Emily Dickinson

Introduction

Emily Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts. She attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, but only for one year. Throughout her life, she seldom left her home and visitors were few. The people with whom she did come in contact, however, had an enormous impact on her poetry. She was particularly stirred by the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, whom she first met on a trip to Philadelphia. He left for the West Coast shortly after a visit to her home in 1860, and some critics believe his departure gave rise to the heartsick flow of verse from Dickinson in the years that followed. While it is certain that he was an important figure in her life, it is not clear that their relationship was romantic—she called him “my closest earthly friend.” Other possibilities for the unrequited love that was the subject of many of Dickinson’s poems include Otis P. Lord, a Massachusetts Supreme Court judge, and Samuel Bowles, editor of the Springfield *Republican*.

By the 1860s, Dickinson lived in almost complete isolation from the outside world, but actively maintained many correspondences and read widely. She spent a great deal of this time with her family. Her father, Edward Dickinson, was actively involved in state and national politics, serving in Congress for one term. Her brother, Austin, who attended law school and became an attorney, lived next door with his wife, Susan Gilbert. Dickinson’s younger sister, Lavinia, also lived at home for her entire life in similar isolation. Lavinia and Austin were not only family, but intellectual companions for Dickinson during her lifetime.

Dickinson’s poetry was heavily influenced by the Metaphysical poets of seventeenth-century England, as well as her reading of the Book of Revelation and her upbringing in a Puritan New England town, which encouraged a Calvinist, orthodox, and conservative approach to Christianity.

She admired the poetry of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as well as John Keats. Though she was dissuaded from reading the verse of her contemporary Walt Whitmanby rumors of its disgracefulness, the two poets are now connected by the distinguished place they hold as the founders of a uniquely American poetic voice. While Dickinson was extremely prolific as a poet and regularly enclosed poems in letters to friends, she was not publicly recognized during her lifetime. The first volume of her work was published posthumously in 1890 and the last in 1955. She died in Amherst in 1886.

Upon her death, Dickinson’s family discovered forty handbound volumes of nearly 1,800 poems, or “fascicles” as they are sometimes called. Dickinson assembled these booklets by folding and sewing five or six sheets of stationery paper and copying what seem to be final versions of poems. The handwritten poems show a variety of dash-like marks of various sizes and directions (some are even vertical). The poems were initially unbound and published according to the aesthetics of her many early editors, who removed her unusual and varied dashes, replacing them with traditional punctuation. The current standard version of her poems replaces her dashes with an en-dash, which is a closer typographical approximation to her intention. The original order of the poems was not restored until 1981, when Ralph W. Franklin used the physical evidence of the paper itself to restore her intended order, relying on smudge marks, needle punctures, and other clues to reassemble the packets. Since then, many critics have argued that there

is a thematic unity in these small collections, rather than their order being simply chronological or convenient. *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (Belknap Press, 1981) is the only volume that keeps the order intact.

HOW TO READ A POEM

There's really only one reason that poetry has gotten a reputation for being so darned "difficult": it demands your full attention and won't settle for less. Unlike a novel, where you can drift in and out and still follow the plot, poems are generally shorter and more intense, with less of a conventional story to follow. If you don't make room for the *experience*, you probably won't have one.

But the rewards can be high. To make an analogy with rock and roll, it's the difference between a two and a half minute pop song with a hook that you get sick of after the third listen, and a slow-building tour de force that sounds fresh and different every time you hear it. Once you've gotten a taste of the really rich stuff, you just want to listen to it over and over again and figure out: how'd they do that?

Aside from its demands on your attention, there's nothing too tricky about reading a poem. Like anything, it's a matter of practice. But in case you haven't read much (or any) poetry before, we've put together a short list of tips that will make it a whole lot more enjoyable.

Follow Your Ears. It's okay to ask, "What does it mean?" when reading a poem. But it's even better to ask, "How does it sound?" If all else fails, treat it like a song. Even if you can't understand a single thing about a poem's "subject" or "theme," you can always say something – anything – about the sound of the words. Does the poem move fast or slow? Does

it sound awkward in sections or does it have an even flow? Do certain words stick out more than others? Trust your inner ear: if the poem sounds strange, it doesn't mean you're reading it wrong. In fact, you probably just discovered one of the poem's secret tricks! If you get stuck at any point, just look for Shmoop's "Sound Check" section. We'll help you listen!

Read It Aloud. OK, we're not saying you have to shout it from the rooftops. If you're embarrassed and want to lock yourself in the attic and read the poem in the faintest whisper possible, go ahead. Do whatever it takes, because reading even part of poem aloud can totally change your perspective on how it works.

Become an Archaeologist. When you've drunk in the poem enough times, experiencing the sound and images found there, it is sometimes fun to switch gears and to become an archaeologist (you know -- someone who digs up the past and uncovers layers of history). Treat the poem like a room you have just entered. Perhaps it's a strange room that you've never seen before, filled with objects or people that you don't really recognize. Maybe you feel a bit like Alice in Wonderland. Assume your role as an archaeologist and take some measurements. What's the weather like? Are there people there? What kind of objects do you find? Are there more verbs than adjectives? Do you detect a rhythm? Can you hear music? Is there furniture? Are there portraits of past poets on the walls? Are there traces of other poems or historical references to be found? Check out Shmoop's "Setting," "Symbols, Imagery, Wordplay," and "Speaker" sections to help you get started.

Don't Skim. Unlike the newspaper or a textbook, the point of poetry isn't to cram information into your brain. We can't repeat it enough: poetry is an experience. If you don't have the patience to get through a long poem, no worries, just start with a really short poem.

Understanding poetry is like getting a suntan: you have to let it sink in. When you glance at Shmoop's "Detailed Summary," you'll see just how loaded each line of poetry can be.

Memorize! "Memorize" is such a scary word, isn't it? It reminds us of multiplication tables. Maybe we should have said: "Tuck the poem into your snuggly memory-space." Or maybe not. At any rate, don't tax yourself: if you memorize one or two lines of a poem, or even just a single cool-sounding phrase, it will start to work on you in ways you didn't know possible. You'll be walking through the mall one day, and all of a sudden, you'll shout, "I get it!" Just not too loud, or you'll get mall security on your case.

Be Patient. You can't really understand a poem that you've only read once. You just can't. So if you don't get it, set the poem aside and come back to it later. And by "later" we mean days, months, or even years. Don't rush it. It's a much bigger accomplishment to actually *enjoy* a poem than it is to be able to explain every line of it. Treat the first reading as an investment – your effort might not pay off until well into the future, but when it does, it will totally be worth it. Trust us.

Read in Crazy Places. Just like music, the experience of poetry changes depending on your mood and the environment. Read in as many different places as possible: at the beach, on a mountain, in the subway. Sometimes all it takes is a change of scenery for a poem to really come alive.

Think Like a Poet. Here's a fun exercise. Go through the poem one line at a time, covering up the next line with your hand so you can't see it. Put yourself in the poet's shoes: If I had to write a line to come after this line, what would I put? If you start to think like this, you'll be able to appreciate all the different choices that go into making a poem. It can

also be pretty humbling – at least we think so. Shmoop's "Calling Card" section will help you become acquainted with a poet's particular, unique style. Soon, you'll be able to decipher a T.S. Elliot poem from a Wallace Stevens poem, sight unseen. Everyone will be so jealous.

"Look Who's Talking." Ask the most basic questions possible of the poem. Two of the most important are: "Who's talking?" and "Who are they talking to?" If it's a Shakespeare sonnet, don't just assume that the speaker is Shakespeare. The speaker of every poem is kind of fictional creation, and so is the audience. Ask yourself: what would it be like to meet this person? What would they look like? What's their "deal," anyway? Shmoop will help you get to know a poem's speaker through the "Speaker" section found in each study guide.

And, most importantly, **Never Be Intimidated.** Regardless of what your experience with poetry in the classroom has been, no poet wants to make his or her audience feel stupid. It's just not good business, if you know what we mean. Sure, there might be tricky parts, but it's not like you're trying to unlock the secrets of the universe. Heck, if you want to ignore the "meaning" entirely, then go ahead. Why not? If you're still feeling a little timid, let Shmoop's "Why Should I Care" section help you realize just how much you have to bring to the poetry table.

Poetry is about freedom and exposing yourself to new things. In fact, if you find yourself stuck in a poem, just remember that the poet, 9 times out of 10, was a bit of a rebel and was trying to make his friends look at life in a completely different way. Find your inner rebel too. There isn't a single poem out there that's "too difficult" to try out – right now, today. So hop to it. As you'll discover here at Shmoop, there's plenty to choose from

Line 1

Because I could not stop for Death –

Dickinson wastes no time warming up in this poem. She immediately lets the reader know that the poem is going to be about death.

"Because" is a clever way to begin. It immediately assumes the speaker is giving some sort of an explanation to an argument or to a question. This makes the poem seem active and alive, unlike many other poems, which sometimes take more of an observant position.

Stating that she could not stop for death means that the speaker didn't have a choice about when she was to die. We've all probably heard something like this before. Even if not, Dickinson reminds us that it's not really up to us when we die.

Dickinson capitalizes death, which is something she does often to nouns (sometimes without any reason). In this particular case she means to personify Death as a gentleman suitor who drives a horse-drawn carriage (personification means to give human characteristics or behavior to something that is nonhuman).

The line ends with a dash that is both characteristic of Dickinson's work and that really launches us into the next line. Think of it as an arrow or string, pulling you along to the next thing.

Line 2

He kindly stopped for me –

And there it is – Death is a kind of a gentleman. Who knew?

This line establishes the tone that most of the poem follows: one of calm acceptance about death. She's even going to enjoy the ride!

This is also kind of a spoiler. We have pretty good reason to believe now, by just the second line, that the speaker is going to escape this one alive.

Lines 3-4

The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

Pay attention to the line break here. Line 3 says it's just her and Death in the carriage, but line 4 complicates that by adding immortality. The break after "Ourselves" creates an "oh, wait!" moment and holds us in suspense until we drop down to line 4.

Be careful interpreting the capitalized nouns. We established that Dickinson personifies Death to make him a real character, but in these two lines the capitalized words probably aren't supposed to be characters as well. Of course, it *is* a poem, so anything can happen. But, since Dickinson often capitalizes nouns, it's probably safe to consider that she capitalized "Carriage," "Ourselves," and "Immortality" more for emphasis than anything else.

Let's take a look at these three important words.

By making "carriage" a proper noun (a capitalized noun), she makes it more specific and more important. In other words, it's not just any old carriage, it's her Death Chariot!

By "Ourselves" we can assume she means her and Death. The emphasis she places on the word also strengthens the relationship between the

speaker and Death. It's almost like a foreshadowing, so we know something serious is going to happen between them.

"Immortality" is the most complicated and interesting word of these three and certainly gets us thinking. Our first instinct might be to ask, "Wait, you're riding in a carriage with Death – don't you mean *mortality*?" So this is the first hint we get that the speaker doesn't think of death as The End, but as a step on the way to eternal life – an afterlife of some sort.

Line 5

We slowly drove – He knew no haste

They're really taking their time getting to wherever it is they're going.

"He knew no haste" is an old-fashioned way of saying Death didn't speed or hurry.

The shift from "We" to "He" in the same line is an important one. The "We" might allow the reader to think the speaker has some control over the pace, but Dickinson quickly reminds us that "He" is the one determining the relaxed progress and that the speaker's just along for the ride.

While we've already determined that the speaker is not afraid of Death, this slow pace still creates a feeling of drawn-out suspense in the poem and keeps us wondering what might happen.

Lines 6-8

And I put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For his Civility –

Lines 6-7 mean that she has given up work and free time (we might assume she's given up thinking about or worrying about them too).

Line 8 works a couple of ways. First, we can read "For" as "because of." So, she gave up thinking about work and play because Death is just so polite and charming that he distracted her from anything else.

Or, we can read the "for" as "in place of." So, similar to the first interpretation, she has given up the worries (work) and joys (leisure) of life in exchange for his graciousness. We might even guess that she is starting to feel more civil and social too.

Either way, the speaker seems pretty content with, if not a little gaga for Death.

If this were a first date, Death would be doing a pretty good job. She seems both happy and even a little impressed by his manners.

Line 9-10

We passed the School, where Children Strove
At Recess – in the Ring –

Dickinson is painting a little scene of what they are riding by. If you've ever taken a hayride in a carriage in the fall, maybe you saw something like this too.

They see children playing in the schoolyard during recess.

This scene seems almost eerily normal. At first, we're in this strange scene with death that doesn't seem at all normal, then we're looking at something totally familiar. Why do you think Dickinson does this? Maybe you think the mixing of the unreal and real makes the poem seem

even stranger. Or maybe you think it makes death and dying seem like just another ordinary part of life.

Line 11-12

We passed the Field of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

More scene setting. They pass "the fields of […] grain" and "the setting sun." When she describes the grain as "gazing" maybe she thinks the thicker tops of the grain resemble heads, or perhaps that the grain seems to stand still and just look at the carriage as it passes.

The sun and field are much more general descriptions of the scene than the previous lines, yet might even have symbolic significance. The setting sun, for example, signifies the end of the day, but might also stand for the end of life. Ever heard of old people being in their twilight years?

We should also notice the repeated phrase, "We passed" (in poetry-speak, a repeated word or phrase throughout a poem is called anaphora). Here it works to mimic the slow progression of the carriage. You can almost hear the echo of clomping horse hooves in the repeated phrase. So instead of feeling like this poem is at a standstill, we're aware that it's moving forward. It almost allows us to be a part of their journey, not just outside observers.

Line 13

Or rather – He passed Us –

Quite literally, the sun passes her because it falls below the horizon. But, reading a little deeper into it, Dickinson suggests that maybe that's what

death is like – the sun, light, and warmth leaving you to the cold darkness that is death.

Dickinson uses personification again as she refers to the sun. Why do you think that is? It seems the farther along in the journey they get, the farther from the living world they get. There are no other people or animals and it's getting dark. It's a little spooky at this point.

The fact that the adjustment, "or rather," is made after the stanza break only enhances the spookiness. The long pause between stanzas allows us to notice that the poem is about to make a shift away from the sunny ordinary day into something more grave (pun intended).

Lines 14-16

The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

"Gossamer" is used here to describe her gown as one of very thin and delicate material.

"Tippet" is an old-fashioned shawl or shoulder cape, and this one's made of "tulle," which is silky and thin like gossamer.

The dew of night is setting in because the sun has gone down. She's now getting chilly because she isn't wearing warm enough clothing. That thin tulle!

The fact that she is under-dressed for this journey also reflects that she is under-prepared. This stanza echoes what we discovered in the beginning line – this is not her choice and she was not planning this trip with Death.

Cold is something often associated with death in literature and in movies. Ever watch *The Sixth Sense* or read about the Dementors in Harry Potter books? So it's no coincidence that Dickinson is lowering the temperature on us here.

Line 17-18

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –

If we were unsure before, these lines settle everything. The speaker is going to die. Death just led her to her burial spot!

