# I taste a liquor never brewed

## POEM TEXT

I taste a liquor never brewed –
From Tankards scooped in Pearl –
Not all the Frankfort Berries
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of air – am I –
And Debauchee of Dew –
Reeling – thro' endless summer days –
From inns of molten Blue –

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove's door –
When Butterflies – renounce their "drams" –
I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats –
And Saints – to windows run –
To see the little Tippler
Leaning against the – Sun!

## SUMMARY

I'm drinking a mysterious liquor that doesn't exist from a gorgeous pearly mug. Even the famous wine grapes of the Rhine valley couldn't produce a liquor like this one!

I'm getting drunk on the air and can't get enough of the dew. I stagger through gorgeous, infinite summer days, stopping to gaze at the burning blue sky like a drunk stops at pubs.

Even when the flowers' bartenders kick out bees that have gotten drunk, and the butterflies swear off their sips of nectar, I'll keep on drinking—until even the angels swing their white hats about and the saints rush to stare at me as I lean like a wobbly drunkard against the sun!

## THEMES

### APPRECIATING THE GLORY OF NATURE

The speaker in "I taste a liquor never brewed" is getting drunk (metaphorically) on the loveliness of a summer day. The speaker has a bottomless thirst for nature's beauty, becoming so deeply connected to the landscape that the speaker out-wilds the animals—getting drunker than even the bees and butterflies sipping on nectar. The poem thus celebrates the intoxicating glory of nature.

The speaker begins by describing a mysterious beverage, something so impossibly good it seems magical. This "liquor" is, confusingly, "never brewed"—that is, this beverage isn't actually something made by human beings. But though the poem is coy at first about exactly *what* the speaker's tasting, the opening lines give readers a sense that, whatever this liquor is, it's really something special. For one thing, it's served in "Tankards scooped in Pearl," fairy-tale-ish vessels, and it outclasses even "Frankfort Berries"—wine grapes from the famous Rhine vineyards, some of the best in the world.

Only in the second and third stanzas do readers learn that this magical liquor is nothing more (or less) than the air, the dew, the flowers, and the summer sky—the natural world, with all its bounty and wonder. Nature has become, to the speaker, rich, magical, and, of course, intoxicating. The summer day is "endless," and the sky becomes an infinite series of "inns of molten Blue." The speaker does indeed feel inebriated, but this isn't the result of partaking in any illicit substances: the speaker is basically drunk on life itself.

And though the pleasures the speaker revels in are wholesome, the speaker's pleasure in them is outlandish. The speaker is a "debauchee," so drunk on nature that the speaker has become joyfully wild. In fact, the speaker is *wilder* than wild: this person can out-party the bees and butterflies drinking their fill in the flowers. The speaker's going to be the last one out the door at this summer-day bar.

The speaker's innocently wild nature-drunkenness is so pronounced, in fact, that it attracts the attention of heaven itself. "Seraphs" and "Saints"—usually imagined as lofty, serene, and holy—become town gossips, swinging their hats around and rushing to windows to see the life-drunk speaker wobbling around. And the speaker's drunkenness has lifted this person so far off the everyday ground that the speaker feels able to lean against the sun itself. The speaker's joyful inebriation thus brings heaven down to earth at the same time as it raises earth to heaven. A normal (if lovely) day has become sublime through the speaker's nature-drunkenness, and celestial beings have become the speaker's next-door neighbors.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-16

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*I taste a liquor never brewed –*
*From Tankards scooped in Pearl –*
*Not all the Frankfort Berries*
*Yield such an Alcohol!*

The speaker starts right in the middle of the action—in the first person and the present tense: even now, the speaker tastes the mysterious liquor that's going to motivate the entire poem.

The speaker's mysterious drink seems paradoxical, maybe magical. If it's never been brewed, how is the speaker tasting it? The description of the vessels from which the speaker is drinking also suggests that something out of the ordinary is going on here. "Tankards scooped in Pearl" are the kind of drinking mugs one might find in a fairy tale, gorgeous objects made from precious materials. The assonance of "brewed" and "scooped" helps the reader to feel the delectable rarity of the drink and the vessel: those matched, cool /oo/ sounds are like lips puckering to sip a drink, or like the "ooh!" of delight people might make when they taste something delicious.

The next lines only strengthen the reader's sense that the speaker is having an extraordinary experience. The very best wine in the world, made from Rhine valley grapes, can't match the mysterious beverage the speaker's drinking.

Taken together, these lines give the reader the feeling that the speaker is having, not just a good time, but a *magically* good time. But the sense of mysterious delight in these first lines works almost like the setup for a joke. The speaker is definitely having some serious fun—but as the reader will soon discover, it's the kind of fun that's as down-to-earth as it is transcendent. It's maybe even a little silly.

