"Success is counted sweetest" is one of only seven poems published in Dickinson's lifetime. The poem is governed by paradox, beginning with the opening lines: "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed" (1–2). Its central theme could be said to be that it is only those who experience suffering who truly understand success. Or, to put it in other words, it is the lack of the thing we desire that teaches us its worth. One way to write about this poem is to consider how Dickinson dramatizes this situation with her example of the dying soldier.

You've likely heard the saying, "You never miss a drop of water until the well runs dry." Dickinson, far more poetically in poem #135—"Water, is taught by thirst," wrote:

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Water, is taught by thirst.
Land—by the Oceans passed.
Transport—by throe—
Peace—by its battles told—
Love, by Memorial Mold—
Birds, by the Snow.
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Both "Success is counted sweetest" and "Water, is taught by thirst" express a common theme of Dickinson's: Desire teaches the value of what we desire. The person who renounces what he or she desires, the person who does without, knows better the value of the desired object than the one who possesses it. In "Success is counted sweetest," it is only the dying, defeated soldier who truly understands the meaning of "Victory" (8). One way to approach "Success is counted sweetest" is to consider why, when the message is one that has grown almost to be a cliché, Dickinson's poems on this subject continue to be memorable. How does she convey her idea without allowing it to turn into cliché, even when she herself returned to the same idea numerous times?

You might want to concentrate on the metaphors in Dickinson's poem. One that gave her early editors pause is found in lines 3 and 4: "To comprehend a nectar / Requires sorest need." Although the meaning is clear enough, some readers may feel that to "comprehend a nectar" is too far fetched. Others, though, might find in a phrase such as this simply the unusual diction that marks Dickinson's work and that continues to surprise readers more than 100 years after it was written.

**Topics and Strategies**

This section of the chapter will seek to provide you with various approaches you might take in writing a paper about this poem. These ideas are by no means exhaustive and should be looked at as a starting point for your own investigation.

**Themes**

"Success is counted sweetest" is one of Dickinson's earliest poems in manuscript form, and in it, you will see themes that she returned to throughout her life. The first two lines of the poem are often taken out of context, as they seem to make a direct statement of the poem's "message": "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed" (1–2). However, if you take these lines too literally you might be left thinking this is a poem about never winning, when it is far more complicated. Better than excerpting the first two lines as a statement of this poem's theme would be to incorporate a consideration of how close the dying soldier has come to victory. He is close enough to hear the victory he cannot experience for himself. In Dickinson's poems, you will often find such a situation; as Moses being allowed to see the promised land though disallowed to enter, it is a form of victory to have come close.

It might also be possible to argue that Dickinson believes that losing is sometimes superior to winning. This idea is illustrated in many of her works where rewards and honors on Earth are shown to be empty in comparison to the rewards
that will come in the afterlife or in heaven. Perhaps the soldier in "Success is counted sweetest" has won a moral victory simply by understanding victory's meaning.

A related theme can be found in the image of the vanquished and the victor in this poem. In stanza one Dickinson states, twice, the argument of the poem. Stanza two gives the reader an image of the victor, and stanza three provides the image of the vanquished. How would you compare the victor and the vanquished? We do not know the nature of their battle. Chiefly, their differences lie in their ability to perceive.

Dickinson could be called a poet of desire, as so many of her lyrics are on this theme. If you read even just a small selection of her poetry, you will find references to want, need, and desires, physical or spiritual, sometimes bordering on the macabre, as in #577 where she writes of her desire, seemingly, to possess her beloved's corpse: "If I may have it, when it's dead, / I'll be contented—so— / If just as soon as Breath is out / It shall belong to me" (1–4). "Success is counted sweetest" emphasizes the power of desire and equates desire with victory.

**Sample Topics:**

1. **Success:** What is Dickinson's attitude toward success, as represented in the poem "Success is counted sweetest"?

   In this poem, the "loser" knows better the definition of victory than the "winners" do. If you were to take this poem as representative of Dickinson's attitude toward success, you might frame an argument that stated: Dickinson believed that success was not so much in winning as in knowing the value of victory.

