Success is counted sweetest

POEM TEXT

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of victory

As he defeated – dying –
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

SUMMARY

People who always fail are the ones who appreciate success the most. To truly value something sweet like success, you have to really, really need it.

Not a single soldier in the army that won the battle today has as clear an understanding of the meaning of victory as does a dying soldier from the opposing army.

To this dying soldier's ears, the distant sounds of celebration ring out painfully clear.

THEMES

SUCCESS, LACK, AND DESIRE

Emily Dickinson's "Success is counted sweetest" argues that "success" is valued most by those who have it least. In this sense, success is a kind of a paradox: the more successful you are, the less you appreciate that success, and vice versa. The desire for success is thus strongest in those who need it most—like the dying soldier who can hear the celebrations of his enemies. Desire, then, is defined by a sense of *lack*—of not having something.

It follows that the less likely success is to come to someone, the more intensely they will desire it. The use of "sweetest" and "nectar" in the first stanza further draw a link between success and desire, as though "success" is something deliciously luxurious to those who don't have it. Indeed, the metaphor in the second half of the first stanza suggests that this paradoxical relationship between success and *valuing* success is engrained in nature itself. A honey bee, for example, desires "nectar" more and more the hungrier it gets. Likewise, those whose longing for success is met only with failure feel increasingly hungry for success (according to this poem anyway).

The poem develops this idea further with a metaphor about military conflict. In this scenario, a soldier lies "dying" on the ground, hearing the "distant" sounds of "triumph" made by the victorious army (the "purple Host"). It is this dying soldier, not the victors themselves, who best understands what success actually *means*. He senses the vast distance between his "failure"—the fact that his side has lost the battle and he is now dying—and the goal of the battle in the first place: victory. In other words, the position he finds himself in is as far away as it possibly could be from the position he *desired* to be in.

The poem's central idea doesn't seem limited to the specific examples given. Its message could equally apply to the "agony" of unrequited love or a sportsperson failing to win the tournament they've always dreamed of winning. People who don't have something want it all the more strongly. Yet the more that thing becomes a part of daily reality—be it success in terms of battle, love, career, or anything else—the less it actually means.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.

Dickinson often wrote poems with succinct moral messages, and this poem immediately states its message in clear terms:

> Success is counted sweetest
> By those who ne'er succeed.

In other words, success is most valued and best appreciated by those who "ne'er" (never) have it. This is a paradox typical of Dickinson's poetry, with "success" meaning *more* the *less* that people enjoy it—and implying that *having* success makes it seem less significant.

The poem is deliberately general both here and throughout,

allowing for the power of its main idea to feel like it can apply to almost any situation that involves success (and by extension the *desire* for success). For example, the opening two lines would seem apt if applied to situations as different as unrequited love or a soccer player's failure to win a long hoped-for trophy.

The first two lines are packed with sibilance:

> Success is counted sweetest
> By those who ne'er succeed.

On the one hand, this dense use of sound makes the opening lines, an example of an aphorism, all the more memorable—they feel quippy and witty in their delivery of this moral message. On a subtler level, the /s/ sounds are an important part of the poem's opening metaphor, of success as a kind of "sweet taste" most desired by those who never have it. The /s/ sounds create a kind of salivation in the mouth of the reader, suggestive of both the enjoyment of food (success) and the way in which the body creates saliva in anticipation of food (desire).

The enjambment between the two lines creates a sense of anticipation as the reader waits for the answer to the implicit question posed by the first line: who counts success sweetest? The next line delivers this answer, and then concludes with a strong end-stop—the clear pause suggesting the speaker's assuredness in the truth of this aphorism.

These lines also establish the poem's meter, which is iambic trimeter:

> Success is counted sweetest
> By those who ne'er succeed.

The first line has an extra unstressed syllable, creating a feminine ending; this may seem like a hiccup, but the speaker will actually repeat this same pattern almost exactly in every other line throughout the poem.

LINES 3-4

> *To comprehend a nectar*
> *Requires sorest need.*

The poem expands upon its moral message using a metaphor. Picking up on success as a kind of sweet taste best appreciated by those who *don't* succeed, these two lines conceive of success as a kind of "nectar." Nectar is a sugary substance secreted by plants that insects collect; nectar is also used to refer to a drink of the gods in classical mythology, or to a thick, sweet drink in general. Any of these definitions works here.