This opening stanza also makes clear that the speaker will tell readers about this liquor in lilting ballad meter, the rhythm of old songs and old rhymes. Like much of Dickinson's poetry, this poem is made up of quatrains with an ABCB rhyme scheme. That means lines 2 and 3 rhyme, but lines 1 and 2 do not. In this first stanza, though, those rhyme sounds are slant rhymes (another common feature of Dickinson's poetry): "Pearl" doesn't rhyme perfectly with "Alcohol," suggesting the speaker's drunken dizziness.

The meter of the poem, in keeping with its ballad form, consists of alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. Recall that an iamb is a poetic foot with an unstressed-stressed, da-DUM, beat pattern; tetrameter just means there are *four* of these iambs per line, while trimeter means that there are *three*. Take lines 1-2:

I taste a liquor never brewed –
From Tankards scooped in Pearl –

This is a bouncy, familiar meter that is appropriate for the speaker's light-hearted, joyful tone.

### LINES 5-6

*Inebriate of air – am I –*
*And Debauchee of Dew –*

The mystery of the liquor begins to unravel in the first part of the second stanza. It's not some magical fairy beverage that the speaker is sipping, but rather air and dew: that is, two of the most everyday natural substances one could possibly think of! The glory of this "alcohol" isn't necessarily in these substances themselves, then, but in the speaker's way of perceiving them, the speaker's relationship to them.

And that relationship is so deep that it seems to have become the speaker's whole identity. This person isn't just *inebriated*, but an "Inebriate"; not just *debauched*, but a "Debauchee." It's almost as if "Inebriate" and "Debauchee" are the speaker's titles: one might introduce the Debauchee of Dew to the Duke of York. And these titles use strong words. If you're a debauchee, you're partying as hard and as uninhibitedly as you possibly can!

The movement of sounds in these lines helps the reader to get a sense that it's pretty great to be an "Inebriate of air" or a "Debauchee of Dew." Take a look at the assonant sounds in lines 5-6. Various /e/ and /a/ sounds weave in and out of each other in euphonious harmony. The alliteration of "Debauchee of Dew" also helps to make these lines roll over the tongue as deliciously as the speaker's summer-day liquor. The experience of the natural world grants the speaker deep sensual delight.

### LINES 7-8

*Reeling – thro' endless summer days –*
*From inns of molten Blue –*

The speaker isn't just *drunk* on nature, but *staggering* drunk—"reeling," in fact. The speaker's verse here imitates that reeling motion. For one thing, the iambic meter stumbles a bit, thanks to the opening trochee (stressed-unstressed) of line 7:

Reeling – thro' endless summer days –

The caesura in the middle of line 7, falling right after "Reeling," might also give the reader a sense of the speaker's drunken tottering and stumbling. It's as if the speaker misplaces a foot while looking up at the sky.

The sky itself has become the very source of the speaker's drunkenness, appearing as a series of "inns of molten Blue." This is a powerful image. "Molten" is a dangerous word (think "molten lava"), and gives the reader a vivid image of a burning-hot summer sky. But the sky is also "inns" here, friendly, welcoming watering-holes.

The speaker's choice to call the sky a bunch of "inns" rather

than a single "inn" helps the reader to imagine the speaker's motion here. The speaker's joy-drunk reeling through nature is punctuated by visits to these "inns": stops to look up into the blazing sky and drink up.

The pleasurable sound patterns in this stanza continue to match the speaker's elation. The long /ee/ assonance begin earlier in the stanza with "Inebriate" is picked up by "Reeling," and the /oo/ assonance of "thro'" (looks like "throw," but it means and is pronounced "through") and "blue" use similarities of sound to link up the speaker's experiences, identity, and pleasures on this beautiful day. The gentle /l/ and /s/ consonance add to this effect.

By the end of this stanza, the tone of the poem has changed. The magic and mystery of the first stanza have come down to earth, where the speaker is both a roaring drunk, and drunk on completely normal parts of the natural world. But the speaker's juxtaposition of the magical and the normal creates a sense that this person is having an experience that makes these two poles one. The speaker is perceiving a glory in the natural world that elevates that world (and the speaker) to a new place.

## LINES 9-12

*When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee*
*Out of the Foxglove's door –*
*When Butterflies – renounce their "drams" –*
*I shall but drink the more!*

The speaker isn't the only one out getting drunk on the summer. The bugs are busy, too. The speaker imagines bees and butterflies as serious drinkers: the bees have overdone it so much that they're getting thrown out of the foxglove flowers by the flowers' imaginary bartenders, and the butterflies are swearing off drinking altogether (maybe after one too many nectar hangovers!). But the speaker isn't going to give up so easily. The speaker plans to drink these bugs under the table!

In personifying the bees and butterflies, the speaker becomes an equal among equals in nature. In fact, the speaker imagines beating the bees and butterflies at their own game, out-wilding the wild.