Your first instinct when you read this might be to scream something like, "Run for your life, lady. He's going to kill you!" But let's not forget how at ease the speaker feels with Death and how calmly she's faced the whole experience so far.

The "we paused" marks the second stop in the poem. The first instance was the beginning of the journey when Death stops to pick up the speaker. So we might guess that this second stop could end their journey.

Using the word "House" to indicate the place of burial is a clever move by Dickinson. Instead of "grave" or "tombstone," which might stir up images of finality and death, she uses a word that we consider synonymous with "dwelling" or even "home." Ever heard someone call a gravesite the "final resting place"? This is a subtler way to say that.

"A Swelling of the Ground" eliminates any possibility that we might think this is *not* a grave. Think of a freshly-dug place where a dog hides his bone; even after he covers it up there is a little rise in the ground.

Line 19-20

The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground

These lines continue to explain this burial house, but it gets a little tricky.

A cornice is the pointed part of the roof, and here it's in the ground. So if the highest part of house is in the ground, the rest of it must be too. Further grave evidence.

What part of this burial house can the speaker actually see? It's unclear, but she seems to know what it is and she's OK with it. There's no turning and running for it, as you might typically expect.

Line 21-22

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day

Wait a minute – this happened centuries ago?! This really throws a wrench in the whole system.

The poem seems to be telling a recent memory, but this all actually happened a really long time ago. Meaning...yep, the speaker has been dead the whole time. Interesting.

"Feels shorter than the Day" is just an old-fashioned way of saying something like, "feels like just yesterday." So this memory remains vivid for the speaker.

Line 23-24

I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity –

These final lines recall the very first time the speaker encountered the horse-drawn carriage and had a feeling that they were more than just regular horses – that they signified her journey to the afterlife.

Ending on the image of the horse heads is really smart of Dickinson, because they jut forward and it almost looks like they're pointing toward something. In this case, "Eternity."

It's also very bold of Dickinson to end on this image because this is the first we've heard of the horses, and suddenly she's asking them to hold up the most important moment of the poem.

The final stanza is full of surprising moments for the reader. We find out the speaker has been dead for years and we're introduced to (and left with) this striking image of the horses' heads pushing forward.

Symbol Analysis

OK, so death is not a new concept to us but Dickinson does a good job making it fresh and strange by having death take the form of a man. You might be tempted to think of the grim reaper, with his black cloak and dangerous-looking scythe (the curved sharp thing he's always carrying around), but, no, Dickinson's Death is a real smooth operator. He's the kind of guy who would hold the door open for his date and offer her his coat on a chilly night. Dickinson uses the character of Death as an **extended metaphor** to examine what real death might be like.

Lines 1-2: Death is introduced right away as the leading character and focus of the poem, performing a human action – stopping for someone on his way. If this were a play he'd be cast as the leading male role who gets a lot of lines. Substitute Death for any guy's name: "Because I could not stop for Tom – / He kindly stopped for me." Now, the beginning of this poem seems like the first meeting of two lovers. This personification

of death as a male suitor continues throughout the poem. What does that say about the speaker's thoughts and feelings about death?

Line 5: Now that we've established Death as a human character who represents actual death, let's start making those connections every time he reappears in the poem. In this line we know that the character Death is driving along slowly. What might this action mean when we apply it to thinking about real death? Well, it's definitely not a quick death, like from a gunshot wound or a gory decapitation. Perhaps this could be something more similar to death from a long illness, or slowly dying of old age in one's sleep. Dickinson doesn't really say, but we can look at the evidence she does give us to make educated guesses.

Line 8: Further character development shows us that Death is polite and courteous. So if we were going to continue to relate this to the real thing, we'd probably come to the conclusion that this end wasn't too painful, and that the speaker (the one dying) didn't put up any struggle.

Line 9: The "He" (referring to Death) has now changed to "We." This might be a hint that the two have joined and that the speaker is actually dying.

Line 17: This marks the end of their journey, where Death has brought her home. This might, in more literal terms, mean that the speaker is no longer dying but is in fact dead, and laid to rest in her grave.

he carriage in which Death and the speaker ride is a metaphor for the way in which we make our final passage to death. If you want to be literary about it you might think of Dante's *Inferno* where the souls are ferried by boat into hell. Or, on a more familiar level, it's pretty common for a hearse to carry a coffin to its grave. The carriage in this poem is the mode of transportation to the afterlife. We have to get where we're going somehow.

Lines 3-4: In line 3 we see that the carriage holds Death and the speaker. But the hint that the carriage is more significant than plain old transportation comes in the next line, where we discover the carriage also holds "Immortality," another example of personification. This should really tip us off that the carriage is a pretty special vehicle that will carry the speaker to the next world.

and the cold to follow. This might be the most obvious symbol in the poem. Dickinson is certainly not the first to use sunset as a symbol and foreshadowing of death. So she's in cheesy territory, but luckily Dickinson's a master and avoids cliché.

Lines 12-13: The sun passes them, leaving the riders in spooky cold. Dickinson doesn't write it, but we can assume it's gotten dark too. Dark and cold certainly set the scene for death. What do you think it's like under the ground? So, we have to give Dickinson credit for using an age-old literary device – the sunset – and chucking the pastel-hued beach scene for something a little more original, and more chilling.

THE HOUSE

Symbol Analysis

The speaker's last stop and final resting place. The house is a metaphor for the grave. Dickinson wants to enforce the idea that the speaker accepts and is comfortable with dying. She could have described the claustrophobic coffin, but she didn't. She chose a **metaphor** familiar to the readers to illustrate the calmness of the speaker.

Lines 17-20: The speaker can barely make out the house, since it's just a small rise in the ground. Maybe because she is just starting to understand that this house is going to be her grave. We tend to comprehend things better when they have personal significance. The description of the

house is pretty limited and seems normal except for the fact that it's underground. Dickinson might keep the description vague on purpose. She wants to use the house as a symbol, but still wants it to make sense on a literal level. If she were to describe the house down to the green shutters and the white picket fence, this might seem a little funny to us, and much less believable. So kudos to Dickinson on "less is more."

THE HORSES

Symbol Analysis

…or, rather, their heads! The horses' heads are the 9th inning symbols, but they really hit a home run. OK, forgive the baseball comparison, but these horse heads do heavy-duty work as the closing symbol of the poem. But what exactly do they symbolize?

Lines 23-24: The speaker says the first hint that she was going to die was seeing the horses' heads (maybe even *before* she got in the carriage with Death). So what would make her feel that way? Well, first of all, there's a lot of room for "I had a feeling" in poetry. It's built on gut feelings, especially in Dickinson's poetry, but let's also think about what the image of a horse head looks like. Their heads are long and angled forward, perhaps like an arrow pushing through the barrier from life to death?

ANALYSIS: FORM AND METER

Hymn-Like Iambic Meter in Quatrains

If you're familiar with hymns, you'll know they're usually written in rhyming quatrains and have a regular metrical pattern. Dickinson's quatrains (four-line stanzas) aren't perfectly rhymed, but they sure do follow a regular metrical pattern. We'll show you what we mean.

Iambic meter is supposed to follow the most common pattern of English speech, so if you didn't notice that this poem was written in meter, don't worry about it! That just means Dickinson pulled it off without it sounding forced. The first and third line in every stanza is made up of eight syllables, or four feet. A foot is made up of one unstressed and one stressed syllable. So the first line, if you were to exaggerate it, might sound like this:

Be-***cause*** | I ***could*** | not ***stop*** | for ***Death***,

The vertical lines mark the feet. Since there are four ("tetra") feet per line, this is called iambic tetrameter. The second and fourth lines of each stanza are in the same iambic metrical pattern, but because they have fewer syllables (and therefore only three feet) it's called iambic trimeter (tri = three).

The important thing to know is that there is a regular pattern here, even if Dickinson, rebel that she is, breaks it a couple of times. Can you find where?

The rhyme isn't regular (meaning it doesn't follow a particular pattern) but there is rhyme in this poem. "Me" rhymes with "Immortality" and, farther down the poem, with "Civility" and, finally, "Eternity." Scattering this same rhyme unevenly throughout the poem really ties the sound of poem together. Also, "Chill" and "Tulle" are half or slant rhymes, meaning they sound really close to a perfect rhyme but there's something a little off.

Another thing that ties the poem together is the repeated phrase, "We passed," which is changed a bit in the fifth stanza to, "We paused." This

repetition of a word or phrase throughout a poem is called anaphora and it's a technique poets use a lot in order to help the poem progress as a well as tie it together.

You probably noticed that Dickinson likes to capitalize nouns, but what is the effect? Capitalization can make the words seem more important; it certainly stands out, and it can also slow the reader down a little, making us pause to consider the word rather than breezing through the poem. Those dashes have a similar effect sometimes. They both make us pause and usher us on to the next line. You might think of them as connecters or strings, pulling you through the poem.

ANALYSIS: SPEAKER

The speaker is dead. But the even cooler thing is that we don't know this for sure until the last stanza. So the speaker is a ghost or spirit thinking back to the day of her death. She's actually pretty calm about it too. Maybe because she's been dead for so long she's not so freaked out about it anymore, or maybe she was ready to die when she did; either way, she's completely at ease with it now and looks back at that day almost fondly.

This was a memorable day for her, though. Centuries have passed and she still remembers everything so vividly – what they passed on the way, when she got chilly, what the grave looked like, and she especially remembers the feeling she got when she looked at those horse heads.

ANALYSIS: SETTING

Where It All Goes Down

Well, the setting moves around a little because the speaker and Death are going for a ride in a carriage. It starts when Death picks up the speaker

and they drive for a while through her town, past the schoolyard and fields of grain, and eventually to her burial site. We can assume that the trip takes a while and that they probably cover a decent amount of ground. It's light when they set out on their journey, then the sun sets and night begins. Let's not forget the burial "house" either. While we never actually see the speaker in the house, we can assume she made herself pretty comfy shortly thereafter.

The setting shifts a bit in the final stanza because we find out the place in the poem is from long ago and that the speaker is really telling this story long into the afterlife. So, you could say the whole poem takes place in the afterlife, but the memory of the ride has a different setting altogether.

ANALYSIS: SOUND CHECK

Hats off to Dickinson for the way this poem sounds. All those technical things we talked about in "Form and Meter" (meter, rhyme, anaphora, the dashes) really make for subtly-woven sound patterns. Take a look at the repeating rhymes again. Not only does the rhyme tie the poem together, but it draws attention to some very important words in the poem, "Immortality" and "Eternity."

None of the sounds are super loud or noticeable. This is not your neighbor at the drum set. It's almost as if Dickinson has done all of this behind our backs, so if you don't pay attention, you might not even realize it's there. The more attractive the poem sounds, the more you're going to want to read and pay attention. The meter, which is so sneakily undulating (think low-rolling hills), is lulling and attractive. You can almost imagine this poem set to the even sound of the horses' clomping

hooves; the real conversation is going on between the speaker and Death in the carriage, but the hooves are always in the background. Very cool stuff.

ANALYSIS: WHAT'S UP WITH THE TITLE?

"Because I could not stop for Death" is actually *not* the title of this poem. Dickinson didn't title any of her poems, because she never meant to publish them. In collections, sometimes this poem is given a number, either 479 or (712). These numbers were assigned to the poems after Dickinson's death and indicate the order in which Thomas Johnson (1955 edition) and R.W. Franklin (1998 edition) think they were written. Nowadays, the Franklin number, which is not in parenthesis and appears first, is usually the more trusted.

ANALYSIS: CALLING CARD

Lady of the Dark Side

Dickinson is no stranger to the topic of death. In fact, it's pretty safe to say she's got a corner on the market. An unsettling amount of her poems are either about dying, death, or what happens after death. What's stranger than her fixation on the subject is her more-or-less cool, calm, and collected attitude toward it. Sure, the poems are creepy, but the speakers in her poems are rarely spooked by the bleak scene. They seem pretty comfy on the dark side of things.

ANALYSIS: TOUGH-O-METER

(4) Base Camp

You can probably leave the ice pick at home. The action in this poem is pretty straightforward. The real meat is the comparison of death to a date in a carriage ride, and the calm attitude of the speaker. Make sure you

keep your hiking boots on, though, because the ending is a little bit of a shock.

Brain Snacks: Tasty Tidbits of Knowledge

Dickinson's creative writing seeds were planted as a kid. Back in the day, creative writing wasn't taught in school. However, Amherst Academy, where Dickinson was first educated, encouraged original writing and made it a part of their regular curriculum. (Source: *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, Issue 18. "Dickinson's Early Schooling as a Scholar")

Dickinson's poems were so good, they started a family feud. When it came time to publish Dickinson's poems after her death, her sister and her sister-in-law battled over who would be in charge. In the end, they both lost to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dickinson's literary mentor. (Source: The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson, "The Emily Dickinson Wars.")

Dickinson liked riding bikes! But she sure didn't ride what Lance Armstrong rides around on today – she rode something called a bone-shaker, which weighed 40 lbs! (Source)

ANALYSIS: SEX RATING

Exactly how steamy is this poem?

G

There's nothing too steamy going on here, though some flirtation with Death is present. All the same, it's pretty tame.

BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH THEMES

Because I could not stop for Death Themes

Mortality

Mortality is probably the major theme in this poem. It's all about the speaker's attitude toward her death and what the actual day of her death was like. Dickinson paints a picture of the day that...

Immortality

That's right, two opposite themes – Mortality and Immortality – occupy this poem. We find out that the memory of the speaker's death day is being told centuries into the afterlife. So,...

Spirituality

Well, the speaker is a ghost, which means Dickinson had to believe in some sort of life after death (and we do know that she grew up in a Christian family). But she leaves specific religious refere...

Love

The poem doesn't really address love head-on, but it certainly gives us a glimpse into courtship (a.k.a. dating) and romantic love. If you exchange "Tom" or "Joe" for "Death" here, this could be a...

BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH THEME OF MORTALITY

Mortality is probably the major theme in this poem. It's all about the speaker's attitude toward her death and what the actual day of her death

was like. Dickinson paints a picture of the day that doesn't seem too far from the ordinary (that is, if you're used to having a guy named Death take you out on dates). The speaker isn't scared of death at all, and seems to accept it.

Questions About Mortality

Why couldn't the speaker stop for Death? What makes her incapable and him capable of stopping?

Why do you think the speaker is so willing to die? What kind of person is ready to die?

How did you feel when you read the first stanza? How did you think the rest of the poem would turn out? Were your expectations correct?

How long do you think the carriage ride takes? What clues does the poem give you?

Find quotes from this poem, with commentary from Shmoop. Pick a theme below to begin.

Mortality Quotes

Because I could not stop for Death – (1)

Immortality Quotes

The Carriage held but just Ourselves – And Immortality. (3-4)

Spirituality Quotes

And I had put away My labor and my leisure too, (6-7)

Love Quotes

He kindly stopped for me – (2)

How we cite our quotes: (line)

Quote #1

Because I could not stop for Death – (1)

Death is introduced right away. We're also reminded that our time of death is not something we choose (at least that's what the poem claims), but something that is determined by forces beyond our control. This is also the start of the "why worry about things I cannot change?" attitude of the rest of the poem. There is no resistance to death, and no fear of it.

