What mystery pervades a well!

POEM TEXT

1 What mystery pervades a well!
2 The water lives so far -
3 A neighbor from another world
4 Residing in a jar

5 Whose limit none have ever seen,
6 But just his lid of glass -
7 Like looking every time you please
8 In an abyss's face!

9 The grass does not appear afraid,
10 I often wonder he
11 Can stand so close and look so bold
12 At what is awe to me.

13 Related somehow they may be,
14 The sedge stands next the sea -
15 Where he is floorless
16 And does no timidity betray

17 But nature is a stranger yet;
18 The ones that cite her most
19 Have never passed her haunted house,
20 Nor simplified her ghost.

21 To pity those that know her not
22 Is helped by the regret
23 That those who know her, know her less
24 The nearer her they get.

SUMMARY

A water well is so full of mystery! Its water lies so far underground that it's like a neighbor from some other planet, living in a container no one's ever seen the bottom of—only the glassy surface. Peering down into it is like staring into the abyss whenever you want!

The grass growing around the well doesn't seem scared by it. I often marvel that it can stand so fearlessly beside something that fills me with wonder and dread.

In what might be a similar situation, the sedge plant grows beside the ocean—which is bottomless—and doesn't show any fear.

But to human beings, Mother Nature is still alien. The people who claim to know her best have never seen how frightening her world really is, and they've never gotten to the bottom of her ghostly mysteries.

The pity one might feel for people unfamiliar with nature is eased by a sad awareness: people who *are* familiar with her understand her less the better they get to know her.

THEMES

THE MYSTERY OF NATURE

The speaker of "What mystery pervades a well!" begins by contemplating well water and ends by contemplating the mystery of nature itself. The dizzying depth of well shafts reminds the speaker of the bottomlessness of the sea and the unfathomed depths of nature as a whole. In the end, the poem implies that nature is actually *unfathomable*—that "her" mysteries are as bottomless as the deepest wells or oceans. In other words, humanity can never fully understand the natural world, and only the arrogant think otherwise.

The poem associates deep wells with profound, awe-inspiring mystery and hints that such mystery is part of normal life. The speaker compares the water in wells to "A neighbor from another world," as if, by digging into the earth, humans tap into something otherworldly. The speaker also notes that humans cannot see the "limit," or bottom, of the underground water they draw from. Staring down at this water is like "looking [...] in an abyss's face"—staring into the abyss; that is, it's frightening and fascinating all at once. Moreover, people can have this experience "every time [they] please," since wells are common (and were even more so in Dickinson's time and region). Read figuratively, this claim suggests that a kind of dizzying mystery always lurks beneath everyday life: people can confront it whenever they dare to admit it's there.

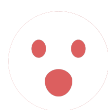
The speaker then associates deep wells with deep "sea[s],” suggesting that the mystery "pervad[ing] a well" also pervades nature, or the world in general. The speaker compares the "grass" beside a well to the "sedge" (grass-like vegetation) beside the sea, marveling that both can stand fearlessly at the edge of something so deep and dangerous. Seas are far broader and deeper than wells, of course, so this comparison implies that the local "mystery" of a well is also a *global* mystery. The depths lurking beneath ordinary backyards also lurk beneath the earth as a whole. And these depths are "floorless," or bottomless. Humans cannot reach the deepest depths of the

oceans (at least, no human had ever done so when Dickinson was alive). By extension, nature always contains secrets that remain hidden from us.

Rather than trying to get to the bottom of this mystery, the speaker suggests that it is bottomless. Paradoxically, in fact, the more humans know about nature, the more unknowable it becomes. The speaker observes that "nature is a stranger yet": something fundamentally alien to human beings, even after all these centuries. People "know her less / The nearer her they get." In other words, learning about nature just reveals how much people still *don't* know. Deep familiarity with nature only opens up further mystery—and always will. The world always offers further depths to explore.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24



FEAR, FASCINATION, AND CURIOSITY

"What mystery pervades a well!" suggests that sometimes the most frightening things are also the most fascinating. The speaker feels "awe"—both wonder and dread—when peering down a seemingly endless well and contemplating the unknowability of the natural world. Such encounters, the poem suggests, are equal parts "haunt[ing]" and tempting. For those who want to understand nature better (such as poets), they may be all but irresistible. Meanwhile, people who *pretend* to know nature well don't understand how "haunted" it is; they haven't been daring or curious enough to encounter, much less solve, its mysteries.

