

## Thematic Interpretation of “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” by Emily Dickinson

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**Abstract:** as an Applicable Linguistics, Systemic Functional Linguistics Brings New Insights into Literary Studies. Thematic Structure, an Important Theory in Systemic Functional Linguistics, Shows the Line of Meaning in Discourse Which Can Facilitate Discourse Analysis. Emily Dickinson’s Poems Have Been Studied by Many Researchers from Different Perspectives. Working within the Framework of Thematic Structure, This Paper Conducts a Detailed Analysis of the Poem “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” by Emily Dickinson, with the Aim of Exploring Dickinson’s Attitude Towards Death. This Study Shows That Thematic Structure Can Give Important Implications for Discourse Analysis and Literary Studies for Its Strong Power in Interpreting the Meaning of Discourse.

### 1. Introduction

Systemic Functional Linguistics and literary study have long been integrated. Thematic structure in Systemic Functional Linguistics is powerful in interpreting the meanings of discourse. Thematic structure is the structure to carry the line of meaning, a message structure. In a thematic structure, the Theme is always put first, accompanied by the Rheme. The Theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that which locates and orients the clause within its context. The Rheme is the remainder of the message, the part in which the Theme is developed. There may be a simple Theme or a multiple Theme. A simple Theme means the Theme contains only one constituent. A simple Theme is usually the topical Theme, the element playing the experiential meaning. A multiple Theme can be further divided into textual, interpersonal and topical Theme. Textual and interpersonal Themes are elements which are either in textual or interpersonal function. (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004)

As an influential American poet, Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830-1886) has created over 1700 poems. Through the poems, Emily Dickinson shows her profound understanding and creative thinking of many topics, such as love, nature, god and death. She pursues brevity and conciseness in language choice. Therefore, to fully explore the meaning of her poem takes a thorough and detailed analysis of its images and development of meaning. This paper will analyze Emily Dickinson’s “Because I could not stop for Death” following the thematic structure.

### 2. Interpretation of “Because I Could Not Stop for Death”

Of over five hundred poems Emily Dickinson written about death, “Because I could not stop for Death” is a representative one with delicate language choices that deserve closer attention. The poem consists of six stanzas, successfully creating eight images: Death, “I”, Immortality (Eternity), Carriage, Children In the Ring, Gazing Grain, the Setting Sun, and the House (the Roof). In the first stanza, Death came to pick “I” up. In the carriage were Death, “I” and Immortality, a third passenger. In the second stanza, “I” put everything aside and went on the trip with Death. The trip was in no hurry. In the third stanza, “we” saw Children In the Ring; “we” saw Gazing Grain; and finally, “we” saw the setting sun. In the fourth stanza, the Setting Sun made “us” quivering and chill because “I” didn’t have warm clothes to resist the coldness. In the fifth stanza, the trip was over and “we” stopped before a House. In the sixth stanza, “I” first guessed the Carriage were heading toward Eternity. This poem is rich in images and sophisticated in language. In the poem, Emily

Dickinson sends the message that Death is Eternity. With time passing by, although we can not stop the arrival of Death, we can hold a positive attitude toward Death and enjoy life.

### 3. Analysis on Thematic Structure

The choices of thematic structures organize the discourse and carry it forward. We find fourteen thematic structures in “Because I could not stop for Death”. To facilitate our discussion, we number the lines according to the thematic structures as in Table 1.

Table 1 Thematic Structures In “Because I Could Not Stop for Death”

Sentence Number	Theme	Rheme
1	Because I could not stop for Death -	He kindly stopped for me -
2	The Carriage	held but just Ourselves - / And Immortality.
3	We	slowly drove -
4	He	knew no haste
5	And I	had put away / My labor and my leisure too, / For His Civility -
6	We	passed the School, where Children strove / At Recess - In the Ring -
7	We	passed the Fields of Gazing Grain -
8	We	passed the Setting Sun -
9	Or rather - He	passed Us -
10	The Dews	drew quivering and chill - / For only Gossamer, my Gown - / My Tippet - only Tulle -
11	We	paused before a House that seemed/ A Swelling of the Ground -
12	The Roof	was scarcely visible - / The Cornice - in the Ground -
13	Since then -	'tis Centuries - and yet / Feels shorter than the Day
14	I	first surmised the Horses' Heads / Were toward Eternity -

From Table 1, we can see themes in sentence (2), (3), (4), (5), (6), (7), (8), (10), (11), (12), (13), (14) are simple themes, or the topical themes. The Theme in sentence (1) is clause as theme, with an adverbial clause of reason being the Theme. The Theme in sentence (9) is a multiple theme, “Or rather -” being the textual Theme and “He” being the topical Theme. The Theme “We” repeats for five times. “He” occurs in themes for two times and “I” appears in themes for three times. Important images “The Carriage”, “The Dews” and “The Roof” are used as Themes in sentence (2), (10), and (12) .

