

## “The Other Jouissance” and “Desire” in Emily Dickinson’s “I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed”: A Lacanian Approach

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### Abstract

The present article investigates Emily Dickinson’s poem “I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed” and aims to solve the confusion of scholars that struggled to specify the precise meaning of some of the terms in the text and fully appreciate the psychic dynamics of it in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The first question the article asks is how is desire represented, and the second is whether the speaker of the poem longs for an Other jouissance. In Seminar XX, Lacan defines Other jouissance as the most intense and ineffable kind and equals it to the jouissance of the mystics. Desire, in Lacanian teachings, is unattainable and an inevitable consequence of language. The famous Lacanian maxims “desire is the desire of the Other,” and the “Other is the treasure trove of signifiers” indicate that desire could be represented through signifiers. The article integrates These Lacanian notions in Paul Ricoeur’s three-staged hermeneutic Arc, which consists of 1) explanation, 2) understanding, and 3) appropriation. The poem will undergo these three stages of interpretation. By the end of the last stage, the world of the text is appropriated by the selected Lacanian notions. The results of the study are the following: 1) the poem is unique in displaying what Lacan termed ‘Other jouissance,’ 2) it demonstrates an intense desire for a supreme being—the Other, 3) desire is explicitly named in the poem: it is manifested explicitly in the words ‘liquor,’ ‘tankards,’ ‘Alcohol,’ ‘inebriate,’ ‘debauchee,’ ‘drams,’ ‘drink,’ ‘little tippler.’

### Keywords

Emily Dickinson; Other Jouissance; Desire; Lacanian Psychoanalysis; Mysticism; Signifier.

### 1. Introduction

Whether a poem has mystical attributes or not depends on the author and the style of life he or she chose. Although there is no official or hard evidence in Emily Dickinson’s life to prove that she was interested in mysticism, she is considered a female mystic by some scholars (Nafi et al. 72; Humiliata 51; Sewall 203). On the other hand, some like Wolosky and Martin see “the overarching theme of religious engagement” in her poetry (132). Hagenbüchle also believes that “Dickinson’s oeuvre displays a

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profoundly religious quality, anchored in the Western meditative and mystical tradition, although hers is a poetic mysticism” (5). Biographical literature implies she was a kind of mystic, like the fact that her hometown was a strictly religious community in New England (Sewall 23) and that she enjoyed intimate friendships with Ralph Waldo Emerson and a minister famous for his mystical preaches named Charles Wadsworth (Bloom 5; Dickinson’s Love Life). Other signals in her life, like having eccentric views on religion, spirituality, and taking to white dressing, and becoming increasingly isolated, are also suggestive of her interests (Wolosky and Martin 17; Howe 10). Despite widespread belief, her isolation was not out of inability or compulsion, but a deliberate choice (Aiken iv). Her literary isolation, too, was deliberate. She refused several offers from Higginson and others begging her to let them publish, arguing that publication destroys the purity and integrity of poetry (Wolosky and Martin 5-6). Other signs in her peculiar character include not caring for material issues and reportedly stating that “my business is the sublime” (St Armand 64; Bloom 4). These credible biographical indicators seem like “she wanted to access God directly, but couldn’t since she admits, ‘It is hard for me to give up the world’” (White 97).

Some confusion regarding the usage of the term ‘mysticism’ and what a ‘mystic’ is might arise with our discussion. Especially when some authors prefer terms like ‘Gnosticism’ or ‘Esotericism.’ However, the paper overrides this issue by taking Lacan’s definition of mystics, which he spelled out in seminar XX. In that seminar, Lacan defined mystics as “those who believe in a jouissance that is beyond” (75). In another instance, He asserts, “mysticism, throughout every tradition...is a construction, search, askesis, assumption...anything you like...plunged toward the bliss of God” (89). Hence, a mystic, according to Lacan, is one who believes in the ‘Other jouissance’ and longs towards the bliss of the Other (God as a face of the Other). In other words, a mystic believes in a kind of jouissance that does not depend on the signifier—a complete jouissance of the Other. Therefore, in this way, the paper surveys Dickinson as a female mystic.