Nectar also alliterates with "ne'er" from the previous line, further establishing a connection between the two; this line is an elaboration of the idea presented earlier in the poem. In order to best comprehend this nectar—that is, to fully understand its worth—takes "sorest need." In other words, the nectar tastes best to those need it most—and it's needed most by those who don't have it. People that do have success get used to it, the poem implies, whereas those that don't only crave it more.

By mentioning "nectar," the poem also brings nature into the poem. Just as a bee instinctually desires nectar, so too do people long for success. And just as a satisfied bee desires the nectar much less than one that is starved of it, people who succeed more don't appreciate it as much—that's just the way of the world, suggests the poem, a sort of natural law.

Metrically speaking, these two lines mirror the opening two (note that "requires" scans as three syllables). "Nectar" ends line 3 on a weak stress (another feminine ending):

> To comprehend a nectar
> Requires sorest need.

The /r/ consonance through these lines ("comprehend," "nectar," "requires," "sorest") is gently tender, suggestive of the "soreness" that comes with "need." Desire is characterized as a kind of ache, a dull pulsing pain that runs through failure.

LINES 5-8

> *Not one of all the purple Host*
> *Who took the Flag today*
> *Can tell the definition*
> *So clear of victory*

The second stanza introduces the poem's next metaphor, though its full meaning isn't clear until the final lines of the poem. Here, the reader gets a couple lines of build up, as the speaker says that not a single member of an army who won a recent battle can understand what victory means as much as... well, the reader doesn't know yet! The stanza ends before finishing the thought, with an enjambment between stanzas that ups the sense of anticipation.

What is clear from this stanza alone, however, is that not a single soldier from the "purple Host" can "tell the definition" of (that is, truly understand) "victory." "Purple" carries with it connotations of royalty and power, so "purple Host" might reference a royal army, perhaps that of the United Kingdom in which Dickinson lived.

Line 6 contains an example of metonymy, with "the Flag" representing victory. Free from the rival army's aggression, the victors can display their flag as a symbol of their achievement. Or, as is the case here, they can also capture the enemy's flag and thereby *deny* the enemy that same status symbol. But no one, continues the poem, on the winning side knows the true *value* of victory. That is left for the third stanza to describe.

It's notable here that all four lines are enjambed. Perhaps this matches what the stanza describes: the "purple Host" has conquered its resistance, and so the stanza's four lines

encounter no resistance in the form of punctuation either.

LINES 9-10

As he defeated – dying –
On whose forbidden ear

In the third stanza, the poem zooms in one of the defeated army's soldiers—who is notably alone, in contrast to the numerous "purple Host" of line 5. This soldier is nearly dead, with the alliteration between "defeated" and "dying" underscoring the life force ebbing away (notice how "defeated" also contains the word "dead"). The caesura here—the only in the poem—suggests this moment-by-moment loss of life, breaking the line up until small moments too.

Generally speaking, the third stanza completes the metaphor begun in the second, depicting the soldier on the ground. While "dying," he hears the "distant strains of triumph" coming from his rival victors (and the sounds are probably drums, trumpets and cheers).

In other words, the "dying" soldier is better placed to understand the meaning of victory than the actual victors—the rival army which is celebrating within earshot. This, of course, is a metaphorical way of depicting any situation which there are "winners" and "losers."

But before the poem gets to these "distant strains," it states that the dying soldier has a "forbidden ear." Of course, it is not his *ear* that is "forbidden" specifically but the soldier himself more generally. Because he is on the losing side, he is shut out—"forbidden"—from the victory ceremonies. There's a kind of spatial metaphor at play here, with the soldier on the outskirts of the celebration as a failed exile. The consonant /d/ sound in "forbidden" links with "defeated" and "dying," confirming the way in which all of these are linked. Furthermore, the soldier is now "forbidden" from living any longer.

But it's this soldier, rather than the victors, who best knows the "definition" of "victory." He is better placed to understand it because he does not have it and, indeed, he has sacrificed his life in its pursuit. Relating this back to "success," the poem is restating the idea presented in the first two lines: that "success" is best understood by those that do not have it.

LINES 11-12

The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

In the poem's final two lines, insult is added to the dying soldier's literal injury. Lying there helplessly as his last living moments play out, he hears the sounds that he wishes he was making himself—the sounds of "triumph."

