the horse and carriage silhouetted against the sun, a glowing semi-circle dipping behind the horizon. To picture the setting sun passing the carriage is even more difficult, but perhaps Dickinson is trying to achieve the effect of seeing the sun in its arc across the sky moving faster than the carriage. The suggestion would be that, having begun her journey with Death, the speaker has left normal time. Days and days go by (the sun rises and sets), but the speaker’s journey continues toward Eternity.

6. Now examine the tone of the poem and how Dickinson achieves it.

Do the poem’s rhyme scheme and meter seem appropriate to the subject matter? Why or why not?

Like most of Emily Dickinson’s work, this poem adheres to the basic structure of the common ballad stanza, four lines of alternating iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter with an A-B-C-B rhyme scheme.

The commonness of the rhyme scheme and metrical pattern and the sing-song quality of the short iambic lines make the poem sound unsophisticated, almost childish. Thus, Dickinson creates a contrast between the seriousness of poem’s content (human mortality) and the light-hearted nature of its form.



Alternatively, Dickinson does not handle Death as a dark, morbid, or fearsome entity. Instead, Death is a gentleman who takes the speaker on a pleasant journey.

- How do the rhyme scheme and meter contribute to the overall impact of the poem?

The commonness of the rhythm and rhyme enhance the sense of normalcy, of Death’s not being fearful or somber that Dickinson is apparently striving for.

Explain the wordplay Dickinson uses in the first two lines of the poem. What effect does she achieve by playing on the word “stop”?

- Look up the word stop in an unabridged dictionary or on your preferred Internet search engine. Note the most common denotations, especially those that would have been in use during Dickinson’s lifetime (1830 – 1886).

Denotatively, stop means to cease or pause in an activity and to pay a short social call.

- Which definition(s) is/are most applicable to the way Dickinson uses “stop” in the poem?

Both of the most common definitions apply. When Dickinson claims in the first line that she “could not stop for Death,” most readers assume that she is making a statement about how busy she was, how full her life was, and she simply could not stop doing what she was doing to accommodate Death. In the second line, Death does not pause in any activity. He does, however, make a social call, “stop[ping] for [her].”

- How do the different uses of the word characterize the speaker and Death?

The idea of Death making a social call on a busy woman—especially given the suggestion that he is calling on her because she has been too busy to call on him—characterizes Death as a well-bred and mannerly gentleman. The speaker emphasizes this by saying that Death “kindly” stopped for her. For her part, the busy speaker seems to welcome the pause in her activity that Death’s visit offers.

- What effect does Dickinson’s use of stop have on the tone of the poem? Given the content of the poem, is this tone more expected or surprising?

Despite the surface seriousness of the subject matter, this wordplay and the personification of Death as a well-mannered visitor lend the poem a lighthearted, almost glib tone. The reader can almost hear the speaker smile as she recalls that she was too busy to pause in her work, so the gentleman “kindly” paid her a call.

7. Show students the Prestwick House poster and allow them to comment on the image of the woman that accompanies the poem.

To what extent does the image on the poster capture the tone established by the rhythm, rhyme scheme, and word choice of the poem?

This is an evaluation question and student responses are likely to fall along a broad spectrum from believing the image perfectly captures the tone of the poem to believing the image mocks the poem. What is more important than the reactions themselves is the way students explain and support their reactions with specific and accurate references to the image and the details it comprises and to the poem and how it is constructed. Any time the student makes a questionable claim about either the image or the poem, demand support and invite another look at the image or text.

Does the image confirm your reaction to the poem or challenge you to reevaluate your reaction. How?

This is another evaluation question. Again, the students’ explanations are more important than their reactions. The explanations, however, must always reflect a close and accurate examination of the image and the text of the poem. Matters of simple opinion should be challenged.