2. **Superiority of failure:** Does "Success is counted sweetest" argue for the superiority of failure?

   That failure is ennobling in "Success is counted sweetest" is one possible thesis statement. For evidence, you might discuss the connotations of such words as *sweetest* or *nectar*. Does it matter that the dying soldier can "tell" the definition of victory, as if speaking were somehow implied?

3. **Victor vs. vanquished:** What distinguishes the vanquished from the victor in "Success is counted sweetest"?

   One possible thesis for an essay on this topic would be that it is perception that distinguishes the vanquished from the victor. The dying soldier understands "Victory" better than those "Who took the Flag" (6). He can "tell the definition," which implies an ability to speak. He can also tell it "clear," which implies an ability to see. The final stanza is about what the soldier can hear. Even if the sounds of victory are "forbidden" him, it seems he understands and hears them intuitively.

4. **Desire:** How does "Success is counted sweetest" show the importance Dickinson places on desire?

   Dickinson writes that "To comprehend a nectar / Requires sorest need" (3–4). Presumably, the greater need leads to greater comprehension. And though the poem says that "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed," where *ne'er* is a contraction for *never*, there is a temptation to read the word as *near*. The dying soldier, after all, is still a soldier. He could not understand victory had he not desired it and strove to achieve it.

**Philosophy and Ideas**

The statement that opens this poem appears simple on the surface, but it hints at a greater psychological truth. Suffering ennobles the person who suffers. The person with the greatest "need" (4) has the deepest understanding. This idea is essential to many religions and belief systems and seems to be one that Dickinson embraced. The story of Christ offers an example of such suffering. A reading of "Success is counted sweetest" from a Christian perspective would perhaps see the "dying" soldier as victor, simply because he is passing into another realm. His earthly battles are over. He is passing to his eternal reward. The concerns of the world, such as warfare, are no longer his. Perhaps the sounds that "Burst agonized and clear" (12) upon the soldier's ear are heavenly music and not the sounds of the celebrating army. Think of the hymn "Onward, Christian Soldiers" written in 1865:

> At the sign of triumph Satan's host doth flee;  
> on then, Christian soldiers, on to victory!
Hell's foundations quiver at the shout of praise;
brothers, lift your voices, loud your anthems raise.

In this hymn, the connection between warfare and Christianity is made explicit.

This poem seems to be one of the more masculine of Dickinson's works. The scene of the battlefield and the loneliness of the dying soldier contribute to this impression. The idea of home was important to her, and the sense is that this soldier is far from his home and its comforts. Perhaps there is some condemnation of the masculine pursuit of warfare, or of war in general. Emily Dickinson's brother, Austin Dickinson, paid another to go in his place when he was conscripted for the Civil War (to do so was not only allowed, it was a common practice among the upper classes, with apparently no shame attached). This poem is believed to have been written before the war, likely in 1859. But Dickinson's poems about violence and warfare do not shrink from descriptions of the bloodiness and the losses of battle.

Sample Topics:

1. **Suffering**: Do Dickinson's poems suggest that she prized suffering?

   One possible thesis is that "Success is counted sweetest" shows the ennobling effect of suffering. You could discuss other poems, such as #241—"I like a look of agony," to further explore Dickinson's attitudes toward suffering.

2. **Religion**: Can "Success is counted sweetest" be read as a poem of religious belief?

   In the Christian faith, death is less to be feared than welcomed. The soldier here, his battles over, meets his death as a victor. Words such as *purple* and *Host* have religious connotations. As we find in 2 Chronicles in the Bible, "The battle [is] not yours, but God's" (20:15). An essay on this topic would continue to discuss any religious imagery in the poem.

3. **Masculinity**: Does "Success is counted sweetest" offer some insight into Dickinson's view of masculinity?

   Many of Dickinson's poems seem to focus on concerns that were largely the province of women in 19th-century America, such as housekeeping. As a particularly masculine poem, does "Success is counted sweetest" tell you anything about Dickinson herself? To write an essay on this topic, you might want to look at some of her poems written from a male perspective.

4. **Futility of war**: Could this be called an antiwar poem?