The sounds of these lines continue to keep the poem feeling light-hearted and bouncy, with the alliteration of bold /b/ and /d/ sounds echoing in "drunken Bee," "door," "Butterflies," "drams," and, of course, "drink."

There's also something pretty funny in imagining a butterfly swearing it'll never drink again. There's also something ludicrous about it: a butterfly's whole life, after all, is nectar-drinking. It's that note of ludicrousness that pushes the speaker's declarations into hyperbole. To say that you're going to keep drinking the summer day when even the bugs have quit is to say that your thirst for nature is, essentially, infinite—a match for the "endless summer days" of line 7. In spite of the silliness of these lines, the speaker is tapping into something profound here, a love of life that feels bottomless. This note of eternity leads the reader into the final stanza's images of a world beyond our own.

## LINES 13-14

*Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats –*
*And Saints – to windows run –*

By the end of the poem, the speaker has gotten so nature-drunk that it's attracting the attention of heaven itself. But this heaven seems to have more than a little in common with earth. In the previous stanza, the speaker personified bugs, raising them to the level of humans; now the speaker is doing the opposite, bringing superhuman creatures down to the level of nosy neighbors.

The speaker does this by housing "Seraphs" (members of the most exalted rank of angels) and "Saints" in what seems to be nothing more than a normal street. The seraphs are wearing, not haloes or celestial robes, but hats: hats of "snowy" white, to be sure, but hats all the same, the standard daily headgear of Emily Dickinson's 19th-century contemporaries. And the saints are apparently hanging out in their living rooms, waiting for something gossip-worthy to come by. These saints are so eager for entertainment that they "run" to their windows to look as the speaker passes.

The pronounced sibilance in these lines (and throughout the last stanza) help to underline this comical picture of a heaven that behaves a lot like a small town. All those whispery /s/ sounds sound like nothing so much as scandalized whispering:

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats –
And Saints – to windows run –

The speaker's pleasure in the summer day, then, is not just exalted and transcendent, but mischievous. For starters, there's the mischief of representing a joyful experience of nature as drunkenness, really digging into the extended metaphor. To be "drunk with pleasure" is a cliché, but to thoroughly *imagine* the staggering and the debauchery and the dizziness of being drunk is a little naughtier (especially, it's worth noting, for a woman writer in the 19th century). It's naughtier still to imagine the angels themselves as nosy neighbors.

The speaker is again bringing together very different parts of life—the elevated and the lowly, the transcendent and the everyday—to communicate an experience that unites all of these feelings. The speaker's overwhelming, gleeful, and childlike joy in nature brings together the human, the animal, and the spiritual in one exuberant experience.

## LINES 15-16

*To see the little Tippler*
*Leaning against the – Sun!*

The speaker isn't only mischievous at the expense of heaven

and the animal kingdom, as the poem also gently mocks the speaker. The final lines of the poem once again unite down-to-earth drunkenness and heavenly bliss.

What have the saints and angels been rushing to their windows to see? None other than the drunken speaker, who here is deemed "the little Tippler." The delicate assonance and consonance of "little Tippler" underline the gentle mockery of these words. A "tippler" is another word for a drunk, but compared to the speaker's earlier titles of "Inebriate" and "Debauchee," it's a pretty gentle one. If a debauchee is a decadent reveler in a torn velvet gown, a tippler is the town lush, staggering around, losing a shoe, being a mild, comical nuisance. The speaker has been wilder than wild; now the speaker is presented as small, ridiculous, and sweet in all this pleasure.

But there's something else going on here, too. This gentle "little Tippler" is doing something that most tipplers can't: leaning against the sun itself. Just as the saints and angels have come down to earth, the speaker has risen to heaven through all this drunken pleasure. The juxtaposition of the silly tippler and the mighty sun again suggests that the speaker's experience is beautifully all-consuming: the speaker's rapturous love of nature makes room for the great and the small, the sublime and the ridiculous.

Bigness never quite escapes smallness here. Take a look at that last caesura:

> Leaning against the – Sun!

This is a place where one would never pause in natural speech, and alongside all this talk of drunkenness, it suggests nothing so much as an untimely hiccup. This speaker is making a blissful fool of themselves, and doesn't care; the neighbors can gossip all they like. The speaker is going to keep indulging in that "liquor never brewed" that is the human ability to delight in the world.

## SYMBOLS

### ALCOHOL AND DRUNKENNESS

Drunkenness is the big governing symbol of "I taste a liquor never brewed"—the backbone of the poem's central extended metaphor. The speaker is drunk on the beautiful summertime world, and only plans to get drunker.

So the reader has to ask: what does drunkenness *mean*? When a person gets drunk, they seem to lose their inhibitions, to be freer and wilder. They become emotionally looser, feeling their feelings more strongly. The speaker isn't *literally* drunk in the poem, but rather uses language related to alcohol and drunkenness to represent the boundless joy, and freedom the speaker experiences when partaking in the delights of the natural world.