Mortality

Quote #2

We slowly drove – He knew no haste (5)

Again, we're reminded that death is in control. He's in the driver's seat (literally). Also that death isn't always a quick thing. We are really shown the dying process in this poem and that, for the speaker, it was not a "life flashed before my eyes" kind of thing, but more like "my life crawled away slowly." The pace reflects the peace the speaker feels with death.

Mortality

Quote #3

We passed the Setting Sun – (12)

Once the sun goes down, and death is lingering around, there's probably not a lot of hope for life left. Think of the sun setting as the symbolic closing of the eyes of the deceased. The lights are out, it's cold, and it won't be warming up. This is her final sunset.

Mortality

How we cite our quotes: (line)

Quote #4

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground – (17-18)

Well, this is the speaker's final resting place. The journey is over and their last stop is the grave. The speaker continues with the cool, calm, and collected approach to her death, and even seems hopeful by describing the grave as a house. Maybe she will finally feel at home there.

Mortality

How we cite our quotes: (line)

Quote #1

The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality. (3-4)

The speaker knows this journey to death is also the beginning of the afterlife. So she believes she will continue a life, just not here on Earth. No wonder she's not freaking out.

Immortality

Quote #2

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain – (9-11)

Children grow up and fields go dry – these are examples of things that won't last forever. As the speaker passes them, perhaps their transience reminds her of her soon-to-be immortality.

Immortality

Quote #3

Since then – 'tis Centuries – [...] (21)

Well, she's talking to us from somewhere, and it sure isn't Earth. We now have proof that she continued on somewhere after she died. "Centuries" is a really long time, so whatever afterlife it is (Heaven?) it's not a normal human life span, and we get a sense she'll live forever where she is now.

How we cite our quotes: (line)

Quote #4

Were toward Eternity – (24)

If we were at all uncertain that the speaker was living forever in her new life, the last line really seals it. She tells us that her first feeling about the horses has been confirmed. Talk about a woman with spot-on intuition.

Immortality

How we cite our quotes: (line)

Quote #1

And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too, (6-7)

Because the speaker is spiritually committed to dying and to what comes after death, she no longer worries about "earthly things."

Spirituality

Quote #2

We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain – (11)

Grain is mentioned in the Bible often, usually as a sign of prosperity and life. The fact that they are passing grain shows the speaker's journey away from health and life toward death. The spirit is usually thought to be free of the body in the afterlife, so no need for grain or any other food, for that matter. Hunger is a thing of the past! Though this poem is not explicitly written from a Christian perspective, this may be one hint as to the speaker's spiritual influences.

Spirituality

Quote #3

The Roof was scarcely visible – (19)

This is a classic example of spirituality and faith – the speaker does not need to see the whole thing to know it exists, she simply believes it.

Spirituality

How we cite our quotes: (line)

Quote #4

Were toward Eternity – (24)

Immortality and spirituality often go hand-in-hand. They both tend to support the idea of something after this life on Earth. So, in order to think about eternity, the speaker had to have some faith that after her death there would be something more waiting for her.

Spirituality

How we cite our quotes: (line)

Quote #4

Were toward Eternity – (24)

Immortality and spirituality often go hand-in-hand. They both tend to support the idea of something after this life on Earth. So, in order to think about eternity, the speaker had to have some faith that after her death there would be something more waiting for her.

Spirituality

BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH THEME OF LOVE

The poem doesn't really address love head-on, but it certainly gives us a glimpse into courtship (a.k.a. dating) and romantic love. If you exchange "Tom" or "Joe" for "Death" here, this could be a pretty good example of dating for the 1800s. The speaker's tone in the poem makes the reader believe the speaker does not fear death, but feels the opposite toward it. If the poem did not explore death with an underlying theme of love, the acceptance of death might eventually be hard for the reader to believe.

Questions About Love

Why didn't the speaker and Death ever speak?

Think about what she's wearing. Does her outfit remind you of a wedding gown at all? Or a fancy outfit? What do you think this means?

Is the love between the speaker and Death romantic love, or something else? What could it be? What evidence in the poem makes you think so?

Do you think Death is really gentlemanly, or is this just a front to get her to go along with him?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil’s advocate.

The speaker knew about the date beforehand and that's why she's dressed up and not at all surprised to see Death.

The speaker hasn't really passed into an afterlife, but lives in the "house" with Death.

BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH QUESTIONS

Bring on the tough stuff - there’s not just one right answer.

Do you believe the speaker's relaxed attitude toward death? Sometimes we pretend to be confident when we're nervous and brave when we're scared. Is this an example of that? Which lines of the poem support your opinion?

Why might the speaker not fear death?

If Dickinson were writing this today, do you think she could still illustrate the journey to death with as a carriage ride, or would that be silly? What would be a good present-day equivalent?

Try reading the poem out loud. How does the sound of the poem affect your reading of it? Think about the action in the poem (the driving, the stopping). When does the sound mimic the action?

The speaker seems to speak fondly and clearly of her memory of death. What do you think that means about the afterlife? How do you imagine the place where she now speaks from?

SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST

HOW TO READ A POEM

There's really only one reason that poetry has gotten a reputation for being so darned "difficult": it demands your full attention and won't settle for less. Unlike a novel, where you can drift in and out and still follow the plot, poems are generally shorter and more intense, with less of a conventional story to follow. If you don't make room for the *experience*, you probably won't have one.

But the rewards can be high. To make an analogy with rock and roll, it's the difference between a two and a half minute pop song with a hook that you get sick of after the third listen, and a slow-building tour de force that sounds fresh and different every time you hear it. Once you've gotten a taste of the really rich stuff, you just want to listen to it over and over again and figure out: how'd they do that?

Aside from its demands on your attention, there's nothing too tricky about reading a poem. Like anything, it's a matter of practice. But in case you haven't read much (or any) poetry before, we've put together a short list of tips that will make it a whole lot more enjoyable.

Follow Your Ears. It's okay to ask, "What does it mean?" when reading a poem. But it's even better to ask, "How does it sound?" If all else fails, treat it like a song. Even if you can't understand a single thing about a poem's "subject" or "theme," you can always say something – anything – about the sound of the words. Does the poem move fast or slow? Does it sound awkward in sections or does it have an even flow? Do certain words stick out more than others? Trust your inner ear: if the poem sounds strange, it doesn't mean you're reading it wrong. In fact, you

probably just discovered one of the poem's secret tricks! If you get stuck at any point, just look for Shmoop's "Sound Check" section. We'll help you listen!

Read It Aloud. OK, we're not saying you have to shout it from the rooftops. If you're embarrassed and want to lock yourself in the attic and read the poem in the faintest whisper possible, go ahead. Do whatever it takes, because reading even part of poem aloud can totally change your perspective on how it works.

Become an Archaeologist. When you've drunk in the poem enough times, experiencing the sound and images found there, it is sometimes fun to switch gears and to become an archaeologist (you know -- someone who digs up the past and uncovers layers of history). Treat the poem like a room you have just entered. Perhaps it's a strange room that you've never seen before, filled with objects or people that you don't really recognize. Maybe you feel a bit like Alice in Wonderland. Assume your role as an archaeologist and take some measurements. What's the weather like? Are there people there? What kind of objects do you find? Are there more verbs than adjectives? Do you detect a rhythm? Can you hear music? Is there furniture? Are there portraits of past poets on the walls? Are there traces of other poems or historical references to be found? Check out Shmoop's "Setting," "Symbols, Imagery, Wordplay," and "Speaker" sections to help you get started.

Don't Skim. Unlike the newspaper or a textbook, the point of poetry isn't to cram information into your brain. We can't repeat it enough: poetry is an experience. If you don't have the patience to get through a long poem, no worries, just start with a really short poem. Understanding poetry is like getting a suntan: you have to let it sink in. When you glance at Shmoop's "Detailed Summary," you'll see just how loaded each line of poetry can be.

Memorize! “Memorize” is such a scary word, isn’t it? It reminds us of multiplication tables. Maybe we should have said: “Tuck the poem into your snuggly memory-space.” Or maybe not. At any rate, don’t tax yourself: if you memorize one or two lines of a poem, or even just a single cool-sounding phrase, it will start to work on you in ways you didn’t know possible. You’ll be walking through the mall one day, and all of a sudden, you’ll shout, “I get it!” Just not too loud, or you’ll get mall security on your case.

Be Patient. You can’t really understand a poem that you’ve only read once. You just can’t. So if you don’t get it, set the poem aside and come back to it later. And by “later” we mean days, months, or even years. Don’t rush it. It’s a much bigger accomplishment to actually *enjoy* a poem than it is to be able to explain every line of it. Treat the first reading as an investment – your effort might not pay off until well into the future, but when it does, it will totally be worth it. Trust us.

Read in Crazy Places. Just like music, the experience of poetry changes depending on your mood and the environment. Read in as many different places as possible: at the beach, on a mountain, in the subway. Sometimes all it takes is a change of scenery for a poem to really come alive.

Think Like a Poet. Here’s a fun exercise. Go through the poem one line at a time, covering up the next line with your hand so you can’t see it. Put yourself in the poet’s shoes: If I had to write a line to come after this line, what would I put? If you start to think like this, you’ll be able to appreciate all the different choices that go into making a poem. It can also be pretty humbling – at least we think so. Shmoop’s “Calling Card” section will help you become acquainted with a poet’s particular, unique style. Soon, you’ll be able to decipher a T.S. Elliot poem from a Wallace Stevens poem, sight unseen. Everyone will be so jealous.

“Look Who’s Talking.” Ask the most basic questions possible of the poem. Two of the most important are: “Who’s talking?” and “Who are they talking to?” If it’s a Shakespeare sonnet, don’t just assume that the speaker is Shakespeare. The speaker of every poem is kind of fictional creation, and so is the audience. Ask yourself: what would it be like to meet this person? What would they look like? What’s their “deal,” anyway? Shmoop will help you get to know a poem’s speaker through the “Speaker” section found in each study guide.

And, most importantly, **Never Be Intimidated.** Regardless of what your experience with poetry in the classroom has been, no poet wants to make his or her audience feel stupid. It’s just not good business, if you know what we mean. Sure, there might be tricky parts, but it’s not like you’re trying to unlock the secrets of the universe. Heck, if you want to ignore the “meaning” entirely, then go ahead. Why not? If you’re still feeling a little timid, let Shmoop’s “Why Should I Care” section help you realize just how much you have to bring to the poetry table.

Poetry is about freedom and exposing yourself to new things. In fact, if you find yourself stuck in a poem, just remember that the poet, 9 times out of 10, was a bit of a rebel and was trying to make his friends look at life in a completely different way. Find your inner rebel too. There isn’t a single poem out there that’s “too difficult” to try out – right now, today. So hop to it. As you’ll discover here at Shmoop, there’s plenty to choose from.

INTRODUCTION

In A Nutshell

Isn't it ironic… don't you think? Like rain on your wedding day or a free ride when you're already there?

Actually, no—neither of those things is ironic. (Irony is basically when the opposite outcome or meaning occurs, but hit up our link for the full lowdown.) What *is* ironic is that they both appear in a song called… "Ironic," by Alanis Morissette. Poor Alanis. She doesn't seem to understand what irony really means—which of course is totally ironic.

Something else that might be confused for irony is Emily Dickinson's poem "**Success is counted sweetest.**" It describes the strange fact that you have to be denied something before you can truly appreciate it. To put it in another cheesy pop band way, "You don't know what you got till it's gone."

Technically speaking, though, this is more paradox than irony. Still, it's a truth that bears looking into. Why is it that it's always the thing we don't have that seems most precious to us, whether it's money, love, or the last Beanie Baby that you need to complete your collection? What? We can dream, can't we?

Dickinson's poem clearly struck a chord, as it was one of seven (count 'em) poems that she published in her lifetime. If it seems strange to you that a mega-poet like Dickinson only published seven poems in her life, well then you're just not up on your Dickinson biography.

She spent most of her life living at home in her parents' house. As a result, she's been portrayed as everything from a shy recluse to an introspective visionary. Whatever the case, the bulk of Dickinson's poetry wasn't discovered until after her death in 1886.

The poems—nearly 1800 in all—were collected in hand-stitched books called fascicles. For a variety of reasons, they didn't appear in print until 1955. Sadly, Dickinson was long gone before she rose to fame. And the seven poems she did see published in her life were all anonymous. Clearly, she wasn't big on self-promotion.

Of those seven, six appeared in newspapers or journals. Only one made it into an actual book. Can you guess which it was? If you said "Success is counted sweetest," give yourself a thousand bonus points. This poem first appeared in the April 24, 1864 edition of the *Brooklyn Daily Union*, but then later in an 1878 anthology called *A Masque of Poets*.

Technically, then, that makes this the most successful of Dickinson's poems. So what are you waiting for? Dive in and see what the fuss is all about.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

What do you want right now? What is it that you're really, truly craving? An A in English? A new car? A cheeseburger? Whatever it is, we're guessing that it's not something that's within arm's reach. For that matter, it may take years—even decades—for you to lay your grubby little paws on it.

That, as they say, is life. The things we desire most are never those things that are easy to get. But did you every stop to consider that all that wanting might actually be a *good* thing? We dream about the time when what we want becomes ours, pining away in day in and day out. But that obsessive focus actually might be the pathway to enlightenment.

Let us explain. How many of your possessions to you really, *truly* appreciate? You can lump your family members and loved ones in there too. If you're still listing, we're going to stop you. According to Emily Dickinson's "Success is counted sweetest," the answer is… zero.

Once you have something, you see, you stop focusing on it. It's yours, so why would you devote the same kind of attention to that person or

possession? Nope, all your brain cells are focused on the *next* thing that you don't have—and herein lies the central paradox of this poem's life lesson: it's only through wanting something that we can truly understand and appreciate it.

So, the next time you're totally bummed because the latest video game or that person you're crushing on seems hopelessly out of reach, cheer yourself up with this poem. It will remind you that the sensations you're feeling are key to true understanding and appreciation. Don't let all that jonseing drag you down. Embrace the neediness. Trust us—meditating on the fringe benefits of human cravings is way more fun than suffering from those cravings yourself.

SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST:

TEXT OF THE POEM

SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST SUMMARY

The poem's speaker starts with a message for us: it's the folks who never succeed that really crave success the most. In order to understand a "nectar," you have to be seriously in need. Then she describes an army of sorts, saying that the victorious side ("the purple Host/ Who took the Flag") can't define victory better than the poor, defeated, dying soldier who will never know what it's like to have won the battle (5-6)—too bad. At least he's got that going for him, though.

STANZA 1 SUMMARY

Get out the microscope, because we're going through this poem line-by-line.

Lines 1-2

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

We start off with a lesson of sorts.

The poem's speaker lets us know that only those who "ne'er succeed" can most appreciate the concept of success.