### 4. Discussion

As we discussed before, “Because I could not stop for Death” creates eight images to convey the message. All the images are used in themes to carry the information forward, making the poem coherent and highlighting Emily Dickinson’s attitude towards Death.

In the poem, the Theme “we” refer to Death, “I” and Immortality. The two most important images Death and “I” appear in the first Theme, providing the starting point for the poem. The adverbial clause of reason “Because I could not stop for Death” unfold the the relationship between Death and “I”. The trip that “I” take with Death is initiated by Death. Death and “I” begin the trip by taking a horse-drawn carriage with a third passenger, Immortality. The third Theme “He” refers to Death. We move slowly because Death drive leisurely. Considering the polite behaviour of Death, “I” put everything down and go on the trip with Death. The same Theme “we” appears for three times in Sentence (6), (7) and (8) . The repetition of the Theme emphasizes what “we” see during the journey, indicating the complex emotion in this stanza and leading to another three important images in the Rheme: Children In the Ring, Gazing Grain, and the Setting Sun. Children In the Ring, Gazing Grain, and the Setting Sun are a series of new information that needs further investigation. The next thematic structure moves to the Theme “Or rather - He “. “Or rather -” is the textual Theme indicating a change in the feelings and attitude. The topical Theme “He” refers to the Setting Sun, the Rheme in the previous thematic structure. The setting sun serves as a key concept. By

examining the hidden meaning of the Setting Sun, it can be inferred that *Children In the Ring* refers to childhood, *Gazing Grain* refers to adulthood, and the *Setting Sun* refers to old age. “We” actually pass three major stages of life in this trip: childhood, adulthood, and old age. In the previous thematic structures, “we” move slowly and see the scenery along the road. However, after passing the *Setting Sun*, “I” gained a different feeling toward death. “I” do not want to see the sun setting, but even if “I” refuse, the *Setting Sun* will inevitably arrive. In fact, the *Setting Sun* is also the symbol of the arrival of Death. In the first thematic structure, Death kindly stop for “me” and take “me” to pass different stages of life. Now, Death ruthlessly takes “me” to go beyond the old age and move toward the destination of this trip. After realizing the arrival of Death, “I” feel quivering and chill with no warm clothes to fight against the coldness of Dews. Actually, “I” am not just afraid of coldness brought by Dews. What “I” am truly afraid of is the unknown things and the unknown world one will experience after Death. Although “I” do not want to end the trip, the trip still arrives at the destination. The Theme moves back to “we”. “We” paused before a House. The Roof of the House is hardly visible. Based on previous thematic structure, we can infer that the House and the Roof refer to the tomb. The next Theme “Since then” reflects another change in the attitude. Looking at the tomb, “I” feel how time flies and accept the arrival of Death. The last Theme “I” draw the attention to how “I” feel about Death. “I” first understand that Death is Eternity.

The development of the fourteen thematic structures follow the flow of meaning of the poem. The first Theme begins with what “I” feel toward Death at first and the last Theme moves back to “I”, emphasizing the new attitude “I” hold toward Death. Important new images are achieved successfully by the repetition of the Theme “we”, clearly symbolizing the life stages from childhood to adulthood, and to old age. The two changes of Dickinson’s attitude are coherently shown by the Theme ““Or rather - “, indicating the contrast, and “Since then”, indicating the time when “I” change again. At first, “I” do not refuse the company of Death and live life in a relaxed way. Without noticing the passage of time, “I” suddenly see the arrival of death. “I” begin to feel afraid. Finally, after “I” recall what I have lived through, fears are gone and “I” reconcile with Death with the knowledge that Death is Eternity.

## 5. Conclusion

What we have discussed above serves as an example for applying the thematic structure to discourse analysis and literary studies. Literary works, especially poems, are pervaded by rich images and strong emotions. Thematic structure can play an active role in analyzing the development of meanings in literary works. Through a thematic analysis, we can explore the meaning of a discourse, thus enabling us to understand the author’s attitude and uncover the implied meanings as fully as possible by examining text organization and the flow of information.

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