‘I taste a liquor never brewed’ is among the few poems Dickinson published in her lifetime and is regarded as one of her most curious lyrics (Tearle). It has stirred considerable academic interest, but it has not been reviewed for its mystical theme. This study is the first one to investigate the esoteric and psychoanalytic aspects of it. The poem idealizes nature, and in this way, it could be called an inheritor of the romantic tradition; for instance, the second stanza begins with: “Inebriate of air - am I - And Debauchee of Dew.” In addition, the poem’s most prominent symbol, the ‘liquor,’ a gift of nature, carries unique attributes that have not been considered by any

other paper. Like most commentators of the poem, we believe the poem idealizes nature while criticizing the 'popular temperance movement,' however, we also argue that its socio-cultural context provides the necessary ground for important psychical dynamics. To that end, we will use a hermeneutic model.

The paper utilizes the Hermeneutic Arc, which Paul Ricoeur introduced as a three-leveled model for approaching texts to treat the poem. The Arc comprises three levels of interpretation: *Explanation, Understanding, and Appropriation*. On the first level, the interpreter asks what the text says. On the second level, the question is what it speaks concerning to. And on the third level, the interpreter appropriates the world of the text for himself/herself (Ghasemi et al; Freeman). The Arc boosts the coherence and cohesion of the discussion and the ontology of the analysis. However, since it is not a closed system, we incorporated Lacanian notions as conceptual tools into it.

## 2. Literature Review

There are several papers on Dickinson and her poems, and many confirm the grounds that our paper builds on. Here, we briefly go through some of them. Cureton, in his analysis of the poem, concludes, "the central purpose of the poem is to express the process of identification with the hummingbird...to identify with a hummingbird so completely is to assume a merger of subject and object, perceiver and perceived..." (21). This is not the only poem where Dickinson shows such an interest in dissolving the self, in another instance, she likens herself to a drop of water and says "the drop, that wrestles in the sea – forgets her own locality – As I – toward thee." These instances reiterate our argument that the speaker *ex-sists* in the poem because of its strong desire for union or identification; as you know, *ex-sistence* in Lacanian terminology refers to a sort of being outside language, in other words, when the subject's ego no longer exists (Evans 59-61). This is pertinent to our argument in that *ex-sistence* precedes Other *jouissance* (*Encore* 79). Thus, our discussion is set to find the mystical *jouissance* in the poem beside one other thing: we also need to know whether Dickinson deliberately used transgressive imagery in her poem since *jouissance* is fundamentally transgressive (*Ethics of psychoanalysis* 5).

Luckily, Koukoutsis has examined the poet's use of Alcohol imagery and reiterates our position that the poem's transgressive voice is deliberately adopted (84). We will discuss the transgression in more detail later. In addition to these, Eberwein also suggests that Dickinson "felt drunk with spiritual energy" (qtd. in Kang 208). He Finds the drunken state as an 'archetypal sage' and concludes that Dickinson's drunkard is "a perfect sage who achieves inner repose, capable of an immensely happy...an emblem of achieving divine freedom" (208). These works provide the grounds we

need and see the text as esoteric and the poet as a mystic; however, none have utilized Lacanian tools as such. Our work is a continuation of theirs with a psychoanalytic touch.

Amna Saeed has utilized the same approach as ours in analyzing *Rumi's* and *Hafiz's* poems. She integrated some Lacanian notions into Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Arc since, she argues, “elements of subjectivity cannot be left out of any form of hermeneutic” (65-80). The article is related to ours in adopting the same approach to examine mystical texts. (69). As Saeed suggests, the three-staged hermeneutic Arc provides an umbrella to contain more specific conceptual tools. However, our choice of conceptual tools is not exactly easy, given Lacan's infamous style.

