‘Because I could not stop for Death’
Emily Dickinson
Learning purposes

• Consider the tone of a poem
• Understand connotations and metaphorical meanings
• Express ideas in a sophisticated and analytical manner

Prior learning:
1. What ‘conceit’ did Matthew Arnold use to present his ideas surrounding England’s movement towards science?
2. How did this impact religion?

Future learning:
1. Develop understanding of challenging poetry, use of poetic devices and why the writer uses them.
2. Continue to prepare for the end of module poetry recital.
Starter

• Create a mind-map listing symbols, colours and objects that relate to death.
• Elaborate on the connotations of them and explain the emotions they create.
Context – Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson was a reclusive poet from Massachusetts. Published 1862.

During Dickinson’s early years, she experienced the death of many people close to her, including that of her cousin. It is easy to see why she felt familiar with death.

Dickinson also lived near a cemetery, so she watched many people, even loved ones riding in a hearse to their final resting places. This is a likely inspiration for the setting of this poem.

In times of sorrow, she would likely have heard sermons about salvation, paradise, and mansions waiting in eternity.

During Dickinson’s lifetime, many of her close family members and friends joined the church as the 1830s saw what many referred to as “revivals” or “awakenings” in which many people proclaimed faith in Jesus Christ and eternal life (The Dickinson Properties).
Initial impressions

• Who is the Speaker?
• What is the Subject?
• What is the tone like? Explain in detail.
• How does the poem shift? What is the structure like and how does it match the subject?
Interpreting the literal meaning of the poem

• Complete the ‘literal meaning’ worksheet.
• Paraphrase (briefly explain) what if being said in each section.
• Then, summarise your ideas in the final column.
Key term: Allegorical

A story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one.

As we explore the poem in more detail, we are going to be identifying parallels between Dickenson’s life and the imagery she evokes throughout the poem.
Interpreting the metaphorical meaning of the poem

- Complete the ‘allegorical meaning’ worksheet.
- Summarise the overall metaphorical significance of the speaker’s journey.
- Explore the four quotations in detail.
What is the metaphoric significance of the poem?

- 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 resting place for our physical remains; the final destination is Eternity.
Questions

1. The poem blends the use of both iambic trimeter and iambic tetrameter Metre – **What is the effect of this?**
2. What is the effect of personifying the abstract noun ‘Death’? How does it create a relationship between the speaker and Death?
3. How does the speaker seem to feel about giving up her life? What proof from the poem can you offer?
4. In the third stanza, the word “passed” is used three times. What three things do they pass?
5. Notice the order of the things they pass. What might each symbolically represent?
6. Why is immortality in the carriage?
Examining the tone of the poem

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

   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 sing-song, childish quality contrasts the dark subject.

2. 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 sombre that Dickinson is apparently striving for.
Look at this artwork for the poem

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

2. Does the image confirm your reaction to the poem or challenge you to re-evaluate your reaction. How?
Some critics believe that the poem shows death kindly escorting the speaker to some sort of paradise. Others believe that death comes in the form of a deceiver, carrying her off to destruction. Which do you believe? Why? Offer proof from the poem to back up your belief.

• Choose one argument and construct a response.