   Dickinson's poem "My portion is defeat—today," dated by editor Thomas H. Johnson to 1862, includes a graphic description of the waste of the battlefield. It could be referenced as evidence that when Dickinson writes of war, she takes the view of the losing soldier. An essay on this topic would likely make use of Shira Wolosky's book *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War*.

**Language, Symbols, and Imagery**

Of all of Dickinson's poems, "Success is counted sweetest" is the most closely linked to the Civil War. However, the poem was clearly written before the war. Johnson gives its likely date of composition as 1859. But it is not only its subject matter that gives readers the impression that it was occasioned by the Civil War; its publication history also provides a link. The poem was first published anonymously in the *Brooklyn Daily Union* on April 27, 1864. The *Brooklyn Daily Union* worked closely with another publication, *Drum Beat*, which raised funds for the Civil War. Helen Hunt Jackson, a close friend of Dickinson's and a well-respected writer, later submitted it to *A Masque of Poets*, where it was printed in 1878 with the title "Success." *A Masque of Poets* was part of a series wherein all contributors appeared anonymously. Some of the series' popularity rested upon this guessing game, where the public attempted to guess who the anonymous writers were. "Success is counted sweetest" was widely believed to have been contributed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, so much so that when the poem was later reprinted in *Literary World* on December 10, 1878, it carried this head note: "If anything in the volume was contributed by Emerson, we should consider these lines upon 'Success' most probably his" (Pollak 331).
The battlefield is powerful as a subject, an image, and a metaphor. There is no reason to assume that the subject of this poem is warfare. On one level, the poem may be read as a straightforward look at clashing armies, but you should not neglect other possibilities. There is always a temptation to read a Dickinson poem as a veiled reflection on losing at romance, and this applies to "Success is counted sweetest." Perhaps some of the power and popularity of this poem is owed to the fact that its message can be applied to any situation where there are winners and losers.

The language of "Success is counted sweetest" is not difficult. Even syntactically, the poem is fairly clear. Part of what makes the language memorable is Dickinson's use of alliteration. The repetition of the "s" sound in the first line seems to give that line an authority, as if this was a truism passed down over time. Throughout the first stanza, the "s" sound and the "n" continue to be repeated. The words that are emboldened by the alliteration may be considered for their importance and for their added meaning. The word nectar is an unusual choice. What are the connotations of nectar? Have you heard the phrase "nectar of the gods"? Likely you have the sense that nectar is something rare and special. You can imagine other words that Dickinson might have used here, such as water, and why the one she chose is particularly apt. You may also wish to consider the words in this stanza that share with nectar the initial n: ne'er and need.

"Success is counted sweetest" is particularly good at engaging the senses of the reader. A paper could be written discussing how Dickinson achieved this. The word purple stands out in part because there is no alliteration for it in the poem. One of the connotations of purple is that it is the color of royalty or wealth. Another is that it is the color of blood. In the United States, the Purple Heart is the award given to soldiers in battle. The lines "To comprehend a nectar / Requires sorest need" speak to thirst and remind the reader of the dying soldier who cries out for water, or the person lost in the desert. The final stanza engages the sense of hearing. The dying soldier recognizes the "strains of triumph" (strains is another curious word choice), though he is unable to participate in them.

Sample Topics:

1. **War poem**: Why has the imagery of war captivated so many readers, and why does Dickinson's poem, written when the United States was not at war, seem so apt an expression of the war that was to come?

   You do not need to do historical research to construct an argument that Dickinson's poem, for instance, strikes a chord with many because it is from the perspective of the dying soldier. Another interesting approach to this poem would be to discuss why it was so widely attributed to Emerson. Is it surprising that "Success is counted sweetest" was written by a woman?

2. **Metaphor**: Wars and the battles they engender, in addition to being the central image to the poem, might also be a metaphor. How could this battle be said to be a metaphor, and what other metaphors does the poem contain?

   An essay on this topic would argue that the battle is a metaphor for any contest in life. Supporting evidence would be the broad statement of the poem's first two lines and the metaphor of the nectar.