Here, then, the speaker's drunkenness is a wholesome one. It's nature that has made the speaker feel wild and exuberant and emotive. Nature, this symbolism suggests, is potent, freeing, and delightful as any alcohol. And luckily for the speaker, those "endless summer days" don't tend to result in a hangover (but maybe a sunburn!).

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "liquor"
- **Line 2:** "Tankards"
- **Line 3:** "Frankfort Berries"
- **Line 4:** "Alcohol"
- **Line 5:** "Inebriate"
- **Line 6:** "Debauchee"
- **Line 7:** "Reeling"
- **Line 8:** "inns"
- **Line 9:** "Landlords," "drunken"
- **Line 11:** "drams"
- **Line 12:** "drink"
- **Line 15:** "Tippler"

### FLOWERS

Flowers spring up everywhere in poetry, and the poets of the English and American Romantic movements (of whom Dickinson is one) especially loved their flowers. (Take a look at William Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" for just one famous example.) Associated with spring and summer, flowers often represent hope, youth, beauty, and rebirth.

The symbolic resonance of the foxgloves here, in addition to giving readers a picture of the kind of cottage-garden where one might find them, thus contribute to the poem's feeling of fresh, lively joy—a joy that endlessly renews. The speaker can get just as drunk on the enlivening beauty of the foxgloves as the bees can get drunk on their nectar.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 10:** "Foxglove's"

### THE SUN AND THE SKY

The vastness, beauty, and power of the sky are a big part of the speaker's experience of nature in this poem. The sky is a common symbol of freedom, expansiveness, imagination, and joy, and it serves all these roles here. This sky is so blue that it's "molten"—melting-hot—but it's also an "inn," a place to get drunk. The speaker consumes a potent feeling of liberation and joy from a sky that is both a little bit dangerous,

and a little bit domesticated.

Similarly, when the speaker leans against the sun in the poem's last line, there's a feeling of deep engagement with the powerful life-giving energy that the sun traditionally represents. To lean against the sun the way one would lean against a wall is a low-key, everyday gesture; the juxtaposition of tipsy staggering with the sun itself suggests that the speaker has absorbed some sun-power—some of that life-giving energy—through this nature-drunkenness.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 5:** "air"
- **Line 8:** "inns of molten Blue"
- **Line 16:** "Sun"

## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

There's a great deal of alliteration in "I taste a liquor never brewed," and it helps to develop the sense that the speaker is relishing her day.

Alliteration can serve a lot of different purposes in a poem, but there's one thing it almost always does: it just makes things sound better. Take the pleasant alliteration in a line like "Debauchee of Dew." (The alliteration there also helps to create the sense the the "Debauchee of Dew" might almost be a noble title, like the Duchess of Devonshire.)

Similarities between sounds might also link up with the speaker's feeling of being in joyful harmony with nature. After all, the speaker summer-drunk enough to actually lean on the sun—an image of a relationship with nature so close that it makes the greatest powers of the heavens approachable. Alliteration here helps to create feelings of connection and ease. To "taste" from "Tankards" similarly creates a link between what the speaker's actions and the physical world, making her lively motions feel connected to the material things around her.

All the assonance on /s/ sounds in the last stanza has its own name: sibilance. That sibilance might mimic the gossipy whispers of the angels and saints who are rushing to their windows to watch the speaker's drunken staggering. Check out the "Poetic Devices" entry on "sibilance" for more on how /s/ sounds work here.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "taste"
- **Line 2:** "Tankards"
- **Line 6:** "Debauchee," "Dew"
- **Line 9:** "drunken," "Bee"
- **Line 10:** "door"
- **Line 11:** "Butterflies," "drams"
- **Line 12:** "but," "drink"
- **Line 13:** "Seraphs," "swing," "snowy"
- **Line 14:** "Saints"
- **Line 15:** "see"
- **Line 16:** "Sun"

### ASSONANCE

Like alliteration, assonance turns up in many (maybe most) poems, and it almost always serves the broad purpose of making things euphonious—that is, easy on the ear. In this poem, that euphony helps to strengthen the reader's sense of the speaker's rapturous delight in the summer day. It's a pleasure to enjoy a day so much you feel drunk, and it's a pleasure to hear the interplay of /ih/ sounds in "little Tippler," or the luxurious /oo/ sounds of "brewed" and "scooped." Assonance helps to bring the reader into the speaker's pleasure.

Looking at specific moments of assonance here, the reader can see how vowel sounds help to create the speaker's world. Take a look back at the /oo/ sounds of those first two lines again:

> I taste a liquor never brewed –
> From Tankards scooped in Pearl –

The long cool vowels of "brewed" and "scooped" suggest lips on the edge of a cool goblet, and the deliciousness of the liquor inside: haven't you gone "ooh" when you've tasted something delectable?