Lacan raised many voices by his controversial style and ideas. Among the plethora of topics, he discussed sparingly over many long seminars and essays are his arguments and occasional comments on mysticism. A serious early stance he takes towards the topic is his account of *courtly love* in the Middle Ages in the seminar on *ethics* (1958-59). In that seminar, he defines the lady in the cliché scenario of courtly love as the ‘Thing’ (71). However, in seminar XX dubbed *Encore* (1972-73), after recounting his interpretation of saint Theresa's statue in Rome, he names the saint's apparent orgasm as ‘Other jouissance,’ the ineffable and the most intense kind of jouissance (78). That seminar marks Lacan's most in-depth theorization about mysticism. However, Lacan's vast and varied theories could be confusing. Nevertheless, Ehsan Azari has done an excellent job in clarifying his relation with literary criticism. After an extensive introduction of Lacanian concepts, Azari takes the concepts of desire, Other jouissance, love, and sublimation and traces them in Donne's poems. He attempts to show “the vicissitudes of Mystical jouissance and desire” in Donne's poetry (135).

Drawing on the notion of mystical experience as a kind of union and closeness with the Supreme Being, he claims, “This is the meaning of the mystic ecstasy through which the ego dissolves in the Other, and through a psychosomatic delirium, the subject touches the Thing in the real.” (136) later he adds “finally, in this experience, the subject falls into the real and its jouissance, knowledge of which remains unknown to the experiencing mystic” (137). He connects this experience with the poems, “mystic literary discourse acts out the fantasy of such an experience” (137). Azari postulates that the desire in the poem is visible and directed at the Other, and dissolution in it (137). Azari's work helped us by collecting Lacanian notions in a single book. He demonstrated that ‘Other jouissance’ and ‘desire’ are especially apt for analyzing mystical poems. In other words, the work provides a precedent for our discussion to implement the same set of concepts in analyzing Dickinson's poem.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1. Jouissance

Jouissance is gradually developed like other Lacanian concepts: it first appeared in the first seminars of Lacan in relation to master-slave dialectic. In the way that the slave works to provide for the master's jouissance. However, as Evans notes, it does not play a structural and important role there (93). Nevertheless, what follows here is a coherent end-product of the notion, widely used in professional psychoanalytic circles. Nasio, a leading psychoanalyst in Paris, designates three types of jouissance that will be noted here with emphasis on the mystical one since the poem we are going to analyze has a mystical quality. The three types of jouissance are 1) Phallic jouissance, 2) Surplus-of-Jouissance, 3) Other jouissance (93).

##### 3.1.1. Phallic Jouissance

Phallic jouissance is the discharge of energy (Nasio 4). It is the jouissance that evacuates through the symbolic. Phallic jouissance is determined by the signifier—phallus. Thus: the jouissance that is determined by language is called phallic. It is the partial jouissance allowed for the barred subject of language—the split subject.

##### 3.1.2. Surplus-of-jouissance

Surplus-of-jouissance or *plus-de-jouir* is some jouissance that does not evacuate and is entrapped in the parts of the body called erotogenic zones (Nasio 4-5). It is the jouissance that is repressed by S1, the phallus. Thus, this surplus-of-jouissance is what creates the unconscious (5). It is marked by increasing tension that is detrimental and should be discharged (become phallic). The other type of jouissance not determined by the signifier is the mystical or Other jouissance.

##### 3.1.3. Other or Mystical Jouissance

Other jouissance, as Fink points out, is “the jouissance of love and is asexual” (120). Lacan equates it with feminine jouissance (*Encore* 79). It is ineffable and beyond language. It rarely happens, very rarely; that is why Nasio calls it a “hypothetical state” (5). Unlike phallic jouissance, it is not determined by the signifier (107). Fink calls it “religious ecstasy or rupture” (120). This jouissance is associated with sublimation and real love (“Courtly love or woman as Thing” 103). It is reminiscent of the pre-Oedipal stage where the subject has unmediated access to the mOther's jouissance and has not been separated from it (Farzi 51). In other words, it is a digression into the imaginary stage of union with mOther (Farzi; Azari 136).