Here, the poem makes playful use of musicality, using delicate consonance to suggest a far-off tune (perhaps a bugle call played by the winning army's trumpeter):

The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

The meter of the two lines contrasts effectively. Line 11 has a steady iambic sound—even though it, again, has an extra unstressed syllable on the end (another feminine ending, keeping with the poem's pattern), it still *sounds* like an iambic meter—whereas line 12 "bursts" into volume with a spondee. The two stressed syllables in a row—"Burst ag onized"— convey the way the sounds of "triumph" play "agonizingly" in the dying soldier's mind, as though he cannot block them out. The metrical violence of this final line is also suggestive of the soldier's injury at the hands of his enemy.

Comparing the two then, line 11 has a measured tone that seems to evoke military victory and organization, whereas line 12 relates more to the soldier's personal experience. The exclamation mark is almost painful to read, suggesting both the noise of the victors' celebrations and the finality of the poem's ending.

In this scenario, the soldier represents failure. This failure is taunted by success, meaning that those who *don't* succeed focus on—and perhaps obsess over—success to the point that they paradoxically know it better than those for whom succeeding is the norm.

There is another possible interpretation of the poem, though it seems unlikely to have been Dickinson's intention. Perhaps, through being on death's door, the soldier has the clearest definition of success because he understands that it is ultimately meaningless. That is, he knows that all victories are temporary, and that life is always defeated by death in the end.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The first stanza of "Success is Counted Sweetest" makes frequent use of alliteration, which, combined with sibilance and consonance, makes its moral message all the more memorable. This stanza is filled with repeated /s/ and /n/ sounds at the start of words.

The poem here is building a metaphor, mapping the idea of "success" onto taste (specifically, onto sweetness). The "sweet" taste of success is one best enjoyed—or one that *would* be best enjoyed—by those for whom it is most unattainable.

The next instance of alliteration is between "ne'er" and "nectar" (lines 2 and 3). These words look and sound very similar, with just the /ct/ added or taken away to make them sound the same. This places the two concepts close together: "ne'er," which represents denial and failure, with "nectar," which stands in for the sweet taste of success. This creates a "so-near-yet-so-far" effect, with "nectar" placed tantalizingly—but forever—out of

reach. This then widens to include the "need" of line 4.

The other example of alliteration in "Success is Counted Sweetest" comes in line 9. Here, the two /d/ sounds of "defeated" and "dying" combine with caesura to create a sense of weariness and small, difficult movement in keeping with the description of a dying soldier. Indeed, the first and last syllables of "defeated" even create the word "dead."

This alliteration also chimes with the /d/ in "distant," which has a similar effect to the /n/ alliteration discussed in the paragraph above. The alliteration helps draw a distinction between the "dead" soldier in one place and the victorious "distant" army in another, showing that they are close in the sense that there are fine margins between victory and defeat but also far apart in terms of what it means to succeed or fail.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "S," "s"
- **Line 2:** "n," "s"
- **Line 3:** "n"
- **Line 4:** "s," "n"
- **Line 9:** "d," "d"
- **Line 11:** "d"

CAESURA

Caesura is used only once in "Success is Counted Sweetest"—in line 9. Here, the poem describes a "dying" soldier whose army has lost the battle. The soldier is mortally wounded, his life force ebbing away. The poem uses its single caesura to help bring this moment to sonic life.

Whereas the rest of the poem has flowed smoothly, at least from the start to finish of each line, this caesura comes as an abrupt interruption. It conveys a sense of difficulty and small movement, as though the soldier is helplessly trying to raise himself or flee. He's not yet dead, but he is most certainly *dying*. The two dashes around this word—"dying"—give it its own space, making it a powerfully dramatic moment. The word is isolated, subtly hinting at the isolation of the soldier himself; presumably, his comrades are either dead, dying, or have already fled. This isolation contrasts with the "triumphant" sounds of the rival army, which suggest a big group reveling in their victory.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "–"

CONSONANCE

"Success is Counted Sweetest" is brimming with consonance in its opening stanza. Note how many repeated /s/, /k/, /n/, /r/, and /t/ sounds suffuse the lines. As noted in our discussion of alliteration, this helps make the poem's moral message all the more memorable; it sounds like a common aphorism, like a sharp and witty remark that relates a well known truth about life. (Also note that much of this consonance is more specifically sibilance, which is discussed in the sibilance section of the guide.)