On a different note, assonance can also have a sense of humor:

> When Butterflies – renounce their "drams" –
> I shall but drink the more!

Here, the repeated /uh/ sound of "butterflies" and "but" makes the "but" into a comical rebuttal: the butterfly might be giving up on drinking, but the speaker is just getting started!

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "taste," "brewed"
- **Line 2:** "Tankards," "scooped"
- **Line 5:** "Inebriate"
- **Line 6:** "Debauchee," "Dew"
- **Line 7:** "Reeling," "thro"
- **Line 8:** "Blue"
- **Line 9:** "drunken"
- **Line 10:** "of," "Foxglove's"
- **Line 11:** "Butterflies"
- **Line 12:** "but"

- **Line 13:** “Seraphs,” “Hats”
- **Line 15:** “see,” “little,” “Tippler”
- **Line 16:** “Leaning”

## CONSONANCE

Like alliteration, assonance, and sibilance, consonance often just helps to make a poem sound good. Take the gentle /l/ and /s/ sounds of lines 7-8:

> Reeling – thro' endless summer days –
> From inns of molten Blue –

These are soft sounds that create a sense of the lolling luxuriousness being described.

Consonance also serves the same *thematic* purposes as its poetic-device cousins, helping to evoke the speaker's feeling of joyous drunken connection with a beautiful summer-world. The reader might notice this effect especially where consonance and assonance join forces. Take a look at what the speaker says in line 15:

> To see the little Tippler

Here, the tap of the consonance on /t/ sounds pairs with the assonance on short /ih/ sounds to give the "little Tippler" a nice feeling of internal sound-consistency. Beyond just being euphonious, this sound pattern effects how the reader imagines the "little Tippler." If the speaker instead said a "small Drunk" or a "tiny Lush," the effect wouldn't be at all the same! The delicate tap of the /t/ sounds and the lightness of the /ih/ sounds creates a feeling of fondness or sweetness. The speaker isn't taking things tremendously seriously when saying "little Tippler," and this makes the speaker's drunkenness seem innocent. Consonance here contributes to the poem's sense of mischievous joy: this kind of drunkenness isn't going to leave the speaker with regrets.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** “taste,” “liquor”
- **Line 2:** “Tankards,” “scooped,” “Pearl”
- **Line 3:** “all”
- **Line 4:** “Alcohol”
- **Line 5:** “Inebriate”
- **Line 6:** “And ,” “Debauchee,” “Dew”
- **Line 7:** “Reeling,” “endless summer,” “ days”
- **Line 8:** “From,” “molten,” “ Blue”
- **Line 9:** “Landlords,” “drunken Bee”
- **Line 10:** “door”
- **Line 11:** “Butterflies,” “drams”
- **Line 12:** “but drink”
- **Line 13:** “Till Seraphs swing,” “snowy Hats”
- **Line 14:** “Saints – to”
- **Line 15:** “To see,” “little Tippler”
- **Line 16:** “Leaning against,” “Sun”

## CAESURA

Emily Dickinson's poems are often laden with caesuras, and "I taste a liquor never brewed" is no exception. Dickinson tends to mark breaks in her lines with dashes, giving her verse a breathy, halting feeling. In the drunken context of this particular poem, the reader might imagine the caesuras doing something a little different: they make the poem stagger, or hiccup.

For a good example, take a look at the impressively weird caesura in the last line:

> To see the little Tippler
> Leaning against the – Sun!

Earlier in the poem, caesuras break up the lines in a lurching way, but they do still tend to fall in places where a person reading the poem out loud might naturally take a breath or leave a little space. Here, though, there's no such excuse. This last caesura is jolting and odd; there's just about no way a reader would leave a gap between "the" and "Sun" in any normal circumstances.

But then, the speaker has come to an odd place. Having spent most of the poem on the move, dashing between "inns of molten Blue" to drink up the summer day, the speaker has finally been forced to stagger to a stop and take a little breather. As all the angels and saints peer down from heaven at this ridiculous sight, the reader can see this "little Tippler," too, taking a deep and hiccupy breath as the speaker leans against the (hic!) Sun.

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 5:** “air – am”
- **Line 7:** “Reeling – thro'”
- **Line 11:** “Butterflies – renounce”
- **Line 14:** “Saints – to”
- **Line 16:** “the – Sun”

## PERSONIFICATION

Not only does the personification in the third stanza make bees and butterflies into people, it makes the speaker more like a bee or a butterfly.

There's something comical about the way that the speaker personifies the third stanza's bugs into fellow-drinkers. The bees and butterflies are, of course, just doing what pollinators do, going about their business, drinking from flowers. But the speaker imagines them not only as drunks, but serious drunks:

the bee is so inebriated it's getting thrown out of a foxglove, and the butterfly, after one too many rough mornings, is swearing off nectar for real this time.

