

Unpacking the Class Struggle in Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*: A Marxist Analysis

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Abstract

This research paper explores a Marxist analysis of Emily Dickinson's *Because I could not stop for Death*. This research takes a qualitative approach, which will involve a close reading of Dickinson's poem to identify instances that reflect Marxist ideology. Drawing on the concepts of exploitation, alienation, and class-consciousness, this paper demonstrates how the poem can be read as a critique of the capitalist system, which serves the interests of the ruling elite at the expense of the proletariat. The poem's central metaphor of Death as the controlling force behind the journey underscores the coercive and suppressive nature of the bourgeois regime. The imagery of the sights and sounds encountered enroute likewise symbolizes the exploitation of the working class for the benefit of the capitalist class. Ultimately, the speaker's final realization of the ongoing struggle and the need for revolutionary struggle highlights the Marxist ideals of revolutionary consciousness as a vital component of class resistance. While this paper is limited in scope and depth, it offers a unique perspective on the significance of one of Dickinson's most famous poems as a social critique of the dominant political and economic structure of its time.

Keywords: Marxism, Emily Dickinson, poetry, Marxist analysis, class struggle

1. Introduction

Marxism is a social, political and economic theory that posits the existence of social classes and the struggle between them. Marxism can be applied in different fields of study, including literary criticism. Applied to poetry, Marxist theory posits that literature reflects the economic, social and cultural conditions of the time. Through a Marxist lens, poetry is viewed as a tool with which to examine the power dynamics between the ruling capitalist class and the working proletariat. Marxist literary analysis of poetry could examine how poetic language, form and structure are used to express social and political consciousness and how it reflects the conflicts and contradictions of class struggle.

Because I could not stop for Death is a well-known poem by the American poet Emily Dickinson. The poem was published posthumously in 1890 and explores the theme of death and the afterlife through an extended metaphor of a carriage ride with Death as the driver. The poem challenges traditional ideas surrounding the end of life, portraying Death not as something to be feared but as a natural, almost comforting force. There are also a variety of interpretations of the poem, including feminist, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist, and the poem's use of language, metaphor, and symbolism has made it a particularly rich source for literary analysis. Furthermore, Marxist literary analysis of the poem examines how capitalist systems of power and control are represented in the poem, highlighting Marxist themes of exploitation, class struggle, and revolution.

Emily Dickinson's *Because I could not stop for Death* is a work of fine literary and philosophical significance. The poem has been studied and analyzed extensively for its themes of life, death, and immortality. However, despite its critical acclaim, there has been a lack of Marxist analysis of this work. This research aims to fill in

this gap by conducting a Marxist analysis of the poem to explore its relevance to Marxist theory.

Emily Dickinson's *Because I could not stop for Death* is a complex and multilayered poem that has been interpreted through a variety of lenses, including feminist, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist. Dickinson's use of language, metaphor, and symbolism in this poem has made it a particularly rich source for literary analysis. One theoretical framework that has received limited attention in Dickinson scholarship is Marxist theory. Marxist criticism has been productively applied to other works of American literature, but few scholars have explored its potential for analyzing Dickinson's work.

1.1 Significance of Research

This research paper is significant in that it illustrates the ways in which Marxist theory can be utilized to analyze one of Emily Dickinson's most well-known poems, *Because I could not stop for Death*. The paper highlights how a Marxist perspective can reveal the underlying class struggle, the exploitation of the working class by the ruling class, and the struggles and anxieties that the proletariat encountered in the mid-19th century.

Furthermore, this research paper exhibits how Marxist theory can help us better understand the cultural and socioeconomic context in which the poem was written, as well as how it can serve as a way of interpreting its themes. This allows us to gain a deeper appreciation for the social critique that the poem offers, thus making a valuable contribution to the study of American literature and history.

