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"The Agony of Triumph: A Study of Emily Dickinson's 'Success is counted sweetest'"

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson's poem "*Success is counted sweetest*" presents a profound paradox: that the truest understanding of success is born not in victory, but in defeat. This paper examines the poem through a multi-dimensional lens—literary, structural, philosophical, and spiritual. Employing powerful metaphors, ironic contrasts, and vivid imagery, Dickinson evokes a battlefield scene to illustrate how longing, deprivation, and suffering awaken a deeper awareness of triumph. The poem's spiritual resonance is further explored through parallels with Vedantic and Upanishadic wisdom, as well as teachings from the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Vachanamrut*, and *Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapurana*. In its brevity and intensity, the poem mirrors the mystical truths of Eastern and Western traditions alike: that only through detachment and loss can one grasp the fullness of joy. This exploration aims to illuminate Dickinson's poetic depth and reveal her timeless relevance across cultural and philosophical landscapes.

Preface

Emily Dickinson, often called the poet of inwardness and intensity, created verses that delve into the deepest recesses of human consciousness. Among her most striking works is "*Success is counted sweetest*", a twelve-line meditation that transcends its brevity through spiritual profundity and emotional resonance. Composed during the 19th century amidst personal solitude and the backdrop of war-torn America, this poem captures a universal truth: that the value of something is often most deeply realized in its absence.

This paper seeks to present a holistic interpretation of the poem by analyzing its literary craftsmanship, structural form, and thematic richness. It also draws connections with Indian philosophical thought, especially the doctrines of Vedanta, the Upanishads, and sacred texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Vachanamrut*. These scriptures emphasize that realization comes not through indulgence but through detachment, not in possession but in longing. By linking Dickinson's Western poetic insights with Eastern metaphysical frameworks, this research underscores the universality of the soul's search for meaning beyond material triumph.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Emily Dickinson's poem is rich with **figurative language** and stylistic devices that amplify its central paradox: only the defeated understand the value of victory.

• **Metaphor:** The entire poem is metaphorical. "Nectar" represents **success** or **victory**, and the "purple Host" symbolizes **victorious soldiers**. The "forbidden ear" of the dying man implies spiritual or existential distance from worldly triumph.

- **Irony:** The **core irony** of the poem lies in its central idea: **those who do not succeed appreciate success the most.** This reversal of expected logic forms the poem's intellectual and emotional power.
- **Imagery:** Vivid war imagery appears in "purple Host," "took the Flag," and "dying." These images evoke a battlefield scene, enhancing the emotional gravity of the dying soldier's final moments.
- **Alliteration and Assonance:** The repetition of sounds can be found in "sorest need," and "forbidden ear... burst agonized and clear," reinforcing emotional tension.
- **Symbolism:** The "**Flag**" symbolizes **victory or achievement**; "nectar" symbolizes the **sweetness of success**; the "**forbidden ear**" reflects an ultimate disconnection—perhaps even death or existential defeat.
- **Personification:** Triumph is personified when it is said to "burst agonized and clear"—a sound that takes on an emotional, almost conscious, existence.

2. Structure and Form

- **Rhyme Scheme:** The poem follows an **ABCB DEFE GHGH** pattern, with **slant rhymes** that are characteristic of Dickinson's style. This irregularity reflects the theme of contradiction.
- **Meter and Rhythm:** The poem is written mostly in **iambic trimeter and tetrameter**, creating a hymn-like cadence that is musical yet solemn.
- **Stanza and Line Breaks:** The three-stanza structure builds logically from philosophical musing to vivid narrative. The third stanza's **enjambment** ("dying – / On whose forbidden ear") contributes to suspense and gravity.

3. Theme and Subject Matter

At its core, the poem meditates on the **meaning of success** and the **cost of achievement**. Dickinson challenges materialistic notions of success, offering a more profound, emotional, and existential understanding. The **paradox of triumph through defeat** raises questions about desire, fulfillment, and the human condition.

4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** Reflective, philosophical, and paradoxical. The tone shifts in the final stanza to something more **tragic and empathetic**, especially in the portrayal of the dying man.
- **Mood:** Evokes **sympathy, solemnity**, and a sense of **wistful longing**. The mood compels the reader to reflect on personal experiences of loss and desire.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

Dickinson's work resonates deeply with **Vedantic** and **Upanishadic** philosophy:

- The **Bhagavad Gita (2.14)** says: "*Matra-sparshas tu kaunteya... Agama apayino anityas*" — sense pleasures and

pain are temporary. Only one who has experienced suffering can understand transcendence.

- The **Isha Upanishad** discusses **renunciation** and how understanding the **impermanence of victory** leads to wisdom.
- In **Vachanamrut Gadhada I-11**, Bhagwan Swaminarayan says, "Only one who has experienced pain understands the value of joy." This directly mirrors Dickinson's proposition.
- From the **Bible**, in **Ecclesiastes 7:3**, "Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better."