The hard /k/, having been first introduced in the word "success" itself, helps that success remain top of mind throughout the poem; the *sound* of success literally echoes throughout the lines, with repetition of this /k/ (and /s/) sound popping up again and again—"counted," "comprehend," "nectar," "requires," etc. This sound continues on into the next stanza, with "clear" and "victory"—again associating this army's win with "success." Notably, the sound disappears almost entirely from the final stanza—where the dying soldier, not coincidentally, is decidedly *un*successful.

Lines 3 and 4 also use /r/ consonance, gently pre-empted by "ne'er" in line 2. These lines talk of "sorest need," an image that suggests a kind of tender pain like a nursed wound. The /r/ sounds contribute to this image, as though the lines are touching the same sound to see if it still hurts.

The final stanza also uses consonance to great effect, with the /d/ sound of "forbidden" picking up on the alliteration of "defeated" and "dying" in line 9. The fact that the sound is now concealed after the first syllable of the word suggests the weakening life force of the dying soldier. The final stanza also returns to the delicate /t/ sounds used in the first, now perhaps evoking the organized music played by the victorious army. Indeed, four /t/ sounds in line 11—"distant strains of triumph"—are perhaps suggestive of a four-beat musical pattern, of the type sometimes used in marches and military music.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "S," "c," "c," "ss," "s," "c," "t," "s," "t," "st"
- **Line 2:** "s," "n," "s," "c," "c"
- **Line 3:** "T," "c," "r," "n," "c," "t," "r"
- **Line 4:** "R," "q," "r," "s," "s," "r," "n"
- **Line 5:** "ll," "l"
- **Line 6:** "t," "l," "t"
- **Line 7:** "t," "ll"
- **Line 8:** "c," "l," "c"
- **Line 9:** "d," "d"
- **Line 10:** "dd"
- **Line 11:** "d," "s," "t," "n," "t," "st," "n," " t," "r"
- **Line 12:** "r," "s," "t," "z," "d," "d"

ENJAMBMENT

Many lines in "Success is Counted Sweetest" are enjambed, including the very first line of the poem. This creates a little moment of anticipation as the speaker' introduces the poem's moral message: success is most valued... by whom? Readers

don't find out until the next line, which is then clearly end-stopped—signaling the completion of this message.

This alternating pattern—an enjambed line followed by a clear full stop—is repeated in the next two lines as well. The first line flows from "sweetest" (which is associated with success), but the phrase is stopped by "ne'er succeed." Likewise, "nectar" (also associated with success and sweetness) is interrupted by "sorest need." In each instance, then, success is undercut by failure.

The middle stanza then consists *entirely* of enjambed lines. Here, the poem describes a victorious army, and perhaps the enjambment is used to suggest a sense of ease and celebration, the rival army no longer in their way; the lines plow ahead without resistance, just as this army no longer faces any resistance.

Most of the final stanza also uses enjambment, in part keeping up the feel of the previous stanza. It's particularly effective between lines 11 and 12, placing dramatic emphasis on the word "burst." The enjambment (along with the metrical stress) helps the word itself *burst* forth from the start of the line. This helps convey the soldier's pain, which is not just the pulsing physical sensations of his wound (itself a kind "burst") but the psychological pain of listening to the other army's sounds of victory.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sweetest"
- **Line 2:** "By"
- **Line 3:** "nectar"
- **Line 4:** "Requires"
- **Line 5:** "Host"
- **Line 6:** "Who," "today"
- **Line 7:** "Can ," "definition"
- **Line 8:** "So," "victory"
- **Line 9:** "As"
- **Line 10:** "ear"
- **Line 11:** "The," "triumph"
- **Line 12:** "Burst"

METONYMY

Metonymy is used once in "Success is Counted Sweetest," in line 6. Here, "the Flag" is a figurative way of describing victory in war. Flags are symbols of nations or organized groups, and accordingly capturing an enemy's flag represents the suppression of that enemy's power—that is, their defeat. The poem is thus using something *closely associated* with victory—"the Flag"—to stand in for that victory itself, making this a moment of metonymy. The dying soldier in the third stanza has been fighting under this particular captured flag, and the loss of the flag thus might represent both the actual defeat *and* the soldier's loss of life.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "the Flag"

METAPHOR

"Success is Counted Sweetest" uses its first metaphor in its opening line, when "success" is characterized as a kind of taste—"Sweetest." Though "sweet" can generally mean "good," with "sweet*est*" thereby meaning "best," the specific reference to taste links the poem's opening statement more directly to desire. People who *don't* have success hunger for it most.