Imagining that the bees and butterflies will get tired of their summer-drinking soon, the speaker becomes more of a complete animal than the animals! She also draws a vivid connection between the nectar that these insect friends are drinking and the sunlight and fresh air that the speaker is feeding on; the reader can feel the shared goldenness of honey and summer days through the comparison.

In raising the bugs to the level of humans, the speaker also prepares the way for the last images of the poem, when the angels and saints will *fall* to the level of humans—and gossipy humans, at that.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 9-11:** "When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee / Out of the Foxglove's door – / When Butterflies – renounce their "drams" –"

## METAPHOR

The whole poem can be thought of as an extended metaphor in which the delights of nature are compared to liquor. A metaphor that supports this broader reading appears right in the first line:

> I taste a liquor never brewed –

This line is seems paradoxical—how can liquor, a drink that by its nature is brewed, "never" be brewed? The answer is that the speaker isn't being literal. Instead, liquor and drunkenness are the poem's big image for what it's like to feel completely, joyfully absorbed in natural beauty. (For even more on this, take a look at the "Symbols" section.)

It's important to this poem's use of alcohol as a metaphor that this is a really special kind of alcohol—a liquor "never brewed," a fairy-tale substance that outclasses all real wine and is served in pearly tankards. If it's fun being drunk on regular alcohol, it's transcendent to be drunk on the liquor of a summer day.

The speaker's drunkenness is so complete that it becomes an identity, introducing more metaphors into the poem: the speaker isn't just *drunk*, but *a* drunk: an "Inebriate," a "Debauchee," a "Tippler." The speaker's descriptions of landscape become metaphorical as well. The sky is compared a series of "inns" where the speaker might stop in for a pint, while its color in the speaker's rapturous state seems "molten Blue"—so hot that it's melting. The personification of the bees and butterflies in the poem's third stanza is also a kind of metaphor, comparing these little creatures to drunkards who've gotten kicked out of bars and swear that they'll never partake of the stuff again.

Sometimes drunken people are described as "soused," which means "soaked through"; the speaker here is completely soaked in summer-drunkenness, and the poem's constant immersion in the alcohol metaphor makes that clear. The poem's long elaboration of this metaphor also *does* what it *describes* for the reader. By immersing readers in a stream of imagery that unites drunkenness and the experience of natural beauty, the poem might make readers feel a little beauty-drunk themselves.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-6
- Line 8
- Lines 9-11
- Line 12
- Lines 15-16

## ENJAMBMENT

The energetic momentum of enjambment helps to evoke the speaker's movement through the glorious summer landscape. Enjambment keeps the poem going, rushing the reader from one line into the next. The reader knows that the speaker is moving like a drunk—"reeling," through "endless summer days" that have their own ceaseless momentum. The saints running to their windows and the bees being thrown out of flowers also contribute to this sense of swift, sometimes unpredictable motion. The poem's enjambments mirror this kind of movement—especially because the rhythm of the speaker's sentences sometimes stagger as they hit a line break.

Consider what happens to the poem's rhythm in the enjambed lines,

> When "Landlords" turn the drunken bee
> Out of the Foxglove's door –

That drunken bee stumbles over the doorstep of the line as it gets kicked out of the bar, and so it only makes sense that, just past the enjambment, it lands with a thud on the word "out." Something similar happens in the poem's last lines:

> To see the little Tippler
> Leaning against the – Sun!

Again, as the "little Tippler's" sentence crosses the line break, the meter changes, and the speaker is thrown heavily against the word "leaning." Enjambment works with meter here to evoke the giddy stagger of drunkenness.

Some of the poem's lines may be read as either enjambed *or* end-stopped, given Dickinson's often unique and innovative use of grammar and dashes. Line 1, for example, contains a pause in the form of a final dash, yet the syntax continues into the following line—suggesting an enjambment. The same can be

said for lines 7-8. These moments simply add to the tipsy feeling of the poem, as though the speaker is wobbling for a moment smack dab in the middle of a thought before barreling onward.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 3-4:** "Frankfort Berries / Yield such"
- **Lines 9-10:** "turn the drunken Bee / Out"
- **Lines 15-16:** "the little Tippler / Leaning"

## SIBILANCE

There's a lot of sibilance in this poem, but most of it is concentrated in the last stanza:

> Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats –
> And Saints – to windows run –
> To see the little Tippler
> Leaning against the – Sun!

This sudden rush of /s/ sounds in the last lines of the poem makes a lot of thematic sense. The speaker has been roaring drunk on life all through the first three stanzas—and when a person roars, they don't whisper. As such, there's not all that much sibilance up there except for those "endless summer days," whose /s/ sounds slide into each other in an appropriately endless-feeling way.