### 3.2. Desire

“Man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (*Freud’s papers* 235). This famous maxim has several interpretations. According to Hewitson and Fink, the maxim means that desire is essentially a desire for recognition and love from the Other, and that desire is for the thing that we suppose the Other desires (172). Thus, desire belongs to the Other, and the metonymic procedure perpetuates it in the symbolic. That is why it comes from the ascend of the subject to the symbolic. In other words, when pure jouissance is castrated and a signifier is exchanged for it, what is left with the subject is desire (Kadivar 92). Despite jouissance, desire can be articulated. Not all of it, however, a considerable portion is articulable: “That the subject should come to recognize and to *name* his desire; that is the efficacious action of analysis.” (*Freud’s papers* 228–9) In another instance in *Ecrits*, Lacan comments on a dream Freud narrates in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he illustrates the possibility of articulating desire in practice. He explicitly names the desire of that dream (*Ecrits a selection* 320). Following Lacan, we attempt to find the signifier of desire in Dickinson’s poem. However, to find desire, we must consider its characteristic features. We will conduct that in the discussion section.

### 3.3. Object a and the Phallus

Object a is the object-cause of desire and is the remainder of the primordial union with mOther after separation (Fink 21). It is inaccessible and un-symbolizable; it is in the real register (Azari 123). However, by virtue of love, mystics sublimate this object and come close to it in their ecstatic experience (136). Object a is believed to be the Lacanian equivalent of Freud’s Thing (das ding) (Evans 207-8). The vital point to remember is that the phallus is the signifier of desire, and as such, it does not have a signified. It is the privileged signifier that signifies the process of signification itself. (143)

## 4. Discussion

The poem we chose for analysis is number 214, ‘I taste a liquor never brewed,’ in Dickinson’s poems collected by Johnson, 1955. The text will be presented and undergo the Hermeneutic Arc stages: 1) explanation, 2) understanding, and 3) appropriation. At the final step of interpretation, the world of the text will be appropriated with the help of our conceptual tools, as discussed earlier.

### 4.1. Explanation

At this juncture, we will explain the poem and its difficult words. The explanation of the verses is based on previous papers and reviews of the poem.

I taste a liquor never brewed –

From Tankards scooped in Pearl –

Not all the Frankfort Berries

Yield such an Alcohol!

In this poem, the word 'drunkenness' is used in relation to nature. And the speaker clarifies from the beginning that the drunken state is not an ordinary one (never brewed). The second line begins using nature as a poetic image: the tankards, a kind of container, is scooped in pearl, nature's precious gift. The third and the fourth line try to measure the never-brewed-liquor's extraordinariness by comparing it to a kind of wine that in that time was believed to be the best; German winemakers of Frankfurt produced a white wine that was famous in E.D.'s time (Tearle). However, the last line emphasizes that not all the wine produced in the city combined can come close to the one the poem defines.

Inebriate of air – am I –

And Debauchee of Dew –

Reeling – thro' endless summer days –

From inns of molten Blue –

The speaker states that he or she is intoxicated with the air and dew and will continue to be so under the blue sky. The stanza implicates a kind of effacement, a consciousness that the world saturates the speaker. Debauchee's capitalization is worth considering; it is not just any debauchery; it is 'debauchee of dew.' We will take this up again later in the discussion.

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 asserts that even when the bees are thrown away from their tavern and the foxglove and butterflies renounce their hard liquor—drams, she or he will still be drinking. In this stanza, in addition to reminding us that bees get drunk on the nectar they collect, we sense temporality, more accurately im-temporality; the speaker is making clear that her joyful state is indefinite. In this stanza, Dickinson's term—'landlord'—as a metaphor for nature is noteworthy in that it connotes authority and power. By the metaphor, the poet emphasizes its 'Otherness.' We will discuss the Other of the poem in more detail later.

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats –

And Saints – to windows run –

To see the little Tippler

Leaning against the – Sun!

The stanza states that when seraphs—angels—make their clouds or snowy hats move, and saints run to the windows to observe, they will find the speaker, the little tippler, ‘leaning against the sun’ or resting in a joyful state. In this stanza, the poet uses spiritual, religious, or sublime images to convey its extraordinary state. The sublimation voice begins with angels and saints, then reaches its peak with the last line, ‘Leaning against the sun,’ as if she touches the sun itself. This stanza has some crucial implications; referring to seraphs and saints implicates that “God approves of her drunkenness” (Cuellar 137).