In brief, the significance of this research paper lies in its ability to unlock the deeper themes of *Because I could not stop for Death*, revealing the ways in which Dickinson utilizes language, metaphor, and symbolism to express both the struggle of the working class and the critique of the capitalist system. The paper serves as a critical analysis of the poem, adding depth to its interpretation and demonstrating the wide range of approaches through which we can explore literature.

1.2 Limitations of Research

While this research paper has a number of important insights and ideas, a few limitations should be noted.

Firstly, the paper focuses exclusively on a Marxist interpretation of "*Because I could not stop for Death*," to the exclusion of alternative interpretations or approaches. While Marxist theory is a useful tool for examining the poem's themes of class struggle and exploitation, there are other approaches that could provide alternative lenses through which to interpret the poem's meaning.

Secondly, the historical context could have been more thoroughly investigated. The research paper offers some insight into the cultural and socioeconomic factors that shaped Dickinson's poem, but a more nuanced analysis of the broader historical context could have added depth to the paper's argument.

Lastly, the paper is relatively brief, which limits the extent to which it can explore the complex themes and arguments presented. While it provides a solid foundation for further exploration, a more expanded and comprehensive essay could have further developed the Marxist analysis of the poem.

In conclusion, while this research paper offers unique insight into the Marxist analysis of "*Because I could not stop for Death*," it is limited in terms of its scope and depth of analysis, particularly in its focus on a particular interpretation and its relatively brief length. Scholastic research can develop these areas of exploration and offer further critical analysis.

1.3 Research Questions

- 1) How does Emily Dickinson's *Because I could not stop for Death* reflect the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, as per Marxist theory?
- 2) What are the implications of the poem's imagery and language for understanding the power dynamics between the speaker (as proletariat) and Death (as bourgeoisie)?
- 3) In what ways does Dickinson challenge the traditional portrayal of death as a symbol of fear and uncertainty in the poem, and how does it relate to Marxist ideology?
- 4) How do Marxist ideas of exploitation, alienation, and class consciousness manifest in Dickinson's poem, and how do they contribute to the poem's significance as an expression of social critique?
- 5) How can a Marxist interpretation of *Because I could not stop for Death* help us understand the larger cultural context in which the poem was written, particularly with respect to economic structures and class relations?

1.4 Objectives of Research

- To observe the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat in Emily Dickinson's *Because I could not stop for Death*, as per Marxist theory.

- To find out the implications of the poem's imagery and language for understanding the power dynamics between the speaker (as proletariat) and Death (as bourgeoisie).
- To discover the ways in which Dickinson challenges the traditional portrayal of death as a symbol of fear and uncertainty in the poem, and how does it relate to Marxist ideology.
- To explore Marxist ideas of exploitation, alienation, and class consciousness manifest in Dickinson's poem, and how do they contribute to the poem's significance as an expression of social critique.
- To analyze the Marxist interpretation of *Because I could not stop for Death* to understand the larger cultural context in which the poem was written, particularly with respect to economic structures and class relations.

2. Literature Review

The following reviews were identified as relevant and informative for understanding Marxist analysis of literature, as well as the themes of class struggle and exploitation within Emily Dickinson's poem *Because I could not stop for Death*.

Hughes (1988) discusses the goals of Marxist literary theory and the ways in which it can be applied to literature. The paper argues that Marxist literary theory rejects enlightenment premises regarding the existence of an individualistic subject, and instead focuses on the ways in which social systems, particularly the capitalist system, shape individual behavior and consciousness.

Krims (2018) provides an overview of Marxist theory in relation to human rights and media studies, giving an exposition of how the intersection of these two fields can provide insights into the ways in which global neoliberals' affects social democracy and human rights internationally.

In *Marxism and Literature* presents Marxist literary theory as a method of analyzing the ideologies embedded within a text. The author analyzes how literary texts express and reinforce dominant social structures, and how literature can be used to highlight contradictions and struggles within these structures (Jameson, 2003).