To put it more directly: you have to be a real loser to truly appreciate success.

That, friends, is a paradox. How can you most appreciate something that you don't even have?

And yet, we think that that speaker makes a certain kind of sense here. It's the folks who never get to experience the satisfaction of success who will most want that feeling.

If you're into sports, you might think about how hard it is for defending champions to repeat, since they have to fight off all the players who want that success that they've never had a chance to experience.

If you're not into sports, try substituting any of the following instead: spelling bees, business ventures, literary awards, chili cook-offs—you get the idea.

The use of the figurative adjective "sweetest" here really drives home how important success is to those who can't attain it. It's as though they can almost taste it.

Lines 3-4

To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Hmm—here we're presented with a bit of a puzzling metaphor.

The literal translation here is that you have to be really, really, *really* thirsty ("sorest need") in order to fully understand ("comprehend") a… nectar?

Was Dickinson a juice fanatic or what?

Probably not—she was more than likely using "nectar" in a more general sense. In classical literature, nectar was the gods' beverage of choice—kind of like a divine Diet Dr. Pepper. In this sense, then, nectar really means anything you would really like to partake of.

In order to even understand what you desire, argues the speaker, you have to want it, and not just a little bit.

As we look back on this stanza, we're given two examples to illustrate essentially the same lesson: in order to really appreciate something, you a) can't currently have it and b) have to need it real bad—like Napoleon's chap stick.

We should also point out that we have some rhyme and metrical patterns starting to emerge here. We say a whole lot more about that over in "Form and Meter."

STANZA 2 SUMMARY

Get out the microscope, because we're going through this poem line-by-line.

Lines 5-6

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today

We don't know about you, but when we think of a purple host, we imagine going to a party at Grimus's house.

Again, though, our weird free-associating is probably *not* what Dickinson was on about.

Instead, she's using "Host" to mean a large group, probably in reference to a bunch of people.

We can guess that much because this host "took the Flag," which sounds like fun to us.

Did you ever play Capture the Flag as a kid (or maybe as a tween paintballer)? It's a competition where two teams try to outmaneuver each other in order to steal the other team's flag.

It's also a pretty accurate reinvention of conventional warfare, in which two sides meet on a field in order to take over the other's camp and remove their status symbol (the flag).

The importance of the flag probably explains why it's capitalized here, too.

In this case, Dickinson describes the winners as "the purple Host," giving them two distinctions.

Distinction 1: like "Flag," the "Host" is capitalized, lending that word added importance. Capitalizing odd words for emphasis is a classically Dickinsonian move. Check out "Calling Card" for more.

Distinction 2: this Host is purple. Maybe they're fans of Prince? More likely, the color purple is meant to convey a sense of honor.

Traditionally, purple was a color reserved for royalty or nobility, so this particular host is an important, honorable, and victorious group—good for those guys.

Lines 7-8

Can tell the definition
So clear of victory

Line 7 picks after the enjambment of line 6 to let us know that these victorious soldiers may be winners, but they can't give us a definition.

Remember that this stanza started with the word "Not" back in line 5, so we know now that not one of these guys can give us a definition.

More specifically, they can't give us the definition of… "victory." Even though they're all big winners, they can't do it as clear as… someone else, anyway. We're not told in this stanza.

We should point out what's going on in line 8, though, since the syntax is funky. Maybe Dickinson was a Prince fan after all.

The "So" here is better thought of as… "as." In other words, what we have here in this stanza is a comparison. Essentially, Dickinson's saying, "No one in this victorious army could define victory as clearly ("So clear") as…" and then we don't get the comparison before the stanza break.

Instead, we have another enjambment, so we're left to rush off to the poem's third and final stanza. Off we go…
…right after we point out that the rhyme and rhythms of this stanza kind of, *sort of* match up with the first. We say more about that in "Form and Meter."

STANZA 3 SUMMARY

Get out the microscope, because we're going through this poem line-by-line.

Line 9

As he defeated – dying –

When we last left our speaker, she was explaining that this purple group of victors could not define "victory" as clearly as… as… and here after some more enjambment we have our answer: "he."

Before we say more about this mysterious "he" fellow, we'll just point out that we're simply guessing that our speaker is a "she," since we have no other info to go on at this point. For more on that, check out our "Speaker" section.

For now, let's get back to Mr. Dictionary, with his super-ability to define words like "victory."

As it turns out, "he" is both "defeated" and "dying"—bad times indeed. We guess it doesn't really pay to be Mr. Dictionary, after all.

Lines 10-12

On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

Some more enjambment leads us to additional info on this defeated and dying dude.

He's got a "forbidden" ear. So maybe… he stole it or something? But who would forbid someone from having an ear?

Nobody in her right mind, that's who. This is another example of that funky syntax we saw line 8. In this case, "forbidden" doesn't mean that the ear itself is forbidden. Instead, it's forbidden from hearing something.

Line 11 tells us what that something is: the "strains of triumph." "Strains" just mean the faint notes of a song.

In other words, this ear—which belongs to a loser of the battle—is forbidden from hearing the victory song in all its full glory.

Instead of being cranked up to eleven on the volume dial, this is turned down to a one for this poor guy.

That might explain why line 12 describes these strains as "agonized." The dying soldier can barely make them out, but of course he's forbidden to hear them since, you know, he's one of the losers.

Still, he can make out these notes playing for the victors, that "purple Host," even as he's dying. That much is "clear" to him, which probably only ups the agony factor.

Imagine it this way: you've just lost the state championship game and you're walking off the field-pitch-court-track. Over your shoulder, you can hear Queen starting up to celebrate the champions. Wish that song was for you? Well… tough tinnitus—winning songs are for winners only, and you are not in the club.

To sum up, then, this defeated soldier is tortured by the sounds of the victory parade—even as he lies dying on the battlefield.

And yet, he still has one thing going for him: he knows victory inside and out.

Our speaker's message, once again, is that paradoxical notion that you

have to be totally denied something before you can truly appreciate what it is.

As readers, we can also appreciate how this stanza sticks to its rhythm and a rhyme scheme.

In the end, though, we're conflicted: does being able to fully appreciate something make up for the fact that you're never going to attain that thing?

You make the call, Shmoopers.

SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST ANALYSIS

Symbols, Imagery, Wordplay

Form and Meter

When we say "Emily Dickinson," what pops into your mind? If you're reading this, then words like "poet," "homework," and "Why does my English teacher hate me?" might run through your brain. Those i...

Speaker

Grab a seat, folks. Settle down, settle down. Now, take out your notebooks and pens. Are you ready?Good, because our speaker is about to drop some knowledge on you. This poem really just develops l...

Setting

If you have already hit up our "Speaker" section—and if you haven't, you should totes do that—then you'll know that we think of this poem's speaker as a teacher. She's imparting knowledge to re...

Sound Check

If you've read our "Symbols" section, you know what desire tastes like. (And if you haven't, the get on over there now to find out.) In this section, we'll explore what it sounds like. Just like th...

What's Up With the Title?

"The title? Let's see… we're sure it's around here somewhere. It's not at the top of the poem—nope. Maybe it's in the table of contents. No table of contents either? Well then let's just use th...

Calling Card

Emily Dickinson is often associated with the ballad form, and for good reason. Her small poems use a form and meter that she knew well from church hymns. (See our "Form and Meter" section for more....

Tough-o-Meter

At times, this poem can put some funky syntax or nineteenth-century vocabulary in your way. Trust us, though, you won't need serious hiking gear to get over those bumps. Just accept the fact that,...

Trivia

Even though Emily Dickinson only saw seven of her poems published in her life, she did send over 270 of them to her sister in law, Susan Gilbert. (Source.) Some folks think that Dickinson's own "s...

Steaminess Rating

Only nectar and soldier to see here, folks—keep moving.

People who Shmooped this also Shmooped...

SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST SYMBOLISM, IMAGERY, ALLEGORY

Taste

Hungry for success? People are frequently described this way. But why? What's at work in this figurative expression? We think it might have something to do with how crucial eating is to, well, ever...

War

War—what is it good for? In this poem, anyway, it's a handy source of imagery to emphasize Dickinson's argument. Success is important to a lot of people, for a lot of reasons, but, for a soldier...

Symbol Analysis

Hungry for success? People are frequently described this way. But why? What's at work in this figurative expression? We think it might have something to do with how crucial eating is to, well, everything really. If you don't eat, then soon enough you will cease to be.

This makes eating—and tasting—a pretty powerful experience. Those who are "hungry for success" often want it so badly that they can "taste" it. What is this, personal fulfillment or a pizza buffet? This poem's imagery suggests that it might be a bit of both.

Line 1: Who wouldn't want a big bowl of success, served up with a cherry on top? The adjective "sweetest" underscores just how powerful wanting something can be. People don't just want success in the abstract. It's a physical experience, practically part of their taste buds.

Lines 3-4: "Nectar" is a telling choice of example here. Back in Homer's day, nectar was represented as the gods' beverage of choice. It's what they guzzled to wash down all that ambrosia. Here, the drink is something that can be understood by someone who really, *truly* needs a drink. You don't get the full range of its taste-tacular nature unless you're dying for a sip.

Symbol Analysis

War—what is it good for? In this poem, anyway, it's a handy source of imagery to emphasize Dickinson's argument. Success is important to a lot of people, for a lot of reasons, but, for a soldier in the middle of a war, success can mean life or death. The victors of war might win land or money, but first and foremost they get to keep living. The losers? They often lose a whole lot more than just an armed conflict.

Lines 5-6: The "Host" is given two distinctions: a) it's capitalized and b) it's purple. The capitalization is typical of Dickinson, who used the

technique to lend words an extra punch. The color purple also represents a kind of royalty or superiority, since purple was historically a color reserved for kings and queens. In these lines, the victors have captured the "Flag," a symbolic act that marks them as the winners of this particular battle. Good for them.

Lines 9-10: The loser of this conflict is paying the ultimate price: dude is dying. What's worse, his ear is "forbidden" to hear the victory song that the purple Host is now getting down to. There will be no celebrating for him.

Lines 11-12: The music is far-off for our poor, dying loser, but it's still intense for him. "Burst" is a powerful choice of verb, one that emphasizes how well this dying soldier at last understands the importance of winning (and staying alive). It also recalls the violence of the war that he's just fought—and lost. Hey, at least he gets to find out what victory really means, right?

ANALYSIS: FORM AND METER

When we say "Emily Dickinson," what pops into your mind? If you're reading this, then words like "poet," "homework," and "Why does my English teacher hate me?" might run through your brain. Those in the know, however, associate Dickinson with words like "reclusive," "genius," and "ballad."

We cover those first two ideas over in "In a Nutshell," so for now let's focus on Dickinson's ballad form. Much of Dickinson's poems use it, and for good reason. It's a style of writing that came pretty naturally to her because she was regularly exposed to it in the form of church hymns. Check out "Amazing Grace" for just one example of a ballad.

To write a ballad, you'll first need two sets of lines. The first line should be laid out in iambic tetrameter, followed by a line in iambic trimeter. To see what we mean by that, try reading these two lines out loud. Go ahead, nobody's looking:

*The **dis**tant strains of **tri**umph*
*Burst **a**go**nized** and **clear**!* (11-12)

When you hears these lines, you should hear a
repeating rhythmic pattern:

daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM
daDUM daDUM daDUM

Each "daDUM" represents a single iamb, which just a two-syllable pair in which the first syllable is unstressed, the second is stressed. If you have four of those in a single line, then you have iambic tetrameter (tetra- means four). If you have three of them, then you have iambic trimeter (tri- means three).

A typical ballad will start with a line of iambic tetrameter and then follow that up with a line of iambic trimeter, and that's just what we see going on here. We also see the ballad's typical rhyme scheme: ABCB, where each letter stands for that line's end rhyme. Check it out:

Success is counted sweetest A
By those who ne'er succeed. B
To comprehend a nectar C
Requires sorest need. (1-4) B

So, yeah, in terms of rhyme and meter, we have a pretty standard, traditional ballad form—as long as you ignore all the exceptions. And, folks, there are a *ton* of exceptions here.

Just look back at that first stanza to take one example. While it has the expected ballad rhyme scheme, its meter is out of step with the traditional form:

Success is counted sweetest (1)

Right off the bat, Dickinson lets us know that something's missing. It's the last up beat to this line. To put this in true iambic tetrameter, you would have to say something like "Success is counted sweetest, *man*." Okay, so we'll leave the poetry writing to Dickinson, but you get our point. The last iamb of this line is cut off. In terms of rhythm, we're left hanging.

Dickinson also fudges her rhyme scheme:

Not one of all the purple Host A
Who took the Flag today B
Can tell the definition C
So clear of victory (5-8) B*

*That last line, ending in "victory," kind of, *sort of* rhymes with line 6's "today," but it's a real stretch. That stretch is known as a slant rhyme and, like the cut-off iamb, it lets us that something's amiss.

Of course, that's pretty appropriate for a poem that's all about folks who will never get to attain what they most desire in life. For them, success is just out of reach, and the disturbances in the form and meter here reflect that.

Just because something's out of reach, though, doesn't mean you stop wanting it. That idea is reinforced by all the enjambment that's going on in this poem. Lines and stanzas are cut off mid-thought, only to pick back up again on the next line. This keeps us rushing to the next line to

see what happens next, much like a person might hurry after the object of desire.

Unlike those poor folks, though, our desire is fulfilled when we arrive at the next line of the poem. Those for whom success is *really* sweetest are left hanging, with a sad trombone playing in the background.

ANALYSIS: SPEAKER

Grab a seat, folks. Settle down, settle down. Now, take out your notebooks and pens. Are you ready?

Good, because our speaker is about to drop some knowledge on you. This poem really just develops like one big lesson. That lesson, specifically? "Only those who are denied success can truly ever appreciate it." Still, like any good teacher, our speaker isn't just going to give us the answers. She's going to lead us to that conclusion with a series of helpful examples.

Before we get into those, we should point out that we're simply guessing about our speaker being a "she." We just don't get any information about her. Now, it's always dangerous to confuse a poet with her speaker. Even if they talk through first-person point of view, a speaker can still be an invented character. So, we'll just use a "she" for the sake of convenience.

With that out of the way, let's head back to class. Our speaker starts off by stating the end goal of the lesson. She's trying to teach us that "Success is counted sweetest/ By those who ne'er succeed" (1-2). Then, she uses two examples to show us how this is the case. We get a brief one about the nectar, and then a more detailed one about the dying soldier.

What we don't get, however, is any kind of personal detail. How did the speaker-teacher come to this realization about life? How might she feel

about this ultimately sad fact about human existence? It's not about her, though, which again puts us in mind of a good teacher.

You know that teacher you had once that just *loved* to go on and on about his or her personal experiences? Do you remember those long, pointless stories that never connected to the class material at all? If you do, you're probably better at remembering how annoyed you were than you are at remembering any of the lessons. In this poem, though, the speaker is not going in for any of those pointless personal stories.