#### **4.2. Understanding**

Any good understanding of a poem should account for its historical context. In other words, the poem is understood better against its history. The last word of the first stanza, Alcohol, is capitalized, which could be the poet’s way of emphasizing the poem’s anti-temperance voice. But this is not the only implication of the anti-temperance theme of the poem. Many reviews that we mentioned earlier acknowledge its purpose as a critique or rebellion against the movement. For example, Wolosky asserts, “the poem was written and published to criticize the state policy and cultural movement” (95). The campaign’s strength did not last long but attracted much critical attention nonetheless, especially at the time of the poem in 1861. It was meant to prohibit the sale and consumption of Alcohol and promote piety and abstinence. The tension popular temperance movement gained in the 1860s allows the text to acquire transgression. This provides a supporting argument for our hypothesis, which we will discuss later in more detail.

The poem clarifies from the start that the drunkenness is out of the ordinary. The extensive use of natural images indicates an immersive experience in nature. As if the speaker walks in nature and becomes so engrossed in it, she transcends the world and starts experiencing visions. The encapsulating power of nature is exemplified in the lines ‘inebriate of air’ and ‘debauchee of dew.’ Since the air and dew represent sky and earth, it adds to the text’s sublimatory voice. The identity and the gender of the speaker (persona) eludes the reader. We could even assume the persona is a nonhuman entity. As Dickinson herself states, the speaker of her poems is usually not herself: “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person” (*Dickinson Letters* 268). Cuellar, Eby, and Benfey suggest that the poem’s speaker is not even a human being but a bee, a hummingbird, or a similar creature (36; 517; 54). This view is supported by the third stanza that indicates bees and butterflies to be the speaker’s company or competitors. Cuellar also emphasizes, “a



hypothetical human speaker, can only account for the meaning of a very few lines of the poem" (36). We will talk about the implications of this in the next section.

### 4.3. Appropriation

The vagueness and confusion around the speaker are signs of ex-istence Lacan deems necessary for a mystical jouissance (*Encore* 72-79); in other words, the subject is so immersed and intoxicated by nature that he or she no longer exists but ex-ists. Thus, the only present being throughout the poem is nature itself. In other words, the Other's sublimation effaces the being of the speaker and his existence in language. The reward for that is a distinct kind of jouissance, which is beyond the ordinary to the extent that even Germany's best winemakers could not produce it. The timelessness indicated in the second and the third stanza add to the mystery of the state. It is a sublime state of ecstasy that does not know any time or distinct subject. The angels and saints are observers of such a state, and it goes so high that it touches the sun itself.

Speaking of mystical experience, some might wonder if Dickinson ever actually experienced one. But this question is irrelevant. The poet does not need to have experienced a mystical experience, but through a supposed persona could aspire such an experience; in Azari's words, "act out the fantasy of it" (137). The ambiguity surrounding the speaker of the poem is another indicator of a mystical fantasy because a mystic yearns for the dissolution of the self in the sublimated object, which is nature in Dickinson's case (Nilchian 68). Hagenbüchle reiterates this when he asserts that Dickinson uses her lyrics as a solution for lack/want in total annihilation in the Other (3-5). Recall that her peculiar character indicates that she had a mystical inclination. Thus, she might have expressed it through poetry. The transgression displayed in the poem is another supporting argument for the depth of the experience since jouissance is fundamentally transgressive (*Ethics of psychoanalysis* 15). In Žižek's words, the problem with today's superego injunctions is that it opens no world proper ("Religion, knowledge and jouissance"). However, in this poem, the peculiar context allows transgression and provides the opportunity for a commensurate jouissance, one that goes beyond the imaginary injunctions.