3. **Diction**: Are there any unusual word choices in the poem that, upon inspection, prove the value of the poet's choosing?

   The word nectar is cited above as a word that bears further consideration. An essay discussing this word choice would likely touch on issues of alliteration and meaning. Other words from "Success is counted sweetest" that could bear further analysis are purple and Host.

4. **Use of senses**: How does Dickinson successfully engage the senses in this poem?

   An essay on this topic might choose any one word, such as purple, and discuss how it has numerous sensory connotations. There is purple prose and purple music, the idea of the overwrought and excessive. There is also the idea of richness. Purple is thick like velvet or blood. You might also choose to catalog the way the senses are used here to give perspective to the plight of the dying soldier.

**Compare and Contrast Essays**

"Success is counted sweetest" is a poem whose message is repeated throughout Dickinson's work, so it is not difficult to find any number of poems to compare with it. As mentioned above, #135—"Water is taught by thirst" contains a similar
message, though it does not concentrate on the battle. Instead, this poem shows how things are often defined by their lack.

"The Missing All—prevented Me" and "Your Riches—taught me—Poverty" are both suggestive of autobiography. The former depicts a speaker so taken over by "Missing All" that she cannot be distracted by the Sun being put out or the world dislodging from its axis, occurrences she refers to as "minor Things" (2). What the "All" is that she misses is unidentified. She cannot lift her head from her "work," which somehow is connected to the missing of all. In "Your Riches—taught me—Poverty," it is clearly a beloved who is missed. It is only the speaker who appreciates the true value of the missing beloved and who feels impoverished in his or her absence.

To compare or contrast another poem of battle, you might turn to #639—"My Portion is Defeat—today." You will find in it a number of similarities to "Success is counted sweetest." Both poems take the point of view of the defeated, and both emphasize the music of the victors as it is heard by the vanquished. But #639 has a graphic depiction of the battlefield and its corpses, and the conclusion is not as positive as in "Success is counted sweetest."

"My Portion is Defeat—today" might move you to consider Dickinson's attitude toward death and other losses as essentially positive. If so, #816—"A Death blow is a Life blow to Some" might be another poem worthy of discussion. This poem, like "Success is counted sweetest," begins with a seeming contradiction. How can a death blow be a life blow? In this poem, Dickinson suggests that for some, living is death. For those people, it is death that allows them to finally live.

Sample Topics:

1. **Definitions:** How do Dickinson's poems suggest that only those who lack or lose what they desire know its true worth?

   "Water is taught by thirst" is very similar to "Success is counted sweetest" in defining an object by its absence. If you were to contrast these two poems, it would illustrate Dickinson's concern with this theme while also deepening your understanding of both. "Water is taught by thirst," you might say, explicitly shows what the poet values.

2. **Love poems:** How could you argue that "Success is counted sweetest" is a love poem?

   By looking at other poems that discuss the loss of love in similar terms as the loss that the vanquished soldier is experiencing in "Success is counted sweetest," you could write an essay that argues that love is the central loss that concerns Dickinson. Poems such as #985—"The Missing All prevented Me" or #299—"Your riches taught me poverty" suggest this idea. You might wish to concentrate on the sensual imagery of lines three and four from "Success is counted sweetest": "To comprehend a nectar / Requires sorest need."

3. **The battlefield:** How does Dickinson depict the battlefield in her other poems?

   Dickinson's #639—"My Portion is Defeat—today" could almost seem an extended version of "Success is counted sweetest." These two poems share a scene and have a similar message. However, their perspective is different. In #639 it is the speaker who is defeated. Comparing the two poems might lead you to argue that this change in perspective changes the message of #639 entirely.

4. **Paradox:** How does Dickinson reconcile the seemingly contradictory ideas that often begin her poems and are resolved by the poems' conclusions?

   Her poem #816—"A Death blow is a Life blow to Some" begins in such a contradiction. Like "Success is counted sweetest," it elevates what is normally considered an unenviable fate, dying or losing. A comparison of these two poems could lead to a thesis such as Dickinson's poems force us to reconsider what it means to win or lose, live or die.

Further Information


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