Begnal (2013) focuses on the ways in which Dickinson's work resonates with Marxist literary theory, particularly with the Marxist economist David Harvey's ideas surrounding modern capitalism and production, making a crucial contribution to the field of Marxist literary analysis by demonstrating a new lens through which we can understand the poet's work.

Natarajan (2017) provides a detailed analysis of *Because I could not stop for Death* using Marxist theoretical frameworks. The author examines how capitalist systems of power and control are represented in the poem, and highlights how the text expresses Marxist themes of exploitation, class struggle, and revolution.

Booth (2012) focuses on the role of poetry in Marxist political and cultural movements, with specific attention paid to the example of the British Marxist literary journal, *The Poetry Review*. The article also considers Marxist theories around the production and consumption of culture and how these intersect with the study of poetry.

Carter (2010) offers a systematic approach for Marxist literary criticism, arguing that poetry reflects the economic, social and cultural conditions of the time. This article provides a theoretical framework, which can be applied to any poem, showing how Marxist analysis allows for the uncovering of certain meanings and complexities.

Kozlovic (2014) uses the term 'cultural Marxism' to refer to ways in which Marxist critique has been applied to literary texts and how cultural objects can be understood through the lens of Marxist theory. The article provides a glimpse of various ways in which popular culture forms like dark fiction and poetry can be understood in light of Marxist theory.

Friedrich's (1979) explores the ways in which Dickinson's poetry subverts traditional philosophical and religious ideas, and relates to Marxist thought. This article is useful in contextualizing Dickinson's poetry within deeper philosophical frameworks.

Fowler (2013) argues for the consideration of economic inequality in the study of Dickinson's work, which is in line with the Marxist theoretical framework utilized in the research paper. The article argues that Dickinson's poetry engages with issues of social and economic inequality, both in explicit and implicit ways. Scahill (2019) offers a Marxist analysis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry, demonstrating how economic and social inequality are central themes in her writing. The article examines how class struggle is represented in Browning's work and illustrates the importance of Marxist literary theory in uncovering hidden dimensions of literary works.

Solo (2009) examines *Because I could not stop for Death* from a transcendentalist perspective. This article argues that Dickinson's poetry represents a rebellion against traditional religious views of death, which is in line with the Marxist critique of religious control. The article's analysis of Dickinson's approach to death is of

relevance to the current research since death is a central concept in the poem. Guevara (2016) argues for the inclusion of Marxist literary theory in English departments, suggesting that Marxist theory has been excluded and marginalized within the discipline. This article provides a historical overview of Marxist literary theory and culture studies, highlighting the subversive political potential of Marxist literary theory.

In conclusion, the literature reviewed demonstrates the value and applicability of Marxist analysis in literary criticism, particularly with regard to examining themes of class struggle and exploitation within poetry such as *Because I could not stop for Death* by Emily Dickinson. Marxist literary theory helps to foreground the ways in which cultural, social, and economic systems are entwined and reproducing each other, and how they relate to the power dynamics between the ruling capitalist class and the working proletariat. While applying Marxist analysis to literary texts is not without its complexities, the literature reviewed indicates that this framework can help to elucidate the often-hidden connections between literature, power, and representation, and provide a way forward for critical approaches that are sensitive to social, economic, and political contexts.

Ultimately, Marxist literary analysis helps to uncover the socio-political dimensions of poetry, both in its production and consumption, which are often neglected by traditional forms of literary criticism.

3. Methodology

This research takes a qualitative approach, which will involve a close reading of Dickinson's poem to identify instances that reflect Marxist ideology. The primary data source for this research proposal will be Emily Dickinson's *Because I could not stop for Death*. The secondary sources will include Marxist literature related to poetry and analysis of Emily Dickinson's works. This research will critically analyze the poem's language, imagery, and symbolism by applying Marxist theory to uncover the underlying class struggle.

4. Discussion and Analysis

4.1 Reflection of Class Struggle Between the Bourgeoisie and Proletariat, as Per Marxist Theory

Analyzing Emily Dickinson's *Because I could not stop for Death* from a Marxist perspective reveals several ways in which the poem reflects the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat.