Nope—she's focused on our takeaways. And, while that lesson is a pretty harsh one to have to learn, we'd say that it's one she delivers effectively. Just read the rest of our poetry guide here, and we're sure you'll get an A in her class.

ANALYSIS: SETTING

Where It All Goes Down

If you have already hit up our "Speaker" section—and if you haven't, you should totes do that—then you'll know that we think of this poem's speaker as a teacher. She's imparting knowledge to readers near and far. When it comes to the setting, though, school is out… as an option.

The truth is that the only recognizable setting in this poem is not a classroom, but a [insert serious movie voice here] deadly battlefield that pits one group of combatants against another. Only one side can claim victory, though only the loser can understand what that victory truly means. [Roll the tagline: "Success is counted sweetest": coming… to a theater near you."]

Okay, so maybe this poem would not make the best feature film, but it could make a decent short. If we were to direct it, we would make sure

to include lots of close-ups on the dying soldier's face as he strained to hear the victory music, playing off in the distance.

As we imagine this shot, we can see that Dickinson was actually on to something. The battlefield is actually a pretty apt choice of setting, because it's a place where success can be a super-big deal. To succeed on a battlefield means that you get to keep your life, while losers are either taken prisoner or worse: killed.

The setting, then, sets up this stark contrast, which then really drives home the poem's argument: you can't really appreciate or even know something unless it's totally denied to you. What better way to illustrate that paradox than with a dying solider, meditating on victory? Sure, it's no fun for the dying soldier, but his example is pretty powerful. So, um, thanks for losing?

ANALYSIS: SOUND CHECK

If you've read our "Symbols" section, you know what desire tastes like. (And if you haven't, the get on over there now to find out.) In this section, we'll explore what it *sounds* like.

Just like that poor dude who's dying in stanza three, the sounds of success will ring out pretty clearly to you—if you know how to listen, that is. Here's a general hint that will help: pay attention to the echoes.

We have a ton of sonic repetition in this poem, in fact. We'll start with some alliteration:

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

To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need. (1-4)

We have just sixteen words in this first stanza, and yet four of them (that's 25% for you non-math majors) start with S. Three more start with N. And that's not even counting the additional four words that are sporting an S or an N somewhere in the middle or at the end ("counted," "those," "comprehend," and "Requires").

Between that alliteration and consonance, then, we're bombarded with sound echoes before we even get out of the first stanza. The same can be said for the last stanza, too:

As he defeated – dying –
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear! (9-12)

Here, instead of S and N sounds, we have S's and D's. We also have a familiar end rhyme in "ear" and "clear." That long E sound also appears in "defeated" (9) and—hey, look at that—is a carryover from words above like "sweetest" (1), "succeed" (2), "need" (4), and "victory" (8). In the poetry biz, that's called assonance.

Now, to return to our earlier question: what's the sound of desire? What does it sound like to truly want something that you can never have? Well, it sounds like all this repetition. Think about it: it's a kind of torture not to be able to attain what you most desire, and that kind of thing is hard to put of your mind.

Dickinson knew that, which is why she snuck so many sound echoes into this compact space. The same sounds keep coming at us, again and again, just like your thoughts about that thing you've always wanted—

success, riches, the high score on Ms. Pacman—bounce around in your head all day.

ANALYSIS: WHAT'S UP WITH THE TITLE?

"The title? Let's see… we're sure it's around here somewhere. It's not at the top of the poem—nope. Maybe it's in the table of contents. No table of contents either? Well then let's just use the first line and call it a day."

We can imagine Dickinson's editors having a conversation like this. Since Dickinson wasn't big on publishing her work when she was alive, titles weren't that important to her. Even when this poem first came out in the *Brooklyn Daily Union*, its title was—wait for it—"Untitled."

Instead, subsequent collections of Dickinson's work have gone with the first line for a title, followed by a number. Depending on the edition you're reading, that number either represents the order in which the poem was found in Dickinson's original fascicle manuscripts (check out "In a Nutshell" for more), or it stands for the chronological order in which they were written.

In either case, a number is going to tell you as much about the poem that follows as a title like "Untitled" will.

So, let's go with that first line, shall we? We shall. "Success is counted sweetest" is, if you ask us, a pretty sweet choice to start things off. It establishes the poem's main focus ("Success"), describes the main dynamic of how it matters to people ("is counted"), and finally ends with a twist: "sweetest." We don't normally associate success with being "sweet"—unless we come from southern California, brah, and then everything is either "gnarly" or "sweet."

This kind of strange adjective, though, is pretty typical of a Dickinson poem. It really drives home how much success can mean to those who never get to experience it. The suggestion of a word like "sweetest" is that these poor folks can figuratively taste it. That reminds us of that old expression: to want something so badly that you can "taste" it. It's like that thing (success in this case) is right there, on the tip of your tongue.

And yet—no soup, or ice cream, for you. That's the true tragedy that this poem is describing.

ANALYSIS: CALLING CARD

Bebop Ballads

Emily Dickinson is often associated with the ballad form, and for good reason. Her small poems use a form and meter that she knew well from church hymns. (See our "Form and Meter" section for more.) At the same time, when you start to poke around in her poems, you start to realize that her poems tend to *look* like the proper ballads you might find in a church hymnal, but they actually act like unique jazz tunes, playing loose and fast within a pre-set structure. She changes rhythm and rhyme, then throws in some funky dashes and capitalization to keep her readers on their toes. Check out "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"or "A Route of Evanescence" for examples of this. Maybe Emily Dickinson is more like Miles Davis than people give her credit for.

ANALYSIS: TOUGH-O-METER

(4) Base Camp

At times, this poem can put some funky syntax or nineteenth-century vocabulary in your way. Trust us, though, you won't need serious hiking gear to get over those bumps. Just accept the fact that, in order to truly appreciate something, you must be forever denied it. Once that happy thought kicks in, everything is smooth strolling.

ANALYSIS: TRIVIA

Brain Snacks: Tasty Tidbits of Knowledge

Even though Emily Dickinson only saw seven of her poems published in her life, she did send over 270 of them to her sister in law, Susan Gilbert. (Source.)

Some folks think that Dickinson's own "sorest need" may have been her unrequited feelings for a reverend named Charles Wadsworth. (Source.)

Even when she was dying, Dickinson was so reclusive that she refused to let the doctor visit her bedside. She wanted him to diagnose her through an open doorway. (Source.)

ANALYSIS: STEAMINESS RATING

Exactly how steamy is this poem?

G

Only nectar and soldier to see here, folks—keep moving.

SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST THEMES

Success is counted sweetest Themes

Dissatisfaction

Here's a cheery thought for you: in order to ever truly appreciate something in life, you have to first be seriously bummed out. Think about it. The state of being happy is kind of a blissful ignor...

Ambition

Climb the corporate ladder, reach for the brass ring, push the envelope… and see where it gets you. You see, ambition can lead to success, but that's not necessarily a good thing. According to th...

Suffering

You may have heard the phrase "suffer for your art" before. It's true that suffering is often framed as the path for personal enrichment. We're not sure whether that's just meant to make sufferers...

SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST THEME OF DISSATISFACTION

Here's a cheery thought for you: in order to ever truly appreciate something in life, you have to first be seriously bummed out.

Think about it. The state of being happy is kind of a blissful ignorance. In order to truly appreciate anything—loved ones, possessions, accomplishments—you're going to have to go without them. This is a classic good news-bad news scenario. The bad news is that you're totally and completely dissatisfied, practically tortured by not having that thing you crave. On the plus side? At least you now, at long last, understand

what it is that's missing. Whether that juice is worth the squeeze is up to you, but it's definitely the dynamic at work in "Success is counted sweetest."

Questions About Dissatisfaction

Why is dissatisfaction to so necessary for appreciation, according to the poem?

Do you agree that with the speaker's argument that you can only appreciate something when it's gone? Why or why not?

Who is more satisfied in this poem: the "purple Host" or the dying soldier? How can you tell?

What about the form and-or meter of this poem emphasizes the idea of dissatisfaction?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil’s advocate.

Our speaker is laying it on a little thick here. You can appreciate plenty of things without having to be separated from them.

This poem shows us that dissatisfaction is an important part of the human condition. It's something we should be happy about—or at least happier about.

SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST THEME OF AMBITION

Climb the corporate ladder, reach for the brass ring, push the envelope… and see where it gets you. You see, ambition can lead to success, but that's not necessarily a good thing. According to the speaker of "Success is counted sweetest," the one thing successful ambition won't get you is

enlightenment. Sorry, but full appreciation and understanding is only reserved for the losers of the world. You may not want to admit it, but as soon as you have something, your appreciation of it is going to wane faster than a spray tan in a hurricane. Just as it lends the pain of dissatisfaction a silver lining, this poem also puts a dark cloud over the head of ambition.

Questions About Ambition

If the victorious army suffers ignorance for their ambition, why are they characterized as having a royal "purple" color? How might the speaker answer that question?

Do you think Dickinson's lack of publishing in her lifetime influenced the way she represents ambition and success in this poem? Why or why not?

In what ways might this poem's inconsistencies of form represent the notion of ambition?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil’s advocate.

Ambition does not guarantee success. This poem provides a warning for the ambitious, though, about the lack of appreciation that invariably accompanies success.

Dickinson's own personal lack of ambition explains why she hates on it in this poem.

SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST THEME OF SUFFERING

You may have heard the phrase "suffer for your art" before. It's true that suffering is often framed as the path for personal enrichment. We're not sure whether that's just meant to make sufferers feel better, or if it's

actually true. One thing is sure, though: when it comes to suffering, the speaker of "Success is counted sweetest" is all in.

Now, we talk about the theme of dissatisfaction elsewhere in "Themes," but there is another level to being dissatisfied that this poem is going for, something more profound than just not being able to get what you want. That's where suffering comes in. In essence, the poem is telling us "Gee, we bet you never appreciated how good it is to have ten working fingers until you slammed three of them in your car door." Suffering yields appreciation and insight, goes the argument. So stick your hand in that doorframe and slam away.

Questions About Suffering

What is it about suffering that produces insight? How might the speaker answer this question?

How comforting would this poem be to someone who's suffering? Why do you think so?

Are there any drawbacks to the suffering depicted in this poem?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil’s advocate.

The poem shows us that the only path to true insight is through suffering.

Actually, this poem is way off. It doesn't take suffering to appreciate or understand something. It just takes a bit of reflection.

SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST QUOTES

Find quotes from this poem, with commentary from Shmoop. Pick a theme below to begin.

Dissatisfaction Quotes

Success is counted sweetestBy those who ne'er succeed. (1-2)

Ambition Quotes

Success is counted sweetestBy those who ne'er succeed. (1-2)

Suffering Quotes

To comprehend a nectarRequires sorest need. (1-2)

How we cite our quotes: (Line)

Quote #1

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed. (1-2)

Our speaker-teacher drops the lesson on us right from the get-go. Only the losers in life really know what it means to be a winner. That's a sad paradox. Do you think that explains why we tend to root for the underdog and boo the defending champion?

Dissatisfaction

Quote #2

To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need. (3-4)

You can't just *kind of* want something in order to understand it. You have to desire it in the most profound way possible. "Sorest need" is key, at least in the speaker's estimation. So, at least there's a silver lining to that deep dissatisfaction you might be feeling.

Dissatisfaction

Quote #3

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of victory (5-8)

Bully for you, purple Host. You may have won the battle and captured the flag, but you'll never be able to fully understand why that's important. Do you think that dampens their enjoyment of success? Should it?

As he defeated – dying –
On whose forbidden ear (9-10)

Dying is pretty dissatisfying. This soldier is paying the ultimate price for losing the battle, but he's also receiving the ultimate reward: a full appreciation of what it means to be victorious. Still, we doubt that this is much in the way of consolation for a dying man.

Dissatisfaction

Quote #5

The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear! (11-12)

This is an odd description, but it's a pretty telling one. Line 12 puts "agonized" and "clear" together to remind us that agony is directly

linked to understanding. You have to feel the pain before you receive the gain… of understanding and appreciation. Um, good for you?

How we cite our quotes: (Line)

Quote #1

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed. (1-2)

These lines make us feel a lot better about not getting elected class president any of the six years we ran. All the same, we wonder if people regret being successful. Does success *have* to mean a loss of appreciation? Does failure *always* mean enlightenment?

Ambition

Quote #2

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of victory (5-8)

The victory won by the ambitious purple host comes at a cost in the speaker's eyes: a lack of understanding. Still, the losing, dying soldier was also ambitious. He fought the same battle, after all. By that measure, this poem is less about the evils of ambition, and more about the perils of success—and the comforts of the epic fail.

How we cite our quotes: (Line)

Quote #1

To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need. (1-2)

The word choice of "sorest" is pretty telling here. Dickinson could have gone with "gravest," "deepest," or any number of adjectives. But she went with this word, which prominently features the word "sore." She's insisting that physical suffering—in this case thirst—is required for true understanding.

Suffering

Quote #2

As he defeated – dying –
On whose forbidden ear (9-10)

The soldier is experiencing some pretty serious suffering here, dying as he is on a battlefield. He's totally shut out from the experience of the victors—and yet he's still exposed to their victory song. Talk about rubbing salt in the wound.

Suffering

Quote #3

The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear! (11-12)

Is the music agonized in these lines? It might seem that way, but that's only because it's falling on the tortured ear of this dying solider. The agony and the suffering is all his, but on the bright side he now understands what it victory means. So… um, yay?

SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST QUESTIONS

Bring on the tough stuff - there’s not just one right answer.

Do you agree with this speaker's central argument? Why or why not?

Why do you think the poem uses a military analogy to get its point across about success?

Why does this poem include inverted syntax? How does that affect your reading and how might it relate to the poem's main argument?

How do the changes in rhyme in stanza 2 affect the way you read this poem?

SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST QUIZZES

EMILY DICKINSON INTRODUCTION

What Emily Dickinson did... and why you should care

Here are two ways to look at Emily Dickinson's life:

Old thinking: Emily Dickinson was a shy crazy lady who dressed all in white, never left the house, and secretly wrote nearly two thousand poems that nobody saw until she died.

New thinking: Emily Dickinson was a gifted poet who chose—for reasons she kept private—to stay at home, write quietly and yes, wear white.

What's the difference between these two narratives, whose facts are pretty much the same? For the first ninety years after Dickinson's death in 1886, the public perception of her was closer to the first version. Poor Emily Dickinson, the story used to go. Such a great poet; too bad she couldn't get along like a normal person.

Sometime in the 1970s, though (thanks largely to a fantastic biography by Dickinson scholar Richard B. Sewall), views on Dickinson's life started to change. Maybe it wasn't that the secret bard of Amherst didn't know how to act like a normal person. Maybe she just didn't want to. People who knew Emily Dickinson well during her lifetime recalled her

as warm and funny, with an impish streak. The more this picture emerges, the less Dickinson seems like a victim of pathological shyness. Could Emily Dickinson have been . . . a rebel, living her life exactly the way she wanted to, no matter what anybody else thought?