*Because I could not stop
for Death—*

BY EMILY DICKINSON

*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—*

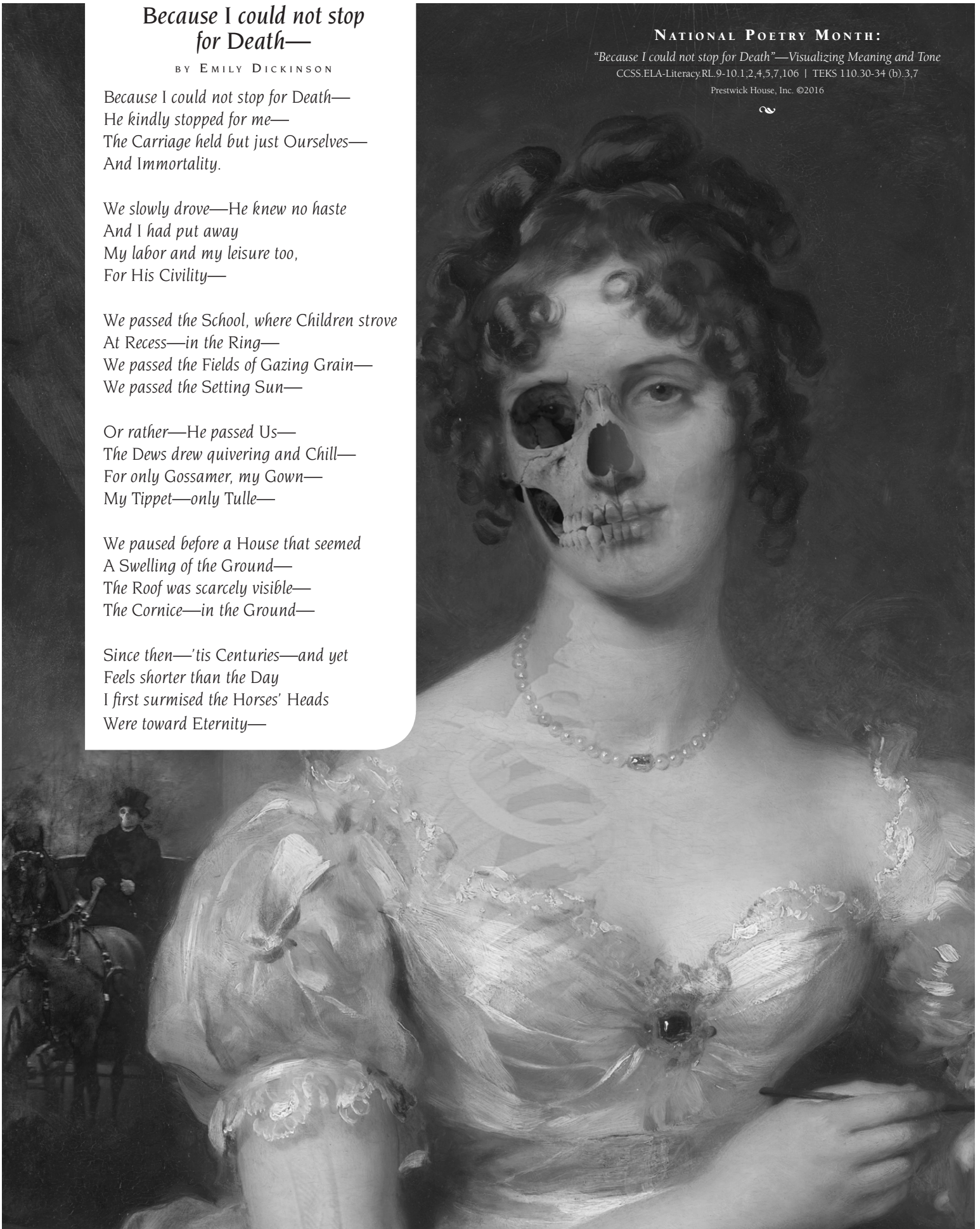
*Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—*

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Because I could not stop for Death

BY EMILY DICKINSON

Chart 1 – Literal Meaning

Text	Paraphrase		Summary of 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... We passed the Fields... 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—			



Because I could not stop for Death

BY EMILY DICKINSON

Chart 2 – Allegorical Meaning

Overall metaphoric significance of journey:

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—

Metaphoric Significance:

-
-
-
-

We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—

Metaphoric Significance:

-
-
-
-

We passed the Setting Sun—

Metaphoric Significance:

-
-
-
-

Or rather—He passed Us—

Metaphoric Significance:

-
-
-
-



Homework:

Have students write a review or critique of the image on the poster, paying special attention to details of the image and specific techniques Dickinson uses to communicate her meaning and establish the tone of the poem.

Standards:

Common Core State Standards - Reading Literature

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2

CCSS: ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5

CCSS: ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.7

Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills

High School English Language Arts and Reading

110.30 (b) Range of Texts

110.31, 32, 33, 34 (b) (3) Reading/Comprehension of a Literary Text/Poetry

110.31, 32, 33, 34 (b) (7) Reading/Comprehension of a Literary Text/Sensory Language



Sources:

Grudzina, Douglas. *Reading Literature Level 11 Homework and Classroom Activities*, Clayton, DE: Prestwick House, 2014. Print.

Moliken, Paul D. (Ed.) *Great American Poems: The Road Not Taken, The Waste Land, Paul Revere’s Ride, and 99 Others*. Clayton, DE: Prestwick House, 2008. Print.

Moliken, Paul D. (Ed.) *Discovering Genre: Poetry*. Clayton, DE: Prestwick House, 2008. Print.



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