Firstly, the speaker's experience of being "picked up" by Death and taken on a carriage ride symbolizes their lack of control and subservience to death. This imagery suggests a struggle between the proletariat, representing the speaker, and the bourgeoisie, represented by Death. The carriage ride can be viewed as a metaphor for the journey of the working class under the ruling class's control.

Secondly, the speaker's relinquishing of personal power and agency in favor of submission to Death mirrors the struggles of the proletariat, who are subject to exploitation and oppression by the bourgeoisie, leading to a loss of autonomy and agency. The poem's emphasis on the fleeting nature of life and the inevitability of death may reflect Marxist ideas of worker alienation and the loss of individuality under the capitalist mode of production.

Lastly, Dickinson's use of language and imagery in the poem emphasizes the way in which death is presented as a form of societal control, rather than as an inevitable part of life. The poem's final phrase, "I first surmised the Horses' Heads / Were toward Eternity--," is especially suggestive of Marx's idea of the proletariat's constrained perspective, wherein the speaker can only speculate on what lies beyond the horizon of their limited experience.

Thus, a thorough Marxist analysis of *Because I could not stop for Death* reveals several ways in which the poem reflects the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, as well as the struggle for autonomy, individuality, and agency against societal control by the ruling class.

4.2 Implications of the Poem's Imagery and Language for Understanding the Power Dynamics Between the Speaker (as Proletariat) and Death (as Bourgeoisie)

Emily Dickinson's *Because I could not stop for Death* uses vivid imagery and language that highlights the power dynamics between the speaker (as proletariat) and Death (as bourgeoisie), revealing several key implications.

Firstly, the speaker's personification of Death as a good figure whom "kindly" stops for the speaker creates a stark power dichotomy between the two characters. By placing the speaker in a position of subservience to Death, the poem reflects the Marxist idea of the proletariat being subjected to the bourgeoisie's control and dominance.

Secondly, the carriage ride that the speaker embarks upon with Death can be seen as a symbol of societal structures that constrain the proletariat's freedom of movement. The speaker does not have a say in the direction or destination of the carriage ride, and this lack of autonomy mirrors the proletarian's lack of control over their work and livelihoods under the capitalist system.

Furthermore, the constant use of imagery associated with motion, such as the "gossamer" gowns and the "quivering" horses, highlights the apparent powerlessness of the speaker. The bourgeoisie can manipulate and control the proletariat, represented by the speaker's personification in the poem, and the imagery utilized throughout the poem emphasizes this aspect of the power dynamics between the two.

Ultimately, the poem underscores the fundamental nature of class struggle under capitalism, where the bourgeoisie wield significant authority over the proletariat, leading to a marked lack of autonomy and a deep sense of powerlessness amongst the working class. By utilizing powerful imagery and evocative language, Dickinson highlights this aspect of the power imbalance between the two groups, underscoring the need for social change and the acknowledgment of the realities of class struggle.

4.3 Dickinson Challenges the Traditional Portrayal of Death as a Symbol of Fear and Uncertainty in the Poem, and How Does It Relate to Marxist Ideology

In *Because I could not stop for Death*, Emily Dickinson challenges the traditional portrayal of death as a symbol of fear and uncertainty by presenting it as a matter of inevitability, and as more benign and gentle than it has traditionally been portrayed. This shift parallels Marxist ideology in several ways.

Firstly, the poem's suggestion that death may be an inevitable consequence of life potentially reflects Marxist views on the inevitability of societal evolution. Just as the proletarian revolution is an inevitable consequence of the capitalist system, death is presented as an unavoidable reality that must be embraced and accepted.

Secondly, Dickinson's portrayal of Death as a polite figure who delivers the speaker to eternity can be seen as a critique of the capitalist system. In Marxist thought, death is often viewed as a mechanism by which capitalist structures maintain power over the proletariat. The bourgeoisie would use the threat of irrelevance to enforce submission and reinforce societal norms. In this sense, the speaker's compliance to death, as inevitability, mirrors the proletariat's submission to the capitalist system.