The poem encourages **spiritual introspection**—that true knowledge (Vidya) and fulfillment come not through gain, but through **detachment, loss, or spiritual hunger**.

Emily Dickinson's poem "**Success is counted sweetest**" harmonizes beautifully with **Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom**, particularly the idea that **true understanding arises from contrast, detachment, and inner realization**. The poem reflects the deep spiritual truth that **one only comprehends the value of an experience when it is absent**—a theme echoed across many Hindu and Vaishnavite scriptures.

Below is a scriptural alignment with **Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Vachanamrut, Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapuram**, and other philosophical traditions:

1. Upanishadic and Vedantic Alignment

A. Kena Upanishad (1.2–1.3):¹

"Not by speech, not by mind, not by the eye can It be apprehended. He who thinks he knows It well, knows not."

The poem speaks of the **deeper meaning of success being understood only in its absence**. Likewise, the Upanishads emphasize that **Brahman (ultimate truth)** cannot be comprehended through possession or conquest—only through **lack, yearning, and humility** does realization emerge. Just as the dying soldier hears "the distant strains of triumph," yet cannot partake in it, **Brahman is glimpsed in moments of renunciation and loss**.

B. Isha Upanishad (Verse 1 & 3):²

"Isha vasyam idam sarvam..." (All this is pervaded by the Lord.)

"Those who see all beings in the Self, and the Self in all beings, they do not suffer."

Dickinson's poem implies that **worldly success** (symbolized by the flag and victory) is transient and external. The **true comprehension lies within**, much like the Vedantic realization of the **Self (Atman)** as the seat of all fulfillment. The defeated person, through suffering and introspection, comes closer to the **essence** of success—similar to the jnani's inner realization of the **Atman**.

2. Bhagavad Gita Parallels

A. Bhagavad Gita 2.15:³

"O Arjuna, the person who is not disturbed by happiness and distress and is steady in both is certainly eligible for liberation."

This echoes the **inner detachment** Dickinson highlights. Success (nectar) is best understood **not in its consumption**, but in its **absence**—when one remains equanimous in defeat, one glimpses the **real nature of fulfillment**, beyond material achievement.

B. Bhagavad Gita 6.8:⁴

"He who is equipoised in cold and heat, happiness and distress, and honor and dishonor... is said to be self-realized."

Just as the **dying man understands success more clearly than the victorious soldier**, the Gita upholds the idea that **those detached from worldly outcomes** see truth more vividly. **True knowledge arises not through external validation but through introspective clarity.**

3. Vachanamrut Alignment (Swaminarayan Philosophy)

Vachanamrut Gadhada I-11:

"Only he who has experienced misery can understand the value of bliss."

This is a **direct reflection** of Dickinson's thesis: **"Success is counted sweetest by those who ne'er succeed."** The **Vachanamrut** teaches that **true joy** (sukha) is best appreciated after enduring **duḥkha** (pain). The concept that **divine bliss** or **moksha** can be truly cherished only by those who have transcended the dualities of life mirrors the poem's central paradox.

Vachanamrut Gadhada I-23:

"Without experiencing the misery of worldly existence, one cannot fully appreciate the greatness of God or the bliss of Akshardham."

This reflects the **contrast principle**—spiritual joy becomes **comprehensible** through earthly sorrow, just as Dickinson suggests **victory becomes meaningful only through defeat.**

4. Shrimad Bhagavatam (Bhagwat Mahapurān)

Canto 10, Chapter 14 – Brahma's Prayers (Verse 8):⁵

"My dear Lord, one who earnestly waits for You while tolerating all sufferings, offering you his heart, such a person becomes eligible for your grace."

Dickinson's soldier, **defeated and dying**, hears the distant victory, and perhaps in that moment reaches a kind of **spiritual insight**—the pain becomes a passage to **divine clarity**. This aligns with the **Bhagavatam's emphasis on suffering as a gateway to spiritual depth** and grace.

5. Rig Veda Insight

Rig Veda 10.129.4:⁶

"Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning, all this was water without distinction. Then that which was hidden by void emerged through intense tapas (suffering or heat)."