From the moment her collected poems were published for the first time after her death, Dickinson has been hailed as one of the great American poets. Her language, rhythm, and punctuation are totally unique, as was her lifestyle. And what's more American than a person unafraid to go her own way?

“The Soul selects her own Society—”

Summary

The speaker says that “the Soul selects her own Society—” and then “shuts the Door,” refusing to admit anyone else—even if “an Emperor be kneeling / Upon her mat—.” Indeed, the soul often chooses no more than a single person from “an ample nation” and then closes “the Valves of her attention” to the rest of the world.

Form

The meter of “The Soul selects her own Society” is much more irregular and halting than the typical Dickinson poem, although it still roughly fits her usual structure: iambic trimeter with the occasional line in tetrameter. It is also uncharacteristic in that its rhyme scheme—if we count half-rhymes such as “Gate” and “Mat”—is ABAB, rather than ABCB; the first and third lines rhyme, as well as the second and fourth. However, by using long dashes rhythmically to interrupt the flow of the meter and effect brief pauses, the poem’s form remains recognizably Dickinsonian, despite its atypical aspects.

Commentary

Whereas “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” takes a playful tone to the idea of reclusiveness and privacy, the tone of “The Soul selects her own Society—” is quieter, grander, and more ominous. The idea that “The Soul selects her own Society” (that people choose a few companions who matter to them and exclude everyone else from their inner consciousness) conjures up images of a solemn ceremony with the ritual closing of the door, the chariots, the emperor, and the ponderous Valves of the Soul’s attention. Essentially, the middle stanza functions to emphasize the Soul’s stonily uncompromising attitude toward anyone trying to enter into her Society once the metaphorical door is shut—even chariots, even an emperor, cannot persuade her. The third stanza then illustrates the severity of the Soul’s exclusiveness—even from “an ample nation” of people, she easily settles on one single person to include, summarily and unhesitatingly locking out everyone else. The concluding stanza, with its emphasis on the “One” who is chosen, gives “The Soul selects her own Society—” the feel of a tragic love poem, although we need not reduce our understanding of the poem to see its theme as merely romantic. The poem is an excellent example of Dickinson’s tightly focused skills with metaphor and imagery; cycling

through her regal list of door, divine Majority, chariots, emperor, mat, ample nation, and stony valves of attention, Dickinson continually surprises the reader with her vivid and unexpected series of images, each of which furthers the somber mood of the poem.

Analysis

Emily Dickinson is such a unique poet that it is very difficult to place her in any single tradition—she seems to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. Her poetic form, with her customary four-line stanzas, ABCB rhyme schemes, and alternations in iambic meter between tetrameter and trimeter, is derived from Psalms and Protestant hymns, but Dickinson so thoroughly appropriates the forms—interposing her own long, rhythmic dashes designed to interrupt the meter and indicate short pauses—that the resemblance seems quite faint. Her subjects are often parts of the topography of her own psyche; she explores her own feelings with painstaking and often painful honesty but never loses sight of their universal poetic application; one of her greatest techniques is to write about the particulars of her own emotions in a kind of universal homiletic or adage-like tone (“After great pain, a formal feeling comes”) that seems to describe the reader’s mind as well as it does the poet’s. Dickinson is not a “philosophical poet”; unlike Wordsworth or Yeats, she makes no effort to organize her thoughts and feelings into a coherent, unified worldview. Rather, her poems simply record thoughts and feelings experienced naturally over the course of a lifetime devoted to reflection and creativity: the powerful mind represented in these records is by turns astonishing, compelling, moving, and thought-provoking, and emerges much more vividly than if Dickinson had orchestrated her work according to a preconceived philosophical system.

Of course, Dickinson’s greatest achievement as a poet of inwardness is her brilliant, diamond-hard language. Dickinson often writes

aphoristically, meaning that she compresses a great deal of meaning into a very small number of words. This can make her poems hard to understand on a first reading, but when their meaning does unveil itself, it often explodes in the mind all at once, and lines that seemed baffling can become intensely and unforgettably clear. Other poems—many of her most famous, in fact—are much less difficult to understand, and they exhibit her extraordinary powers of observation and description.

Dickinson's imagination can lead her into very peculiar territory—some of her most famous poems are bizarre death-fantasies and astonishing metaphorical conceits—but she is equally deft in her navigation of the domestic, writing beautiful nature-lyrics alongside her wild flights of imagination and often combining the two with great facility.

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

THE INDIVIDUAL'S STRUGGLE WITH GOD

Dickinson devoted a great amount of her work to exploring the relationship between an individual and a Judeo-Christian God. Many poems describe a protracted rebellion against the God whom she deemed scornful and indifferent to human suffering, a divine being perpetually committed to subjugating human identity. In a sense, she was a religious poet. Unlike other religious poets, who inevitably saw themselves as subordinate to God, Dickinson rejected this premise in her poetry. She was dissatisfied with the notion that the poet can engage with God only insofar as God ordains the poet as his instrument, and she challenged God's dominion throughout her life, refusing to submit to his divine will at the cost of her self. Perhaps her most fiery challenge comes in "Mine by the Right of the White Election!" (528), in which the speaker roars in revolt against God, claiming the earth and heavens for herself or himself.

Elsewhere, Dickinson's poetry criticizes God not by speaking out directly against him, but by detailing the suffering he causes and his various affronts to an individual's sense of self. Though the speaker of "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" (1129) never mentions God, the poem refers obliquely to his suppression of the apostle Paul in the last two lines. Here, the speaker describes how unmitigated truth (in the form of light) causes blindness. In the Bible (Acts 9:4), God decides to enlighten Paul by making him blind and then healing him on the condition that thenceforth Paul becomes "a chosen vessel" of God, performing his will. The speaker recoils from this instance of God's juggernaut-like domination of Paul in this poem but follows the poem's advice and tells the truth "slant," or indirectly, rather than censuring God directly. In another instance of implicit criticism, Dickinson portrays God as a murderous hunter of man in "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun" (754), in which Death goes about gleefully executing people for his divine master. These poems are among the hundreds of verses in which Dickinson portrays God as aloof, cruel, invasive, insensitive, or vindictive.

THE ASSERTION OF THE SELF

In her work, Dickinson asserts the importance of the self, a **theme**closely related to Dickinson's censure of God. As Dickinson understood it, the mere act of speaking or writing is an affirmation of the will, and the call of the poet, in particular, is the call to explore and express the self to others. For Dickinson, the "self" entails an understanding of identity according to the way it systematizes its perceptions of the world, forms its goals and values, and comes to judgments regarding what it perceives.

Nearly all Dickinson's speakers behave according to the primacy of the self, despite the efforts of others to intrude on them. Indeed, the self is

never more apparent in Dickinson's poetry than when the speaker brandishes it against some potentially violating force. In "They shut me up in Prose—" (613), the speaker taunts her captives, who have imprisoned her body but not her mind, which remains free and roaming. Because God most often plays the role of culprit as an omnipotent being, he can and does impose compromising conditions upon individuals according to his whim in Dickinson's work. Against this power, the self is essentially defined. The individual is subject to any amount of suffering, but so long as he or she remains a sovereign self, he or she still has that which separates him or her from other animate and inanimate beings.

THE POWER OF WORDS AND POETRY

Though Dickinson sequestered herself in Amherst for most of her life, she was quite attuned to the modern trends of thought that circulated throughout Europe and North America. Perhaps the most important of these was Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, published in 1859. Besides the tidal wave it unleashed in the scientific community, evolution throttled the notion of a world created by God's grand design. For Dickinson, who renounced obedience to God through the steps of her own mental evolution, this development only reinforced the opposition to the belief in a transcendent and divine design in an increasingly secularized world.

Dickinson began to see language and the word, which were formerly part of God's domain, as the province of the poet. The duty of the poet was to re-create, through words, a sense of the world as a place in which objects have an essential and almost mythic relationship to each other. Dickinson's poems often link abstract entities to physical things in an attempt to embrace or create an integral design in the world. This act is most apparent in her poems of definition, such as "'Hope' is the thing

with feathers—" (254) or "Hope is a subtle Glutton" (1547). In these poems, Dickinson employs **metaphors** that assign physical qualities to the abstract feeling of "hope" in order to flesh out the nature of the word and what it means to human consciousness.

NATURE AS A "HAUNTED HOUSE"

In a letter to a friend, Dickinson once wrote: 'Nature is a Haunted House —but Art—a House that tries to be haunted." The first part of the sentence implies that the natural world is replete with mystery and false signs, which deceive humankind as to the purpose of things in nature as well as to God's purpose in the creation of nature. The sentence's second part reveals the poet's role. The poet does not exist merely to render aspects of nature, but rather to ascertain the character of God's power in the world.

For Dickinson, however, the characterizing of God's power proved to be complicated since she often abstained from using the established religious **symbols** for things in nature. This abstention is most evident in Dickinson's poem about a snake, "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (986), in which Dickinson refrains from the easy reference to Satan in Eden. Indeed, in many of her nature poems, such as "A Bird came down the Walk" (328), Dickinson ultimately insists on depicting nature as unapologetically incomprehensible, and thus haunted.

Motifs

THE SPEAKER'S UNIQUE POETIC VOICE

Dickinson's speakers are numerous and varied, but each exhibits a similar voice, or distinctive **tone** and style. Poets create speakers to literally speak their poems; while these speakers might share traits with their creators or might be based on real historical figures, ultimately they

are fictional entities distinct from their writers. Frequently, Dickinson employs the first person, which lends her poems the immediacy of a dialogue between two people, the speaker and the reader. She sometimes aligns multiple speakers in one poem with the use of the plural personal pronoun *we*. The first-person singular and plural allow Dickinson to write about specific experiences in the world: her speakers convey distinct, subjective emotions and individual thoughts rather than objective, concrete truths. Readers are thus invited to compare their experiences, emotions, and thoughts with those expressed in Dickinson's lyrics. By emphasizing the subjectivity, or individuality, of experience, Dickinson rails against those educational and religious institutions that attempt to limit individual knowledge and experience.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SIGHT AND SELF

For Dickinson, seeing is a form of individual power. Sight requires that the seer have the authority to associate with the world around her or him in meaningful ways and the sovereignty to act based on what she or he believes exists as opposed to what another entity dictates. In this sense, sight becomes an important expression of the self, and consequently the speakers in Dickinson's poems value it highly. The horror that the speaker of "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—" (465) experiences is attributable to her loss of eyesight in the moments leading up to her death. The final utterance, "I could not see to see" (16), points to the fact that the last gasp of life, and thus of selfhood, is concentrated on the desire to "see" more than anything else. In this poem, sight and self are so synonymous that the end of one (blindness) translates into the end of the other (death).

In other poems, sight and self seem literally fused, a connection that Dickinson toys with by playing on the sonic similarity of the words *I* and *eye*. This wordplay abounds in Dickinson's body of work. It

is used especially effectively in the third **stanza** of “The Soul selects her own Society—” (303), in which the speaker declares that she knows the soul, or the self. She commands the soul to choose one person from a great number of people and then “close the lids” of attention. In this poem, the “I” that is the soul has eyelike properties: closing the lids, an act that would prevent seeing, is tantamount to cutting off the “I” from the rest of society.

Symbols

FEET

Feet enter Dickinson’s poems self-referentially, since the words *foot* and *feet* denote poetic terms as well as body parts. In poetry, “feet” are the groups of syllables in a line that form a metrical unit. Dickinson’s mention of feet in her poems generally serves the dual task of describing functioning body parts and commenting on poetry itself. Thus, when the speaker of “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” (986) remembers himself a “Barefoot” boy (11), he indirectly alludes to a time when his sense of poetry was not fully formed. Likewise, when the speaker of “After great pain, a formal feeling comes” (341) notes that feet are going around in his head while he is going mad, he points to the fact that his ability to make poetry is compromised.

STONE

In Dickinson’s poems, stones represent immutability and finality: unlike flowers or the light of day, stones remain essentially unchanged. The speaker in “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” (216) imagines the dead lying unaffected by the breezes of nature—and of life. After the speaker chooses her soul in “The Soul selects her own Society—” (303), she shuts her eyes “Like Stone—” (12), firmly closing herself off from sensory perception or society. A stone becomes an object of envy in

“How happy is the little Stone” (1510), a poem in which the speaker longs for the rootless independence of a stone bumping along, free from human cares.

BIRDS

Dickinson uses the symbol of birds rather flexibly. In “A Bird came down the Walk” (328), the bird becomes an emblem of the unyielding mystery of nature, while in “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers” (254), the bird becomes a **personification** of hope. Elsewhere, Dickinson links birds to poets, whose job is to sing whether or not people hear. In “Split —the Lark—and you’ll find the Music” (861), Dickinson compares the sounds of birds to the lyrical sounds of poetry; the poem concludes by asking rhetorically whether its listeners now understand the truths produced by both birds and poetry. Like nature, symbolized by the bird, art produces soothing, truthful sounds.

I cannot live with You

"I cannot live with You" (poem 640 in Thomas Johnson's edition of the *Complete Poems*) is Dickinson's longest mature lyric, addressed to a recognizably human, hopelessly loved other, and employing the structure and rhetoric of a persuasive argument. Here it is. Although it is one of Dickinson's more "spoken" poems, "I cannot live with You" still confronts the performer with a number of characteristic challenges. Consider the first sentence -- or rather, what the poem's first sentence may or may not entail. Arguably, it encompasses the entirety of the first three stanzas. Punctuated conventionally, with elided logical connectives interpolated, its prose sense might read as follows: "I cannot live with

you [because] it would be life, and life is over there, behind the shelf the sexton keeps the key to, putting up our life, [which is] his porcelain, like a cup discarded of the housewife -- quaint or broke -- a newer Sevres pleases, [after] old ones crack." Those very elisions are, of course, crucial to the poem's stark authority of tone, but they also create a sentence very difficult to parse, to understand, and thus to speak aloud with confidence. My paraphrase places "His Porcelain" in apposition to "Our Life," but it could represent the start of a participial phrase introducing a new detail ("his porcelain like a cup"). Notice also how "Quaint -- or Broke" interrupts what we may take as a noun clause ("the housewife ... a newer Sevres pleases"), and thus wryly modifies both wife and cup -- the former by proximity, the latter by common sense. Yet an equally plausible reading supplies a full stop after "broke," understands "pleases" as an intransitive verb, and regards "a newer Sevres pleases" as a remark on the general aesthetic pleasure afforded by a new set of French porcelain.

In stanza seven, the reader must negotiate the complicated syntax of "Except that You than He/ Shone closer by" -- a weird inversion even by nineteenth-century standards of poetic license. A final challenge waits in the eighth stanza, when the speaker asserts that "They'd judge Us," then interjects the qualification "How." The odd placement of this word offers three alternate senses -- and hence three alternate ways of saying it -- if attached grammatically to "They'd judge Us," "For You," or even "You know." This last possibility is my current choice. When the sentence is unscrambled, it yields: "you know how they'd judge us, for you served heaven." On the other hand, one might treat it as a freestanding rhetorical question, posed by the speaker in response to her own assertion, then answered by the rest of the stanza. This is the choice Dickinson's first editors made in their revised, heavily repunctuated, and

ultimately repudiated 1890 edition of Dickinson's poems. They also changed "broke" to "broken," "white sustenance" to "pale sustenance," and titled the poem "In Vain."