But at the end of the poem, the speaker is coming to a staggering, joyful rest, and all the angels and saints in heaven are rushing to look at what's going on There's a gossipy flavor to this passage that the hushed sounds of sibilance supports. Notice how "gossipy" even has sibilance within itself? It's the sound of neighbors whispering: "Did you *see* that drunk girl yesterday?" Sibilance here helps to bring heaven down to earth a little: the saints and angels are just next-door neighbors, bustling and whispering.

**Where Sibilance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 7:** "endless summer," " days"
- **Line 13:** "Seraphs swing," "snowy Hats"
- **Line 14:** "Saints"
- **Line 15:** "see"
- **Line 16:** "against," "Sun"

## ALLUSION

The speaker makes an allusion in line 3 in order to relate to readers just how magnificent this mysterious "liquor" is. The mention of "Frankfort" refers to a city in Germany located on the Main River, which connects to the Rhine River—the region around which is famous for its wine. "Berries," meanwhile, is a reference to grapes. As such, the speaker is simply saying that the metaphorical liquor she gets from frolicking in nature could beat out even the best wine in the world! Of course, the speaker hasn't yet revealed what, exactly, the liquor she's drinking is at this point in the poem (that doesn't come until the next stanza), but this allusion clues readers into the fact that the speaker isn't drinking literal alcohol, but rather something far more delicious.

Another arguable allusion pops up in the third stanza when the speaker references bees getting drunk (and, like drunkards, getting kicked out by the imagined barkeeps of the flowers they frequent). Bees in fact can and do sometimes get drunk when sipping fermented nectar.

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 3-4:** "Not all the Frankfort Berries / Yield such an Alcohol!"
- **Lines 9-10:** "When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee / Out of the Foxglove's door –"

## VOCABULARY

**Liquor** (Line 1) - An alcoholic drink.

**Tankards** (Line 2) - A large drinking cup.

**Pearl** (Line 2) - A valuable organic material made by oyster secretions. That the speaker's tankards, or drinking cups/mugs, are "scooped in Pearl" means that they're coated with this valuable substance.

**Frankfort Berries** (Line 3) - Wine grapes grown in the Rhine region.

**Inebriate** (Line 5) - A drunken person. (To be "inebriated" is to be drunk.)

**Debauchee** (Line 6) - A wild partier; a person who indulges (and maybe overindulges) in sensual pleasures. It's a word English borrowed from French, so it's pronounced "day-baw-SHAY."

**Reeling** (Line 7) - Staggering drunkenly.

**Thro'** (Line 7) - Through.

**Inns** (Line 8) - An "inn" in this context is a pub or bar.

**Molten** (Line 8) - Heated to a melting point.

**Landlords** (Line 9) - In this context, bartenders—the people who run inns.

**Foxglove** (Line 10) - A kind of flower, shaped as if to fit a fox's paw.

**Drams** (Line 11) - A small drink of hard liquor (like a shot).

**Seraphs** (Line 13) - Angels—specifically, members of the highest and most exalted rank of angels.

**Tippler** (Line 15) - A drunk person, a drinker.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

Like much of Dickinson's work, "I taste a liquor never brewed" features the singsongy rhythm of ballad stanzas. It's made up of four quatrains, or four-line stanzas, each of which have an ABCB rhyme scheme and feature a mix of iambic tetrameter and trimeter, a.k.a. common meter (see the "Meter" and "Rhyme Scheme" sections for more on this).

The simplicity of Dickinson's form here matches the simplicity of the speaker's delight in nature. There's something mischievous about the way that the speaker uses this nursery-rhyme shape to describe a feeling that's both innocent and naughty: the speaker is staggering drunk in the middle of the day, but only on the beauty of summer. The form the speaker chooses is well-matched to the subject and a little subversive at the same time.

### METER

In "I taste a liquor never brewed," Dickinson uses one of her favorite meters: ballad meter, a pattern that alternates between four and three iambs (poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm) per line. Take lines 1-2:

> I taste a liquor never brewed –
> From Tankards scooped in Pearl –

Ballad meter is almost identical to common meter, which Dickinson also uses all the time; the only difference is the rhyme scheme, which goes ABCB in ballad meter, ABAB in common meter. (See the "Rhyme Scheme" section for more.) It's a down-to-earth, uncomplicated meter, often found in nursery rhymes and folk songs.

Here, a few variations help the meter of the poem to match the matter of the poem. Take a look at lines 15 and 16:

> To see the little Tippler
> Leaning against the – Sun!

The meter in these lines mimics the "little Tippler": the stresses wobble around, fall off balance, and come to a rest against the word "Sun." (The hiccupy caesura in the last line helps with this effect, too—take a look at the "Poetic Devices" section for more on that.)