The poem then develops this metaphor with another one, which comes from a similar place. In line 3, the poem refers to "nectar," which is also "sweet" (again, nectar can refer to either the sugary substance secreted by plants, a drink of the gods in classical mythology, or any thick, sweet beverage). This doesn't *just* restate the first metaphor but inserts a sense of the natural world. Bees, for example, desire nectar almost automatically—it's simply in their nature. This development of the metaphor suggests that desiring success is also in human nature, and most pronounced in those that do not have it.

Stanzas two and three construct the poem's other metaphor, which is perhaps best characterized as an extended metaphor. Here, the speaker describes a dying soldier hearing the sounds of victory from the far-off enemy army. This is both a metaphor for and an example of the poem's opening statement: the soldier, by being on the losing side of the war, is better placed to understand the meaning of success and victory.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 3
- Lines 5-12

PARADOX

The poem's main idea contains a rather puzzling piece of logic: success is best enjoyed and understood by those who do not actually have it. This paradox seems deliberately counterintuitive and, as with much of Dickinson's poetry, attempts to be faithful to the complexities of life and avoid oversimplification. It might be reasonable to think that the people who enjoy success the best are those who *do* succeed, but the poem is making the point that, to such people, success is actually less of a remarkable achievement. People who do not succeed desire it more strongly and are fixated on their *lack* of it. This, according to the poem's argument, makes them understands the value of success all the more strongly.

It's a bit like the idea that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence—except that only one side actually has any grass, and those who live on that side are so used to grass

that it's no longer something that they value! In any case, the poem uses this paradox to help readers conceive of success in a new way—perhaps to reevaluate their relationship to "winning" vs. "losing," and to understand how the desire for things tends to come from not having them.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-9

SIBILANCE

Sibilance is used to great effect in "Success is counted Sweetest," from the first line onward. As noted in our discussion of consonance, the actual *sounds* of the word "success" echo throughout the poem—the hard /k/ and soft /s/ appearing again and again. There's something seductive and luxurious about the prominent /s/ sounds, playing with the idea of "success" being well understood but out of reach. The high number of /s/ sounds in the first stanza in particular might even suggest obsession, as though the line is fixated on sibilant sounds in the same way that—according to the poem—people who don't succeed obsess about it more.

Interestingly, the poem dials down the sibilance in the second stanza. This appears to coincide with a focus on a victorious army. Whereas the first stanza concentrated on *not* succeeding and was highly sibilant, the second stanza shows an example of realized success and accordingly takes the emphasis *off* sibilant sounds. If sibilance suggests desire, then it makes sense for it to be less present while poem briefly touches on the army's victory—since this army doesn't actually understand all that much about success, according to the poem.

Indeed, this idea seems to be confirmed by the final stanza. Here, the poem focuses on a dying soldier from the defeated army—and the sibilant sounds return. The soldier can hear the "agonizing" sounds of the victorious army's celebrations—and those "distant strains of triumph" seem to make the difference between failure and success all the more stark and painful. If the /s/ sounds are linked to this position—that is, knowing the meaning of success through not having it—it makes perfect sense for the poem to reintroduce the prominent sibilance at this stage.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "S," "c," "ss," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 2:** "s," "s," "c"
- **Line 4:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 5:** "s"
- **Line 11:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "z"

VOCABULARY

Counted (Line 1) - Here this means "regarded," rather than something to do with numbers.

Ne'er (Line 2) - A contraction of "never."

Nectar (Line 3) - A sugary liquid produced by plants that attracts animals and insects. "Nectar" can also refer to a drink of the gods in Greek and Roman mythology, or to a thick, sweet drink in general.

Sorest (Line 4) - This can mean "most painful," "most upset," or "most urgent."

Purple Host (Line 5) - "Host" here is used to denote the big group of people that make up the poem's victorious army. They are purple most likely because it is a color associated with royalty and power.

Strains (Line 11) - A literary word for music.

Agonized (Line 12) - This means "painfully," relating to both the soldier's mental and physical pain.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Success is Counted Sweetest" is a ballad consisting of three quatrains. This poem is one of a number of "definition poems" by Dickinson, in which she explores the meaning of a word in order to express a complex truth. In this case, the word is "success," and the poem focuses less on its actual definition than *who* is best placed to define it. Put simply, it's those people don't succeed that best understand the meaning of success.

