

Caitlyn Wurzburger

Professor Anderson

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Success is Counted Sweetest by Emily Dickinson : Analysis

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. It is to believe that 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 Her family had found around 1800 unpublished poems that she had written (Emily). One of her most famous poems ever written, "Success is Counted Sweetest," was published in 1864. It was one of the few published when she was alive but anonymously (Overview). This poem challenges who can really understand success, which is only those who have experienced triumph and defeat. The poem envisions a war and both the losing and victorious sides of the 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 what we believe when we think about success and the emotions and mindset required to know success. For the analysis of this poem, the major aspects is the

unforeseen message of the theme of success that is supported through the 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 don't know any different. The first two lines immediately state the main theme. In lines 1 and 2 Dickinson states, "Success is counted sweetest; By those who ne'er succeed." This is such an unexpected theme since people would assume only those who have succeeded would understand success, but the truth is shown through Dickinson's word. This theme makes sense based on Dickinson's habit of writing "a distinctively elliptical language for expressing what was possible but not yet realized" (Poetry).

Even though this poem is centered around war, this poem has various applications in regards to success and failure. People who have worked so hard to finally achieve a goal don't value that success they are experiencing when they get it as much as they did when they were working hard to get there. 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, line 12, "Burst agonized and clear." The soldier had a plan to win that victory 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.

Dickinson chose to include a lot of figures of speech in her poem. This allowed for a deeper understanding of the words she used. To start the poem, a paradox immediately states what it is about and the main theme. She states in the first line, "Success is counted sweetest; By

those who ne'er succeed." She is trying to open the people's eyes to who can really understand the meaning of success. If you experience success many times you will never appreciate it and if you have the need and motivation for success, you know what its significance is. Dickinson illustrates this through the metaphor in line 3, "To comprehend a nectar." She chose to relate "nectar" to experiencing the "sweetness of success" (Overview). 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.

Imagery was constantly 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 represents some type of army winning the war and the flag is a symbol of that victory. Near the end of the poem the imagery focuses on the defeated side. Line 10 and 11 states, "On whose forbidden ear; The distant strains of triumph," which is illustrating the dying soldier who will never be able to experience success and he can hear the victors celebrating their glory. 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.

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