There are other elements that contribute to the poem's rich uncertainties: elaborately extended metaphors, shifts in tense and mood, riddling paradoxes (How can "Life" cause an incapacity to live? What might it mean to "meet apart"?), and abrupt reversals of scale ("the Door ajar/ That Oceans are"). And yet, even if we can't solve every linguistic conundrum, let alone satisfy ourselves with a uniform way of saying it, "I cannot live with You" remains one of Dickinson's most powerfully direct expressions of longing and loss.

A three-part argument against erotic union (I cannot live with you, die with you, or share the Resurrection with you, as either one of the damned or the saved), the poem ever more forcefully registers the desire for fulfillment each time it asserts the inevitability of disappointment. Indeed, there's something blasphemous about a love so total it outshines divinity, equates "prayer" with "despair" (the poem's most telling rhyme), and finally associates the latter with, of all things, the bread of the Eucharist. Dickinson doesn't take the conventional path of renouncing earthly love in favor of a more compelling, divine love; she refuses it because it is the more powerful of the two.

In the course of her argument Dickinson offers remarkably detailed character portraits of both the speaker and the beloved. It's been suggested that the line "For You -- served Heaven -- You know" reveals the beloved's identity as the Reverend Charles Wadsworth (also a prime candidate for "Master"). More intriguing is the sort of man depicted in the poem: ambivalent or incompetent in his faith ("You served

Heaven ... Or sought to"); charismatic, handsome ("Your Face/ Would put out Jesus' --"), and rather squeamish -- or simply impatient? -- when it comes to performing a final gesture of love ("For One must wait/ To shut the Other's Gaze down --/ You -- could not --")

Tensions between the speaker's competing allegiances register forcefully. No orthodox believer herself, she recognizes both the allure and strictures of the Church, honoring yet manipulating some of its central emblems to make her case. She is also audacious enough to imagine a death pact with her lover whereby she claims the "Right of Frost" as her "privilege." Unapologetically passionate, she imagines her sight "saturated" by her lover's presence, rendering any other excellence -- even the Christian Paradise -- degraded in comparison. And in a glorious rendition of love's twin poles of self-sacrifice and greed, stanzas ten and eleven make plain that while she'd be lost in Heaven if he were damned, she'll be damned if she'll surrender him to salvation.

The final stanza seems to me one of the most overwhelmingly pained and resigned protests in verse. For Dickinson -- the recluse who, paradoxically, valued personal attachments more highly than almost any other life experience -- separation from a loved one amounts to Hell. The last six lines forsake the symmetry of the previous eleven quatrains, and desolation inheres in each syllable and juncture: in the choked finality of the heavy stresses and strong caesuras ("You there -- I -- here"); in the emotional abyss that opens with an enjambment ("With just the Door ajar/ That Oceans are"); in the oxymoronic precision of "meet apart" and "White Sustenance --/ Despair." In this stanza and in hundreds of others, Dickinson resembles Shakespeare, one of the few other poets in English to achieve such a level of volcanic energy. To my mind and ear, no other American poet comes close

‘This World is not Conclusion,’

‘The first twelve lines were first published in the Outlook, LIII (25 January 1896), 140, titled ‘Immortality’… The same lines were also issued in Poems (1896), 139, without title, and appear in later collections.” Thomas H. Johnson, ed. The Poems of Emily Dickinson (Harvard 1955) II, 385 “In Emily’s realm of religious thought, both doubt and belief occupy minor places beside a direct and hostile attack upon the orthodox position. Often with a fine irony, yet with unmistakable intention, she reviled her ancestral God…. All her instincts lead her to believe in the reality of God, and equally induce her to doubt the reality of the preposterous monster proposed to her by conventional religion…. No one though of bitterer gibes: even Blake appears vague and indefinite beside her…. ‘Burglar, banker, father,’ she addresses the deity, in a memorable line hinting at a relation in her subconscious between her father on earth and in heaven. She cannot absolve God for veiling his face behind the ruthlessness of life and nature… God has vainly sought to envelop himself in a pink shawl. A brilliant poem begins with the seemingly innocent and orthodox statement, ‘I know that he exists.’ The argument is that God plays hideand-seek with his creatures.” Henry W. Wells Introduction to Emily Dickinson (Packard & Company 1947) 152-56 “[In reference to her religious faith] the important question is: if Emily Dickinson found theological orthodoxies unacceptable, even repugnant, why did she turn in moments of greatest need to such men as Hale and Gladden and Wadsworth? Since so much of her poetry shows her kinship with the transcendentalists in their

iconoclasm and distrust of institutions, why did she not find in the essays of George Ripley or the sermons of Theodore Parker, and especially in the persuasive voice of Emerson, all the affirmations that she needed? The answer is clear. Her 'rapt attention' to immortality never deceived her senses into overlooking the essential difference between the nature of the Godhead and the nature of man. She knew that the immensity and obduracy of the Creator are beyond the grasp of the creature. Yet she was rebel enough not to accept willingly the limits that she knew are man's. She gave early expression to the thought in 'Just lost – when I was saved.' On the verge of finding the meaning of meaning she becomes 'lost,' in the sense of realizing that she will never discover it during her span of mortality. She now began to record in poems each new awareness of her relation to the inscrutable. 'This World is not Conclusion,' she avers almost truculently, as though she hoped the assertion would forestall her own doubts; 'And through a Riddle, at the last / Sagacity must go.' We have the witness of martyrs who have endured contempt and crucifixion for their faith, yet our uncertainty persists…. On occasion she queries whether simple stoicism may not be the answer. 'Our journey had advanced,' she imagines, to the fork in Being's road called Eternity…. Thus from the first she quested for certainties which from beginning to end she rejected. Yet in the light of her philosophic achievement in the years between 1862 and 1865, one can observe that the questings are directed less at her own uncertainties than at the gestures she saw and the hallelujahs she heard rolling from the Valley pulpits. She never again came near to matching the fecundity of those years, nor did she ever again deal so brilliantly with the philosophical problems now central in almost all the poems she was writing. A marked change occurs in the nature and the virtuosity of the poems written after she had made her adjustment to Wadsworth's removal, and had undertaken, as it were, he preceptorial studies with

Higginson. The lyrical, despairing outbursts of the bereaved bride come abruptly to an end. In their place she wrote a whole series of poems that establish her philosophical position on the nature and destiny of man. They are written with a serene detachment that shows the emergence of a new being." Thomas H. Johnson Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography (Harvard 1955) 238-40 "With many great religious thinkers doubt is a constant ingredient of faith. These are the ones who know despair as well as ecstasy, and this is what keeps their believing 'nimble.' Such is the tension that marks the vitality of Dickinson's religious life and informs her best poems on immortality. Whenever the formulas of conventional religion are invoked, the resistance of her inquiring mind rises to cancel them out or at least to balance them in a precarious equilibrium. Such is her strategy in an extremely interesting poem ["This World is not Conclusion"]…. Her private debate is framed by the public profession of faith, as in a church service remembered during her subsequent inner struggle to make this official belief personal. The poem begins with a resounding echo of the hymns she had sung out of Watts' Christian Psalmody. Heaven may be 'Invisible' but we hear it in the "music' of Sunday worship, answered at the end when 'Strong Hallelujahs roll.' Once again this positive assertion of belief is reinforced by her rare use of a period to punctuate the opening line, 'This World is not Conclusion.'—which lends an air of finality excluding all further discussion. But no sooner is a description of heaven attempted than doubts begin to proliferate, already planted in the second line by the scientific word 'Species' for the kind of world that stands beyond. Following the initial quatrain each succeeding one modifies its flat statement of act. (The poem clearly divides itself into five stanzas though there are no spacings to indicate this.) The structure of antitheses is set up by the fifth line, 'It beckons, and it baffles,' the two alliterating predications balanced on a fulcrum and weighted syllable against

syllable. Throughout the center of the poem philosophy has usurped the role of faith, but the doubts are countered by a positive ‘it’ which continues to stand for the after life until lost in confusion at the end. ‘Scholars’ puzzle their heads here on earth because to solve the riddle of death ‘Sagacity’—both mortal wisdom and sentience—‘must go… through’ the grave, presumably emerging vindicated on the other side. But to answer the questions raised by the rational mind requires something more than the calm assumption of immortality made at the beginning. The martyred saints of an earlier day bore the contempt of unbelievers, even to the point of crucifixion, because they were exalted by faith. Though this profound emotional assurance is exactly what has been missing from the poem so far, ‘Faith’ finally appears belatedly at the opening of the fourth stanza. But this shy young lady does not make a very dignified entrance into the august assemblage of scholars. She trips at the threshold, is covered with confusion (‘Blushes’), fidgets with her hands (‘Plucks’), and instead of offering any triumphant evidence asks the first inane question that enters her head. Can a weather vane, in default of a steeple, point the way to heaven today? The last stanza is a final reversal of the first one, its quiet assertion having been gradually replaced by the noise of debate and then by the attempt to drown that out with rolling hallelujahs. But modern man is afflicted by doubts, and there is no drug to relieve his pain. ‘Narcotics’ is the sharpest epithet she ever applied to the sermons and hymns of an orthodoxy she found inadequate. The poem has moved steadily downward from a flat statement of belief to a confession of gnawing doubt that ‘nibbles the soul.’ There is no attempt at a resolution of the debate, and this is the source of its special effect. There is even a suggestion that it has spread to the pulpit, where ‘Much Gesture’ implies too much for a faith that is firmly held, which adds a final irony. Such is the plight of the religious

sensibility in an increasingly rational age, but the poet does not take sides.”

Success is Counted Sweetest Success is Counted Sweetest

by Emily Dickinson

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 of Success is Counted Sweetest

 Popularity of “Success is Counted Sweetest”: This poem was written by Emily Dickinson, a great American poet. ‘Success is Counted Sweetest’ is a popular poem because of its themes of success and failure. It was first published in 1864. The poem speaks about the value of success and illustrates that those who have tasted failure can truly feel the real essence of success. The poem also unveils the painful truths of human desire. “Success is Counted Sweetest” A Comment on Value of Success: As this poem is about success, the speaker explains that failures can understand the meanings of success. She has used the images of soldiers to express her ideas about success. At the outset, she talks about soldiers who have won the war but still do not understand the real meanings of

success because they have not experienced the pain of failure. Later, she refers to a dying soldier of the losing side, who can hear the victorious soldiers celebrating their day. Hence, the one who is losing the battle of

his life can sense the true spirit of success. What enchants the readers is a stark comparison she has made between winning and losing sides to make clarify her points to the readers. Major Themes in “Success is Counted Sweetest”: Need, success, and defeat are the major themes of this poem. The speaker presents her views about success by narrating various examples. She argues that success is valuable for those who have lost something in life. She adds that people who always win and taste success more often do not comprehend the true colors of success. Instead, it is valued and appreciated by those who experience defeats or failures in life.

Analysis of Literary Devices in “Success is Counted Sweetest”

Literary devices are tools that enable the writers to present their ideas, emotions, and feelings by using persuasive language. Emily Dickinson has also employed some literary devices in this poem to describe her feelings. The analysis of some of the literary devices used in this poem has been given below.

1. Consonance: Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same line such as the sound of /r/ in “Requires sorest need” and the sound of /t/ in “The distant strains of triumph” and “Success is counted sweetest”. 2. Imagery: Imagery is used to make readers perceive things involving their five senses. For example, “Not one of all the purple Host”; “The distant strains of triumph” and “Who took the Flag today.” 3. Symbolism: Symbolism is a use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings different from

their literal meanings. “Nectar” symbolizes white victory and luxury while “The purple host” is the symbol of the royal army. 4. Enjambment: It is defined as a thought or clause that does not come to an end at a line break; instead, it moves over the next line. For example,

“Success is counted sweetest By those who ne’er succeed.”

5. Metaphor: It is a figure of speech in which an implied comparison is made between objects different in nature. There is only one metaphor in the third line “to comprehend nectar”. Here, nectar is referring to the sweetness of victory. 6. Assonance: Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in the same line. For example, the sound of /o/ in “Who took the Flag today” and the sound of /ee/ in “By those who ne’er succeed”. 7. Syncope: It is a literary device that can be defined as the contraction or the shortening of a word by omitting sounds, syllables or letters from the middle of the word. The poet has omitted the letters from the middle of the word such as, “By those who ne’er succeed.” 8. Paradox: A paradox is a statement that may seem contradictory but can be true. For example, “Success is counted sweetest; By those who ne’er succeed.” Here, the poet has used paradox to explain the importance of success.

Analysis of Poetic Devices in “Success is Counted Sweetest”

Poetic and literary devices are the same, but a few are used only in poetry. Here is the analysis of some of the poetic devices used in this poem.

- Stanza: A stanza is a poetic form of some lines. There are three stanzas in this poem with each comprises four lines.

- Quatrain: A quatrain is a four-lined stanza borrowed from Persian poetry. Here each stanza is quatrain.
- Free Verse: Free verse is a type of poetry that does not contain patterns of rhyme or meter. This is a free verse poem with no strict rhyme or meter.
- End Rhyme: End rhyme is used to make the stanza melodious. For example, “ear” and “clear.”
- Iambic Trimeter: It is a type of meter having three iambs per line. The poem follows iambic trimester such as, “By those who ne’er suc”.

Quotes to be Used

The lines stated below can be used in motivational speeches to highlight the importance of success. These could also be used by parents to shape the thinking of their children.

“Success is counted sweetest By those who ne’er succeed. To comprehend a nectar Requires sorest need.” Mending Wall Mending Wall

Robert Frost

Something there is that doesn't love a wall, That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it, And spills the upper boulders in the sun; And makes gaps even two can pass abreast. The work of hunters is another thing: I have come after them and made repair Where they have left not one stone on a stone, But they would have the rabbit out of hiding, To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,

No one has seen them made or heard them made, But at spring mending- time we find them there. I let my neighbour know beyond the hill; And on a day we meet to walk the line And set the wall between us once again. We keep the wall between us as we go. To each the boulders that have fallen to each. And some are loaves and some so nearly balls We have to use a spell to make them balance: "Stay where you are until our backs are turned!" We wear our fingers rough with handling them. Oh, just another kind of out-door game, One on a side. It comes to little more: There where it is we do not need the wall: He is all pine and I am apple orchard. My apple trees will never get across And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him. He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours." Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder If I could put a notion in his head: "Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it Where there are cows? But here there are no cows. Before I built a wall I'd ask

to know What I was walling in or walling out, And to whom I was like to give offence. Something there is that doesn't love a wall, That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him, But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather He said it for himself. I see him there Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed. He moves in darkness as it seems to me, Not of woods only and the shade of trees. He will not go behind his father's saying, And he likes having thought of it so well He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."