The opening two lines state this idea plainly, while the rest of the first stanza develops it with a metaphor (that "success" is a kind of "sweet" "nectar" that paradoxically tastes better the less it's tasted).

The second and third stanzas move the poem on to an illustrative example of the poem's main idea, and this is also a metaphor. Stanza two describes a victorious army, but suggests that they don't know the meaning of their success as much as the dying soldier—described in stanza 3—who hears their celebrations from afar.

METER

"Success is counted Sweetest" is a ballad, meanings its lines alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. Were the poem to conform perfectly to this form, lines 1 and 3 in each stanza should have four iambs (da DUM) per line, and lines 2 and 4 should have three iambs per line.

Except, the poem doesn't do this. Instead, lines 1 and 3 in each stanza are missing their final syllables—ending instead on an unstressed note and essentially leaving the reader hanging.

Take a look:

Success | is count- | ed sweet- | est
By those | who ne'er | succeed.
To comp- | rehend | a nec- | tar
Requi- | res sor- | est need.

For lines 1 and 3 to be proper iambic tetrameter, they'd need another stressed syllable—something like: "Success | is count- | ed sweet- | est dear."

This is technically called catalexis, and it has an interesting effect on the poem's sound. Whereas steady iambs can often sound assured and measured, the missing syllable at the end these lines creates a sense of falling. It is as though these lines *strive* to be iambic—but fail. This effect is particularly noticeable in line 9, when the missing syllable combines with the caesura to create an air of defeat and resignation around the word "dying":

As he | defeat- | ed – dy- | ing –

In fact, the poem's single other variation supports this idea. Line 5 describes the victory—the "success"—of the dying soldier's rivals. And accordingly, the line is purely iambic, as though the army's victory has earned that right:

Not one | of all | the pur- | ple Host

This line is an example of perfect iambic tetrameter, and its regularity recalls the sound of a victory march.

RHYME SCHEME

"Success is Counted Sweetest" has a regular rhyme scheme with the following pattern:

ABCB

This scheme is known as the ballad stanza, but is also close to the hymn songs of Dickinson's time. As with Dickinson's other poems, this makes "Success is Counted Sweetest" an easy poem to memorize. In turn, this makes it feel like an aphorism—a succinctly expressed truth or thought about life—that expresses something complicated in simple terms.

The first pair of rhymes helps set up the poem's relationship between success and the *desire* for success. "Succeed"/"need" neatly represents the poem's main idea that understanding the value of success depends, paradoxically, on not having it.

The second pair of rhyme words—"today"/"victory"—is a slant rhyme, another common element of Dickinson's poetry. But the third pair returns to full rhyme, with "ear" and "clear" chiming together in an appropriately neat and obvious way. Here, the poem describes the dying soldier's experience of hearing the sounds of the other army's celebrations—which thereby makes the distinction between success and failure all the more painful and immediate. It makes sense, therefore, that the rhyme here would match this painful clarity.

SPEAKER

As with much of Dickinson's poetry, the speaker in "Success is Counted Sweetest" is non-specific—given no age, gender, occupation, etc. The speaker has a bold statement to make about the nature of success and failure and, having made that statement, goes about proving it. The speaker's aim is to shake up the concepts of success and failure and in turn to see them anew. The speaker's anonymity helps the poem's argument apply to lots of different circumstances; it's not limited to any single situation.

It's hard not to see this discussion of the nature of success in the context of Dickinson's own life, however. A passionate believer in the power of poetry, Dickinson had to reconcile herself to the unfortunate fact that she wouldn't get the recognition in her life time that her poetry deserved. She was well placed, then, to understand the *desire* for literary success while also having to adjust to its lack.

SETTING

Dickinson's poems often have a timeless quality, and they rarely contain geographical specifics. As with her other "definition poems," "Success is Counted Sweetest" takes place in a kind of forum in which the speaker examines a concept and tries to cast it in fresh light.