A similar thing happens in line 7, which, like line 16 quoted above, opens with a trochee (a foot that goes stressed-unstressed, DUM-da):

> Reeling – thro' endless summer days –

This hiccup in the meter again reflects the poem's content, as though the speaker's drunken "reeling" has affected the steady plod of the poem itself.

### RHYME SCHEME

"I taste a liquor never brewed" uses a rhyme scheme common in Dickinson's poems (and pretty common in general):

ABCB

However, the first stanza breaks slightly away from this pattern in its use of slant rhyme: "Pearl" and "Alcohol" don't exactly rhyme, but their ending sounds share a distant family resemblance. The rest of the poem's rhyming is straightforward, though, matching "Dew" and "Blue," "door" and "more," and "run" and "Sun."

This straightforward rhyme scheme is a favorite of Dickinson's, and it sometimes hides the complexity of her poetry behind a plain exterior. Here, it fits neatly with the poem's youthful giddiness: a simple rhyme scheme for the simple pleasures of a summer day.

## SPEAKER

The speaker of "I taste a liquor never brewed" is, like the speaker of many Dickinson poems, a first-person observer, immersed in the landscape being described. Though often conflated with Dickinson herself, there's no indication of the speaker's gender in the poem. What readers know is that this person is passionate and nature-loving, fully willing to embrace the beauty of the world. The lack of specific identifiers like an age or gender help the poem feel universal; anyone who's felt drunk with joy on a summer day might see themselves in these lines.

Readers may also get the feeling that the speaker feels a little bit silly even while rapturously enjoying the day. The speaker's description as "the little Tippler" gives the reader a sense that there's something touchingly childish about the speaker as they drink in the summertime (and maybe something goofy in that childishness).

## SETTING

"I taste a liquor never brewed" is set in a beautiful sunlit countryside: a landscape of butterflies and bees drinking from flowers under a huge, hot-blue sky. This isn't wild nature, but something more approachable: the speaker's reference to "foxgloves" suggests cottage gardens more than wildflowers, and the image of nature becoming something like a series of inns (that is, pubs or bars) also places the reader in a domesticated natural world. The reader can imagine the speaker moving joyfully through a rural landscape—one where the feeling of life-drunk freedom might liberate the speaker from worry about the gossipy small-town neighbors hinted at

in the fourth stanza.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was a completely original writer: she may belong to the American Romantic movement according to time period and subject matter, but she doesn't sound like anyone else. Her poetic innovations lead some critics to think of her as a proto-Modernist—that is, a precursor of psychologically subtle and experimental 20th-century writers like Virginia Woolf. Among Dickinson's contemporaries, Walt Whitman is maybe the most useful point of comparison: he, like her, was a literary experimenter and a nature-lover.

Dickinson's poetry was deeply influenced by the English Romantics, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, whose use of ballad meter and interest in nature, childhood, and the soul are all reflected in her work. She was also an enthusiastic reader of the Victorian English novelist Charlotte Bronte, Shakespeare, and contemporary American transcendentalist writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson wrote "I taste a liquor never brewed" during a tempestuous era of American politics. The poem was first published in the early days of the Civil War. Reaching out to the beauty of nature was one way that a lot of American poets of the era dealt with the fear and grief of this period; like Whitman, Dickinson found hope of renewal, transcendence, and eternity in nature.

But this poem is also responding to politics that were a little less dramatic and a little closer to home: the anti-alcohol Temperance movement. Some form of loosely organized anti-alcohol movement had been around in America for a long time, and it would stick around for long after Dickinson's death—famously leading to the Prohibition era. Temperance was having a moment of popularity in Massachusetts (where Dickinson spent her whole life) during Dickinson's lifetime. Her image of angels running to their windows to gossip about the "little Tippler" might have something to do with judgmental small-town attitudes toward drinkers.

It's also worth noting that Dickinson's poetry emerged from what, from the outside, looked like a sheltered life. She was shy and reclusive, never married, and died young; most of her poetry was only discovered and published after her death. Her quiet exterior disguised a passionate emotional and artistic life, full of intense romantic attachments and profound engagement with mystery.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Drunken Bees — Though Dickinson isn't being literal in this poem, bees can, in fact, get a little tipsy when drinking nectar that has fermented. Check out this article to learn more! (https://www.iflscience.com/plants-and-animals/drunk-bees-busted-flying-under-the-influence-around-australias-parliament-house/)
- Dickinson's Handwriting — See the original manuscript of the poem. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/9531)
- A reading of the poem — A reader with a slight Irish accent performs the poem—in a different version. Spot the differences! (https://youtu.be/Xf7BFzDiV9I)
- Dickinson's Life — Additional biographical information on Dickinson, plus links to more of her poems, from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- The Emily Dickinson Museum — Take a look at the museum housed in Dickinson's former home in Amherst, Massachusetts. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
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### LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- There's a certain Slant of light
- This is my letter to the world
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

## HOW TO CITE

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