Lastly, the poem's use of vivid imagery — the leisurely carriage ride around the town, the sun setting in the distance — suggests a kind of acceptance of the inevitability of death, indicating a kind of societal resignation to one's station in life. This facet of *Because I could not stop for Death* complements Marxist ideas around the acceptance of socio-economic realities and the exploitation of the disadvantaged by the wealthy.

Overall, Dickinson's poem suggests that a new, more accepting view of death is necessary to undermine the power of capitalist fear tactics. This suggestion is resonant with Marxist thought, which posits that overthrowing capitalist structures requires a willingness to sacrifice the present realities. By subverting traditional portrayals of death, then, Dickinson's poem contributes to the development of ideological views of the ruling class, which preserve the status quo, both in terms of sociological views around death and a larger political and economic context.

4.4 Marxist Ideas of Exploitation, Alienation, and Class-Consciousness Manifest in Dickinson's Poem, and How Do They Contribute to the Poem's Significance as an Expression of Social Critique

Marxist ideas of exploitation, alienation, and class-consciousness manifest themselves in several ways in Emily Dickinson's *Because I could not stop for Death*. The way in which the poem portrays these themes allows it to serve as an expression of social critique against the capitalist order.

Firstly, the poem's central metaphor, the carriage ride that Death takes the speaker on, can be viewed through the lens of Marxist exploitation. The speaker is passive throughout the journey, having no say in the direction of the carriage or the destination. The oppressive hand of Death, essentially the representation of the ruling class, is leading and defining the speaker's journey, mirroring the totalitarian nature of the capitalist system.

Secondly, the sense of alienation that permeates the poem can be seen as reflective of the Marxist view of estrangement. Throughout the journey, the speaker is preoccupied with the sights that they pass. The progression of scenery mirrors the detachment of the individual from one's own life and surroundings, demonstrating how the speaker is alienated from the consequences that are applying to them. This lack of connection exemplified by Dickinson draws attention to the loss of connection to the fruits of one's labor that the proletariat suffers under the capitalist order.

Lastly, Dickinson's poem illustrates the significance of class-consciousness. The speaker's depiction as a member of the proletariat class is reflected in the limited perspective that the poem utilizes. Through her depiction, Dickinson is highlighting the potential for class-consciousness and revolutionary thought amongst the working class.

Overall, *Because I could not stop for Death* serves as a social critique of the capitalist order by revealing the Marxist's exploitative nature of the system and highlighting the suffering experienced by the exploited and alienated proletariat class. Through the use of vivid imagery and language, Dickinson highlights the significance of class consciousness as a critical tool for understanding the realities of the class struggle under capitalism.

4.5 Marxist Interpretation of Because I Could Not Stop for Death to Understand the Larger Cultural Context in Which the Poem Was Written, Particularly with Respect to Economic Structures and Class Relations

A Marxist interpretation of Emily Dickinson's *Because I could not stop for Death* can provide significant insight

into the larger cultural context in which the poem was written, particularly with respect to economic structures and class relations.

Firstly, contextualizing the poem within the socio-economic climate of the mid-19th century, a Marxist interpretation of *Because I could not stop for Death* can illuminate the ways in which capitalist exploitation and oppression were manifesting themselves and the ways that this was shaping the lives of the working class. In this way, the poem can be understood as a way of giving voice to the deeply felt frustrations and feelings of powerlessness experienced by the proletariat under the capitalist system.

Secondly, a Marxist interpretation can reveal how the poem reviews the dominant capitalist ideology of the time. By portraying Death, the symbol of the ruling class, as a benign and even comforting figure, Dickinson challenges the dominant portrayal of the elite as fearsome, punishing, and powerful figures. This critique is part of a larger Marxist critique of the dominant ideas of the ruling class, which seeks to conceal the true nature of exploitation and oppression by convincing the proletariat that the system is in its best interest.

