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The Meaning of Success in Emily Dickinson's "Success is Counted Sweetest"

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson, one of the most influential American poets, challenged definitions and became a prominent poet for all generations. Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1830 and went to school for one year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (Emily). She had been raised in a Puritan New England family, which encouraged her to have a more conservative and orthodox view of Christianity (Emily). She started her poetry career by sending her friends poems and published a few poems in *Drum Beat* and *Brooklyn Daily Union* (Shmoop). Unexpectedly, she went into isolation. She barely had a social life and used writing as her means of communication. During this time period, she wrote many of her poems. However, her legacy as a poet was not created until after her death in 1886. Her family had found around 1800 unpublished poems that she had written (Emily). "Success is Counted Sweetest," was one of the few published in 1864 when she was alive but anonymously (Overview). This poem suggests that to understand success, we must experience triumph and defeat. The poem envisions a war with both losing and victorious armies. The winners have experienced success but they aren't able to grasp the true meaning of it, only people who have failed can. This poem reverses typical thinking about success. The unconventional message is supported through figures of speech and the meticulous use of imagery in the poem.

The theme of the poem is centered around the idea that only those who have not experienced success can truly understand and appreciate it. People who have faced failures and losses in life can see how important it is. In contrast, individuals who never lose and always succeed will never know it means because they lack perspectives on failure. The first two lines immediately state the main theme : “Success is counted sweetest/By those who ne’er succeed” (1-2). This is an unexpected theme, since people would assume only those who have succeeded would understand success. This theme offers an example of Dickinson’s habit of writing “a distinctively elliptical language for expressing what was possible but not yet realized” (Poetry).

Often, individuals have a goal in their mind and it is precious to them that when they don't make it because they know how important it is, it crushes them. In reference to the poem, “Burst agonized and clear” (12). The soldier had a plan to win that battle and now that he is dying with defeat he has come to realize that he’ll never succeed. That want to succeed was so strong that listening to the other side cheer in victory was painful. The poem shows violent imagery associated with war to present its message. Dickinson wrote, “Not one of all the purple Host” (5). The reference to “purple Host” immediately makes the reader think of an army in a war. Purple often has been a sign of royalty and victory, which connects to success. She wants her readers to envision a victorious army succeeding over their enemies. Dickinson shows the brutal parts of war by saying that, “So clear of victory // As he defeated – dying –” (8-9). These lines perfectly show the fine line between victory and defeat. There is one side that is successful and soaking in their glory and the other, the loser who is left to die. However, as the dying soldier is laying there, all he can think about is his defeat and how much he wanted to succeed. Only then, is it shown how that dying soldier had put his life at risk for that need of success.

Dickinson chose to include figures of speech in her poem. Dickinson illustrates this through the metaphor, “To comprehend a nectar / Requires sorest need” (3-4). She chose to relate “nectar” to experiencing the “sweetness of success” (Overview). However, Dickinson is trying to show the need for nectar that an organism like a bee may have that has the same need as individuals can have for success. Only the individual who needs that success, will understand how much it means, just like the bee needs its nectar. The next line references the individual requiring to have a desire to get the nectar. This relates back to her opening lines about someone desiring success to understand it, not someone who already has it. Particularly, the use of the word “need” by Dickinson highlights the message she is trying to convey regarding the type of individual who can understand success. The poem has a syncope stating, “By those who ne’er succeed” (2). The use of the word, “ne’er” is a syncope that Dickinson intentionally put there for her readers. The apostrophe and sounding of the word draws the attention of the reader. She wanted to emphasize her message of only never succeeding is when you can truly understand it.

Imagery was used by Dickinson to illustrate what was occurring in the poem. Examples of this are the phrases in line 5 and 6, “purple Host” and “Flag” that represent some type of army winning the war with the flag as a symbol of that victory. Near the end of the poem, the imagery focuses on the defeated side. “On whose forbidden ear / The distant strains of triumph,” which is illustrating the dying soldier who will never be able to experience success and who can hear the victors celebrating their glory (10-11). The soldier has been left out in the field and feels the pain of never experiencing success. Therefore, by not being able to experience it, he is the only one who can understand its importance.

All in all, Dickinson decided to express her message through her imagery and detailed figures of speech. Both aspects of the poem tie into examples and symbols of who can understand success. Her theme is all about the meaning of success and who can truly know what it is. While few may achieve success, they are the few that will never understand too. Those who never succeed and always have that need and longing for it will be the only ones who acknowledge success's value.

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