Summary of Mending Wall

 Popularity "Mending Wall": Written by Robert Frost, a great American poet, "Mending Wall" is a thoughtprovoking poem about human limitations and their benefits in the society. It was first published in 1914. The poem is about two neighbors who meet in spring every year to mend the stone wall that separates their farms. It illustrates how good fences make good neighbors, and how we can maintain longlasting relations with neighbors by establishing such walls. Since its publication, it has gained immense popularity across the globe on account of its simple yet profound subject. "Mending Wall" as a Representative of Tradition: This poem is about the activity of mending a wall that the speaker and his neighbor perform every year in spring. The narrator of the poem feels that there is no need for any boundary, as neither of them has anything precious to keep in lawns. They have just trees. To him, mending the wall is a purposeless activity. He also observes the falling of stones from the wall and comments that even nature is not in favor of this fence. However, his neighbor, being attached to his traditions, attempts to rationalize. He asserts that boundaries and distances are essential for relationships to work. However, what enchants the reader is the message he conveys that most

relationships can work well with boundaries. Major Themes in “Mending Wall”: Exploration, curiosity and the need of the gap are some of the major themes found in the poem. The poem presents a clash between the two, the speaker and his neighbor. Though they meet every year in the spring to fix the wall, yet the speaker is unable to understand what the necessity of the wall is. Out of curiosity, he questions about establishing the wall. However, he does not get any satisfactory answer. Every time, his neighbor stresses on the need for separation, implying good fences keep the relations cordial.

Analysis of Literary Devices in “Mending Wall”

Literary devices are used to bring richness and clarity to the texts. The writers and poets use them to make their poem or prose texts appealing and meaningful. Frost has also employed some literary devices to discuss the importance of the fence. The analysis of literary devices used in this poem has been given below.

 Assonance: Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in the same line such as /e/ sound in “To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean, No one has seen”. Enjambment: Enjambment refers to the continuation of a sentence without a pause beyond the end of a line, couplet or stanza such as,

“And he likes having thought of it so well He says again, “Good fences make good neighbours.”

 Imagery: Imagery is used to make the readers perceive things with their five senses. Frost has used visual imagery in this poem such as, “And some are loaves and some so nearly balls”, “He is all pine and I am apple orchard” and “Not of woods only and the shade of trees.” Consonance: Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds in the

same line such as /n/ and /t/ sounds “And set the wall between us once again”. Symbolism: Symbolism is using symbols to signify ideas and qualities, giving them symbolic meanings different from their literal meanings. Similarly, “fence” symbolizes ‘gap’ that one should maintain to establish long-lasting relationships and to maintain privacy. “Nature” symbolizes the reunion of the two as the speaker meets his neighbor every year in spring to fix the fence. Metaphor: It is a figure of speech in which an implied comparison is made between objects different in nature. There is only one metaphor used in the poem. It is used in seventeenth line where it is stated as, “And some are loaves and some so nearly balls.” He compares the stone blocks to loaves and balls.

The literary analysis shows that Frost has skillfully used these devices to discuss the profound subject of limits and boundaries between human beings.

Analysis of Poetic Devices in “Mending Wall”

Poetic and literary devices are the same, but a few are used only in poetry. Here is the analysis of some of the poetic devices used in this poem.

 Stanza: A stanza is a poetic form of some lines. This is a long narrative poem written in one stanza with no break. Iambic Pentameter: It is a type of meter comprising five iambs. This poem comprises iambic pentameter such as, “Something there is that doesn’t love a ” Blank verse: Blank verse is written with regular metrical but unrhymed lines, almost always in iambic pentameter. “Mending Wall” is written in blank verse. Repetition: There is a repetition of the phrase, “Good fences make good neighbours.” It has created a musical quality in the poem. Refrain: The lines repeated at the same distance in the poem are called refrain. The phrase, “Good fences make good

neighbours” is repeated with the same words. It has become a refrain as it is repeated twice in the poem.

Quotes to be Used

These lines can be used when discussing the importance of healthy relationships. These could also be used in motivational speeches when talking about the protection of boundaries.

“And he likes having thought of it so well He says again, “Good fences make good neighbours.” Birches Birches

Robert Frost Birches

When I see birches bend to left and right Across the lines of straighter darker trees, I like to think some boy’s been swinging them. But swinging doesn’t bend them down to stay As ice-storms do. Often you must have seen them Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning After a rain. They click upon themselves As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel. Soon the sun’s warmth makes them shed crystal shells Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust— Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen. They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load, And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed So low for long, they never right themselves: You may see their trunks arching in the woods Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair Before them over their heads to dry in the sun. But I was going to say when Truth broke in With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm I should prefer to have some boy bend them As he went out and in to fetch the cows— Some boy too far from town to learn baseball, Whose only play was what he found himself, Summer or winter, and could play alone. One by one he subdued his father’s trees

By riding them down over and over again Until he took the stiffness out of them, And not one but hung limp, not one was left For him to conquer. He learned all there was To learn about not launching out too soon And so not carrying the tree away Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise To the top branches, climbing carefully With the same pains you use to fill a cup Up to the brim, and even above the brim. Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish, Kicking his way down through the air to the ground. So was I once myself a swinger of birches. And so I dream of going back to be. It's when I'm weary of considerations, And life is too much like a pathless wood Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs Broken across it, and one eye is weeping From a twig's having lashed across it open. I'd like to get away from earth awhile And then come back to it and begin over. May no fate willfully misunderstand me And half grant what I wish and snatch me away Not to return. Earth's the right place for love: I don't know where it's likely to go better. I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree, And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more, But dipped its top and set me down again. That would be good both going and coming back. One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

Summary of Birches

- Popularity of "Birches": Robert Frost, a great American poet wrote 'Birches'. This poem is known as one of the best literary

pieces, for its themes of natural beauty and memory. The poem revolves around the beautiful, birches trees that are bent toward the ground. It also tells about the speaker's past experiences associated with those trees. Its popularity, however, lies in that it deals with the subject of a carefree life.

- "Birches" As a Representative of Natural Beauty: The poet illustrates how the dark and bending trees catch his attention. When

he glances those birches bending left to right in the forest, he thinks that the boys swinging caused bends in their branches. Later, he realizes that these bends might also be caused by ice-storm as the weight of ice forces them to bend toward the ground due to the pressure. Although he imagines both situations, he prefers the first one recalling his memory of how he used to swing on the trees from side to side and from the earth up to heaven. He uses his active imagination to make readers feel the joy of swinging on birches trees. Also, he compares his life with a pathless wood and desire to get an escape into those carefree days of childhood. Therefore, he dreams about swinging in the birches to get away from the pains of life.

- Major Themes in "Birches": Nature, memory, and childhood are the major themes of this poem. The poem speaks about the poet's encounter with those beautiful trees. It illustrates how he associates two different ideas while looking at the bent branches of those beautiful trees. The beautiful widespread bends in the branches remind him of his beautiful past days. Also, he imagines how natural calamities can transform the actual appearances of the objects. He desires to be the swingers of birches as he was in his childhood.

Analysis of Literary Devices Used in "Birches"

Literary devices are tools used to convey emotions, ideas, and themes in a poem or a story. With the help of these devices, the writers make their texts more appealing to the reader. Robert Frost

has also employed some literary devices in this poem to capture the beauty of birches trees. The analysis of some of the literary devices used in this poem has been stated below.

1. Assonance: Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in the same line. For example, the sound of /a/ in "Shattering and avalanching on the

snow-crust—”. 2. Consonance: Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same line such as the sound of /l/ in “Soon the sun’s warmth makes them shed crystal shells”. 3. Personification: Personification is to give human qualities to inanimate objects. For example, in line sixteen, “So low for long, they never right themselves”. As if the trees are human and can correct their postures but not they are not willing to do that. 4. Anaphora: It refers to the repetition of a word or expression in the first part of some verses. For example, “As the” in the first stanza of the poem is repeated to emphasize the point. 5. Alliteration: Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same line in quick succession. For example, the sound if /c/ in “As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel” and the sound of /b/ in “When I see birches bend to left and right”. 6. Simile: Simile is used to compare something with something else to make the meanings clear to the readers. For example,

“Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair.”

7. Imagery: Imagery is used to make readers perceive things involving their five senses. For example, “When I see birches bend to left and right”, “To the top branches, climbing carefully” and “And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk.” 8. Enjambment: It is defined as a thought or clause that does not come to an end at a line break; instead, it moves over to the next line. For example,

“And life is too much like a pathless wood Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs Broken across it, and one eye is weeping From a twig’s having lashed across it open.”

9. Hyperbole: Hyperbole is a device used to exaggerate a statement for the sake of emphasis. For example,

“Soon the sun’s warmth makes them shed crystal shells Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust.”

Analysis of Poetic Devices Used in “Birches”

Poetic and literary devices are the same, but a few are used only in poetry. Here is the analysis of some of the poetic devices used in this poem

- Stanza: A stanza is a set of lines or verses in a poem. ‘Birches’ is a single stanza long free-verse poem with fifty lines without any stanza break.
- Free Verse: Free verse is a type of poetry that does not contain patterns of rhyme or meter. This is a free-verse poem with no strict rhyme or meter

Quotes to be Used

The lines stated below can be used for children when discussing ‘life’ in rural areas. The description would help them understand the blissful life of those areas.

“I’d like to go by climbing a birch tree, And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more, But dipped its top and set me down again.”

Summary of Song of Myself

- Popularity of “Song of Myself”: Walt Whitman, a distinguished American poet, wrote ‘Song of Myself’. It is a long narrative poem about the poet’s self-discovery. The poem was first published in 1855. The poem has been through revisions over the years. There are five editions on ‘Song of Myself’. The current poem is 1982, the final edition. The poem speaks about the narrator’s journey, demonstrating the enlightenment of his soul, and pleasure simple things. It also

illustrates nature’s crucial role in man’s life. The poem also discusses the harsh times such as the American Civil War, Slavery, and everyday life of people during those times, including his opinion on life and death.

- “Song of Myself” As a Representative of Joy: This poem is an expression of merriment. The poet says that he celebrates himself and all parts of him along with every audience. He begins his journey at the age of thirty-two when he is in perfect health. He invites his soul in his journey and urges nature to negotiate with its original form. To him, “askers”, “talkers” and “trippers” are wasting their precious time while discussing societies and discoveries. He advises them to listen to their souls as he listens and enjoys a blissful revelation of his inner self which gives him peace and satisfaction. He narrates his significant meeting with an innocent child who questions him about the grass. His question throws him into the valley of wisdom, where he connects this simple object with divinity. Later in the text, he expresses his love for the people of all ages, different sexes, ethnicity, natural objects, and animals. Moreover, he declares himself the poet of all men and women as he knows that goodness, evil and pain play a significant role in man’s life. As the poem continues, he catalogs the sounds he hears and notices the infinite wonders even in the slightest things around him. He develops the idea that God is omnipotent and omnipresent. Therefore, we must not be curious about Him. Toward the end, he makes death as his subject and states that he is not afraid of death because it does not come to put an end to our lives. Rather, it transports

us to another place where we get up taking various forms. What, however, enchants the readers is the way he discovers his identity through this mystical journey. The poet also addresses everyone instead of an individual in sections 1, 20, 47 and 51. While the concept is about selfdiscovery, it implies to both individual and universal subjects. The poet notices bravery and heroism in common people instead of

legendary heroical characters. The poem has also been an inspiration for other famous literary works such as Paper Town by John Green; Dr. Bird’s Advice for Sad Poets by Evan Roskos; a stage play ‘I and You’ by Lauren Gunderson; fantasy film ‘Imaginaerum’, among others. ▯ Major Themes in “Song of Myself”: Oneness of mankind, democracy and divinity are the major themes of this poem. The speaker develops this idea that life is a journey to unveil one’s identity throughout the poem. He takes various forms and imagines himself performing some sacred roles just to show the mystical union of his soul with the divine. He shows his infinite love for humanity as he speaks on behalf of mankind. Also, he focuses on the equality of mankind. The poet expresses that there is no difference between asterisk, cultures, classes, genders, and races and that the things in nature are truly equal. Even death does not violate this equality. It does not bring a ruination. Rather, it leads us to new experiences. Men die and are reborn with new purposes, and this is how the cycle of life and death continues.

Analysis of Literary Devices Used in “Song of Myself” By Walt Whitman

Literary devices are tools used by writers to convey their emotions, ideas, and themes to make texts more appealing to the reader. Walt Whitman has used various literary devices to enhance the intended impacts of his poem. Some of the major literary devices have been analyzed below.

- Enjambment: It is defined as a thought in verse that does not come to an end at a line break; rather, it rolls over to the next line. For example,

“I swear I will never again mention love or death inside a house, And I swear I will never translate myself at all, only to him or her who privately stays with me in the open air.”

- Alliteration: Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same line in quick succession. For example, the sound of /s/ in “And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and composed before a million universes”; the sound of /f/ in “Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged”; the sound of /g/ in “I perceive that the ghastly glimmer is noonday sunbeams reflected” and the sound of /s/ in “Speeding through space, speeding through heaven and the stars”.
- Imagery: Imagery is used to make the readers perceive things involving their five senses. For example, “Here are biscuits to eat and here is milk to drink”, “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love” and “If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.”
- Assonance: Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in the same line. For example, the sound of /a/ in “I tread day and night such roads”; the sound of /ee/ in “In vain the mastodon retreats beneath its own powder’d bones”; and the sound of /oo/ in “Blind loving wrestling touch, sheath’d hooded sharptooth’d touch!”
- Rhetorical Question Rhetorical question is a sentence that is posed to make the point clear. For example, “Listener up there! What have you to confide to me?”, “Do you see O my brothers and sisters “ and “Why should I wish to see God better than this day?”
- Anaphora: It refers to the repetition of a word or expression in the first part of some verses. For example,

“For me” in section seven of the poem to emphasize the point such as;

For me the man that is proud and feels how it stings to be slighted, For me the sweet-heart and the old maid, for me mothers and the mothers of mothers, For me lips that have smiled, eyes that have shed tears, For me children and the begetters of children.”

- Personification: Personification is to give human qualities to inanimate objects. There are several personified objects throughout the poem. For example, “I loafe and invite my soul” and “Or I guess the

grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.”
Symbolism: Symbolism is a use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal meanings. “Grass” symbolizes regeneration of nature and unity or oneness of people, and “I” is the symbol of mankind.

Analysis of Poetic Devices Used in “Song of Myself”

Poetic and literary devices are the same, but a few are used only in poetry. Here is the analysis of some of the poetic devices used in this poem.

1. Stanza: A stanza is a poetic form of some lines. This is a long poem having fifty-two sections in it with various lengths. There are single verses, couplets, triplets as well. 2. Free Verse: Free verse is a type of poetry that does not contain patterns of rhyme or meter. This is a free-verse poem with no strict rhyme or meter.

Quotes to be Used

The lines stated below are suitable as a quote in a speech while hiding one’s personality and being positive.

“You will hardly know who I am or what I mean, But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,