Accordingly, it's fair to say that this poem takes place in a world of argument and metaphor. That said, the mention of "nectar" in line 3 briefly evokes a natural setting, and the second and third stanzas take place on a battlefield of some sort. But the poem is trying to convey truths about the world that are universal, and so this battle is described in very general terms. The lack of a really specific setting helps the poem's message apply to all sorts of different situations.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), one of the world's most influential and beloved poets, might never have been known at all. During her lifetime, she published only a handful of the nearly 1,800 poems she composed, preferring to keep much of her writing private. If Dickinson's sister Lavinia hadn't discovered a trunkful of poetry hidden in Dickinson's bedroom after her death, that poetry could have been lost.

Perhaps it's partly because of her separation from the literary

mainstream that Dickinson's poetry is so idiosyncratic and distinctive. While her interest in the power of nature and the workings of the soul mark her as a voice of the American Romantic movement, her work didn't sound like anyone else's. Combining the common meter rhythms of hymns with strange, spiky, dash-riddled diction, Dickinson's poems often plumbed eerie psychological depths over the course of only a few lines.

Dickinson was inspired both by contemporary American Transcendentalists—like Emerson, whose essays on self-reliance she deeply admired—and by the work of earlier English writers like Charlotte Brontë and William Wordsworth. All these writers shared an interest in the lives of ordinary people and struggled for inner freedom in a 19th-century world that often demanded conformity.

"Success is Counted Sweetest" belongs to the category of Dickinson's work that might be called "definition poems." In these, the speaker sets out an abstract noun which is then discussed in concrete terms and images; this refreshes the abstract concept and casts it in a new light. Other famous poems that follow a similar setup are "Grief is a Mouse," "Fame is a Bee," and "Hope is the Thing with Feathers." This poem differs slightly in that the "is" is not immediately followed by a concrete noun (instead, it is followed by the phrase "counted sweetest").

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson lived in small-town Amherst, Massachusetts all her life. She grew up in a strict Protestant environment that placed great emphasis on religious rules and social codes; in fact, her family line can be traced back to the 16th-century Puritan settler John Winthrop. Though she ultimately rejected organized religion, her poems remain preoccupied with theological concerns (including the existence of an afterlife and competing ideas about the ways in which people ought to serve God). Dickinson's religious upbringing also shows itself in the hymn-like tones and rhythms of her poetry.

Dickinson wrote most of her poetry during the American Civil war, which ran from 1861 to 1865. She was firmly on the Union side of that bloody conflict; in one of her letters, she writes with delight about the ignominious defeat of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who was reportedly trying to make his escape disguised in a woman's skirt when he was finally captured. She even contributed three anonymous poems—some of only a handful she published during her lifetime—to a fundraising magazine in support of the Union army.

However, Dickinson rarely addressed the political world around her directly in her poetry, preferring either to write about her immediate surroundings or to take a much wider philosophical perspective. And by all accounts, Dickinson's life was extremely unusual for the time. Most women were expected to marry and have children, but she never did; in fact, towards the end of her life, she barely spoke to anyone but a small circle of close friends and family. She spent most of her time shut up in her room, relatively immune to what was taking place outside in the wider world.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- On Playing Emily — A clip in which actor Cynthia Nixon discusses playing Emily Dickinson in the film A Quiet Passion. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_SId6che2k)
- Student Resources — Resources for students about Dickinson provided by the Emily Dickinson museum (which is situated in her old house). (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/education/resources-for-students-and-teachers/)
- Understanding Dickinson's Use of Meter — A valuable discussion of Dickinson's use of meter in her poetry. (https://poemshape.wordpress.com/2009/01/18/emily-dickinson-iambic-meter-and-rhyme/)
- Dickinson: the Podcast — Experts talk about Emily Dickinson's life and work on the BBC's In Our Time podcast/radio show. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDBADIHwchQ)
- The Original Poem — Take a look at the poem in Dickinson's handwriting. (https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:fq977x56f)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- An awful Tempest mashed the air—
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Before I got my eye put out
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I dwell in Possibility –
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I like a look of Agony
- I like to see it lap the Miles
- I measure every Grief I meet
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- It was not Death, for I stood up
- I—Years—had been—from Home—
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun

- One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted
- Publication — is the Auction
- Safe in their Alabaster Chambers
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
- There came a Wind like a Bugle
- There is no Frigate like a Book
- There's a certain Slant of light
- There's been a Death, in the Opposite House
- The saddest noise, the sweetest noise
- The Sky is low — the Clouds are mean
- The Soul has bandaged moments
- The Soul selects her own Society
- They shut me up in Prose –
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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