Now that we have grasped the jouissance in the poem, we have outlined the real of it, since jouissance is in the real (Bruanstein 50). But the real conditions the symbolic (Tourage 12). Thus, now we trace the conditioning of it in terms of the signifier; in other words, we look for desire. Human desire is somewhat paradoxical. Lacan implicates that by using lack and desire interchangeably (*Ethics of psychoanalysis* 501). It is as if the very prohibition of something creates an incentive to transgress it. In *Écrits*, He lists the desire's characteristics as "paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric,

and even scandalous” (*Ecrits a selection* 219). In the same book, Lacan asserts, “repression/suppression is inherent in desire” (222). Another peculiar characteristic of desire is that it does not have a signified; it does not have an object. However, it does have an object-cause. In this poem, the word liquor does not have an object. Can you name a liquor that is never brewed? However, it does have an object-cause—nature. Nature in this poem is the object-cause of desire. Thus, this poem’s mysterious liquor is the signifier of desire, desire in its pure desirousness, without an object. But this is not the only reason.

In *Ecrits*, Lacan defines desire as the metonymy of want-to-be or lack-of-being (296). The metonymic procedure is shown in the poem, particularly in the second, third, and fourth stanzas. In the second stanza, we see an explicit aspiration for another being: Inebriate of air—*am I—And Debauchee of Dew*. The third stanza demonstrates the speaker’s aspiration for a transformed being by leveling her with bees and butterflies. The fourth stanza implicates the same longing, this time with the company of angels and saints.

Lacan’s famous maxim “Man’s desire is the desire of the Other” is also applicable here. Evans’ interpretation of this maxim is literal: that man desires the Other (39). The speaker of the poem desires the Other—nature. Another interpretation of the maxim is also relevant: that man’s desire is to be recognized by the Other (38). The recognition of desire by the Other is explicitly expressed in the poem; the last stanza states that she will continue to drink until saints run “To see the little Tippler Leaning against the – Sun!”. The desire for recognition by the Other is explicit in the word ‘see.’

Our reading of the poem also explains the frustration that scholars show in deriving meanings from the terms we identified as the signifier of desire. For instance, in the other version of the poem, which differs from this one in the last line: ‘to see the little tippler—leaning against the sun,’ reads ‘to see the little tippler—from *manzanilla* come!’ the word ‘manzanilla’ has been the subject of debate. According to the Oxford dictionary, the word denotes a kind of ‘Sherry with bitter flavor’ (“Manzanilla”), and according to some scholars, it either refers to an important commercial city on the southern coast of Cuba, which Monteiro believes “Dickinson associated with the export of rum,” or a Spanish city famous for its wine. Monteiro shows the difficulty in finding a signified for this signifier by the following line: “for my money, it is the last of these possibilities that come closest to the mark” (Monteiro 262). This kind of language in an academic paper exemplifies scholars’ frustration at exacting an object for the signifier. However, with our Lacanian reading and his theory indicating the signifier of desire does not have a signified but signifies desire in its pure desirousness, we resolve the confusion regarding the meaning (signified) of the terms. As Smith beautifully puts it,

one suspects that she had something like this in mind when writing the poem, “desire alone is infinitely more delightful than the consumption that can accommodate it.” (29)

### 5. Conclusion

The popular temperance movement provides the necessary ground for Dickinson to take her critique to more profound levels while effectively contesting it. In the poem, desire finds signifiers. This is apparent in the metonymic process of desire: the process manifests desire in signifiers such as ‘liquor,’ tankards,’ alcohol,’ inebriate,’ debauchee,’ drams,’ drink,’ ‘little tippler.’ The manifestation of such a strong desire that is so conspicuous in the poem through several signifiers is another supporting evidence of Dickinson’s quest for a jouissance beyond the ordinary—the Other jouissance. It shows the extent to which Dickinson yearned for a complete jouissance of the Other. The Other of the poem is a sublime provider of endless joy, which is manifested here as nature. This kind of view of nature was common among the romantics. Nature or the Other engrosses the subject and effaces its being and existence in language so that the only being is the being of the Other. The poem demonstrates the desire for the Other, for obtaining Other’s jouissance, which is a mystical one. It is the most potent, inexpressible, uncommon kind of jouissance. With her poetic skills, Dickinson displays the Other jouissance and demonstrates the desire to achieve oneness with the Supreme Being. Thus, from a Lacanian point of view, the poem is mystical.

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