Creation, understanding, and enlightenment emerge **not from possession but from void**, struggle, and tapas. Dickinson's poem echoes this **cosmic principle of contrast**, where **loss unveils the value of gain.**

6. Broader Spiritual Teachings

- **Mysticism (Christian, Sufi, and Hindu)** often emphasizes that **God is best known in suffering and longing.**
- **Tulsidas** in the *Ramcharitmanas* notes that **only one who suffers can appreciate Ram's grace.**
- **Ramakrishna Paramahansa** said, *"Only when the mind withdraws from external pleasure does it begin to taste the nectar of divine bliss."*

Dickinson's **"forbidden ear"** becomes a symbol of **the soul**—shut out from worldly triumph, yet ironically, **most aware of its sweetness.**

Conclusion:

Emily Dickinson's *"Success is counted sweetest"* aligns intricately with **Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom** through its expression of paradox, renunciation, and inner realization. Across the **Bhagavad Gita, Vachanamrut, and Bhagavatam**, we find the same spiritual truth: **one must lose the world to gain the Self**, just as one must taste failure to understand success. Her poem, though Western in origin, resonates with the **timeless Indian spiritual worldview**, demonstrating the universality of truth across cultural and poetic boundaries.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

- Written in the **mid-19th century**, Dickinson's poem emerges from a context of **American Romanticism**, a movement emphasizing **individual experience** and **emotional depth.**
- The use of **military imagery** may reflect the **American Civil War** period (1861–1865), though Dickinson was not overtly political. The **battlefield metaphor** makes her abstract themes concrete.
- The poem defies conventional Victorian ideals of **success and propriety**, positioning Dickinson as a forerunner of **Modernist introspection.**

7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

Emily Dickinson often felt like an outsider—socially, spiritually, and intellectually. Her **reclusive lifestyle** and inner emotional intensity permeate this poem.

• The poem suggests a **deep sensitivity to human suffering**, and perhaps a personal experience of **failure or exclusion**, allowing Dickinson to empathize with the “**defeated – dying**” figure.

• Her writings often reflect **melancholy and existential curiosity**, which inform this poem’s subtle emotional undercurrents.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

• The poem addresses **all individuals** who struggle with **failure, longing, or unfulfilled ambition**. It serves as both **comfort and critique**—comfort to the defeated, and critique of shallow success.

• Dickinson’s purpose seems to be to **redefine success** not as a material or external event, but as a deeply **felt internal experience**, often understood in its absence.

9. Personal Interpretation

“Success is counted sweetest” is a **masterpiece of poetic contradiction**. Through layered metaphor, paradox, and spiritual resonance, Dickinson upends conventional definitions of success. The poem does not offer resolution but compels deep reflection.

For the reader, it serves as a mirror: Have we appreciated success without having failed? Have we understood joy without tasting sorrow? As the Upanishads teach, **duality is the nature of worldly experience**, and only through one do we comprehend the other. Dickinson, in just twelve lines, captures this eternal truth.

Conclusion

In “*Success is counted sweetest*”, Emily Dickinson weaves a poetic tapestry that is both delicate and devastating. Her paradox of the defeated soul grasping the essence of victory captures not just a psychological truth but a spiritual one. The poem’s message aligns with ancient Indian wisdom: that only those who suffer the absence of joy, peace, or fulfillment are equipped to comprehend their true worth. From the battlefield image of the dying soldier to the distant sound of triumph, Dickinson's poem becomes a metaphor for the soul’s yearning for the eternal.

Through literary finesse and spiritual depth, Dickinson reveals that success is not a trophy to be held, but an awareness to be attained—often through loss, detachment, and inner reflection. Just as the *Bhagavad Gita* teaches equanimity in both victory and defeat, Dickinson points us toward a deeper comprehension that transcends worldly binaries. Her poem reminds us that true understanding dawns not in achievement, but in aspiration—a truth as eternal as it is poetic.

Reference:

- 1 श्रोत्रस्य श्रोत्रं मनसो मनो यद् वाचो ह वाचं स उ प्राणस्य प्राणः ।
चक्षुषश्चक्षुरतिमुच्य धीराः प्रेत्यास्माल्लोकादमृता भवन्ति ॥ २ ॥
- 2 ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्य स्विद्धनम् ॥ १ ॥
- 3 यं हि न व्यथयन्त्येते पुरुषं पुरुषर्षभ ।
समदुःखसुखं धीरं सोऽमृतत्वाय कल्पते ॥ 15 ॥
- 4 ज्ञानविज्ञानतृप्तात्मा कूटस्थो विजितेन्द्रियः ।
युक्त इत्युच्यते योगी समलोष्टाश्मकाञ्चनः ॥ 8 ॥
- 5 तत्तेऽनुकम्पां सुसमीक्षमाणो
भुञ्जान एवात्मकृतं विपाकम् ।
हृद्वाग्वपुर्भिर्विदधन्नमस्ते
जीवेत यो मुक्तिपदे स दायभाक् ॥ ८ ॥
- 6 कामस्तदग्रे समवर्तताधि मनसो रेतः प्रथमं यदासीत् । सतो
बन्धुमसति निरविन्दन्हृदि प्रतीष्या क्वयो मनीषा ॥
कामस्तदग्रे समवर्तताधि मनसो रेतः प्रथमं यदासीत् । सतो
बन्धुमसति निरविन्दन्हृदि प्रतीष्या क्वयो मनीषा ॥