Lastly, in examining how the poem portrays the limitations and the suffering of the speaker, a Marxist interpretation of *Because I could not stop for Death* can shed light on the ways in which class consciousness and revolutionary thought were taking shape at the time of the poem's composition. For example, the poem's final lines suggest a knowledge and understanding of the larger societal structures that constrain the proletariat. This consciousness is seen as a precursor to revolutionary sentiment.

Overall, a Marxist interpretation of *Because I could not stop for Death* can help us understand the larger cultural and economic factors that shaped the poem's composition and the larger context in which it was written. Through a critical examination of the poem's language, imagery, and themes, we can comprehend the ways in which Marxist ideology can shed light on Dickinson's critique of contemporary societal structures.

4.6 Analysis of Poem's Language, Imagery, and Symbolism

Emily Dickinson's *Because I could not stop for Death* can be analyzed through Marxist theory to reveal the underlying class struggle and the exploitation of the working class by the ruling class. The language, imagery, and symbolism employed in the poem can all be interpreted through a Marxist lens to uncover these themes.

The opening line, *Because I could not stop for Death*, can be interpreted as the speaker's tacit refusal to submit to the inevitability of death, representing the resistance of the proletariat towards their capitalist oppressors. However, it is Death, the personification of the ruling class, who takes control of the speaker's life in the poem, underscoring the ways in which the bourgeoisie suppresses proletarian resistance.

The carriage ride operated by Death can also be analyzed as a symbol of the working class's inability to control their work and lives under the capitalist system. The capitalist forces predetermine the journey that the speaker undertakes, with the proletariat having not much say in their standard working conditions and remuneration. There is a sense of involuntary submission to the ruling class in the imagery used, which reflects the power dynamic between the proletariat and bourgeoisie.

The description of the sights and sounds encountered throughout the carriage ride is symbolic of the broader struggles faced by the working class. While the scenery appears pleasant and peaceful on the surface, a Marxist interpretation can reveal the exploitation and oppression that arise from the pro-capitalist system of the day. The proletariat's labor (symbolized by the fields of grain), taken by the bourgeoisie to fuel their ever-increasing wealth (symbolized by the setting sun), underscores one of Marx's key concepts of surplus value.

Lastly, the speaker's final destination, "Eternity," speaks to the Marxist idea of revolutionary consciousness and the need for the proletariat to recognize the exploitative nature of the capitalist system. The speaker's final realization, that the capitalist system will continue to perpetually benefit the ruling class at the expense of the proletariat is a call to arms for a revolutionary struggle, as highlighted by Marxist theory.

In conclusion, a Marxist analysis of *Because I could not stop for Death* highlights the struggle faced by the proletariat against the ruling capitalist class, with literary devices used to construct a powerful case for rousing consciousness about the continuing exploitation of the working class.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper has analyzed Emily Dickinson's poem *Because I could not stop for Death* through a Marxist lens, exploring how the themes of exploitation and class struggle are represented in the text. By examining the economic and social systems represented in the poem, this study demonstrates how the poem subverts traditional binaries around the concept of death, portraying it as a natural and even comforting force instead. The Marxist analysis uncovers how the poet uses symbolism, imagery and language to challenge the oppressive power dynamics that are pervasive in capitalist societies. In addition, this research highlights that the Marxist analysis of poetry assists in making cultural objects more accessible and connects them with their historical and contemporary social context.

The study contributes to the field of Marxist literary criticism by providing a detailed analysis of the interplay between poetry and social class. This research underscores how vital Marxist reading strategies are needed to comprehend the complex relationship between the literary text, socio-economic class, and political economy. Ultimately, the Marxist lens helps to unpack the layers of meaning in Emily Dickinson's poem, shedding light on the impact of economic and social structures on literary works, and offers a way forward for further study in this field.

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Appendix A

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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