The speaker's language and tone hint that they are strangely drawn to what terrifies them. Their description of wells is breathless, even hyperbolic: wells strike them as "myster[ious]," otherworldly, and "limit[less]." Their multiple exclamation points suggest a mix of excitement and agitation. The speaker also marvels at the grass that grows beside wells, and the sedge that grows beside oceans, without feeling "afraid." They admit that they're not nearly so "bold": they feel a terrified "awe" at the edge of a deep well shaft. The speaker says that this experience is like "looking" into an abyss whenever "you please." Their phrasing implies that they've often indulged in this convenience—and that, on some level, staring into the abyss *pleases* them!

The poem suggests that this tension between fascination and fear is an inherent part of life, at least for the intellectually curious. "Nature," the speaker says, "is a stranger yet"—meaning a stranger to humanity, but also, presumably, to the speaker, who has tried to get to know her. The speaker distinguishes between people like themselves, who know how daunting nature really is, and people who confidently but falsely claim to understand her ('The ones that cite her most"). Those less curious, more sheltered people have never encountered nature's "haunted house"—her true mysteries. If they don't fear nature, it's because they're not really drawn to her and have never ventured outside their comfort zones to explore her. Nor have they ever "simplified her ghost": managed to distill nature's mysteries into some comprehensible form. Perhaps they've never even *tried* to do this.

In other words, the poem separates those who think they know it all from those who retain enough humility to be curious. Exploring nature, it suggests, requires openness to discomfort with one's lack of understanding. At the same time, the "pity" one might feel for the know-it-alls is offset by the "regret" one might feel on behalf of those who keep probing nature's mysteries—scientists and poets, for example. Nature is ultimately unfathomable, so it will always "haunt[]" these seekers no matter how much they explore.

Notably, the "haunted house" metaphor echoes one of Dickinson's most famous statements about art: "Nature is a Haunted House—but Art—a House that tries to be haunted." In other words, artists strive to reproduce nature's awe-inspiring mysteries in their art, even if they can never fully succeed. "What mystery pervades a well!" suggests that the same kind of attraction toward the mysterious, disorienting, and haunting motivates anyone who explores nature at all.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

What mystery pervades a well!
The water lives so far -
A neighbor from another world
Residing in a jar
Whose limit none have ever seen,
But just his lid of glass -

The poem opens with a wonder-struck exclamation: "What mystery pervades a well!" The following lines elaborate on that statement, which might strike the reader as counterintuitive: after all, what's so mysterious about an ordinary water well?

Modern home wells typically pump water directly into indoor plumbing systems, but Dickinson is describing the kind of old-fashioned well that was common in mid-1800s New England. Water is drawn from such wells by hand, usually via bucket and pulley. Anyone drawing from the well will be able to peer into its depths.

So the well might seem mysterious, first and foremost, because its depths are gloomy, remote, and hard to fathom. In fact, the

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speaker compares the "water" lurking "far" down in the well to "A neighbor from another world," occupying the deep "jar" of the well shaft. Notice that this metaphor contains elements of both personification and paradox. To the speaker, the water seems mysteriously alive, like an intriguing "neighbor." But whereas ordinary neighbors are defined by their nearness, familiarity, etc., this water seems distant and otherworldly. Upon reflection, this paradox makes a certain kind of sense, because the water in a home well is at once *close* (maybe even part of one's own backyard) and *distant* (so far beneath ground level as to be inaccessible).

If the well water seems to "Resid[e]" in a deeply buried "jar," the "lid" of that jar seems to be made of "glass"—meaning, of course, the glassy surface of the water. The speaker stresses that this surface is the only part of the water visible from ground level. Indeed, the speaker claims that "none have ever seen" the "limit," or bottom, of the well. (Depending on how the well was constructed and whether it ever dries up, this claim might be hyperbolic.) So the basic "mystery" that "pervades [the] well" is a visual one: what does the bottom look like? What's down there that we can't see? This visual obscurity, in turn, might symbolize other kinds of mysteries and "limit[s]," such as knowledge human beings can't access.

For some, peering down into that deep water might also be dizzying or frightening. After all, people have accidentally fallen into wells! Besides, any presence that we can't see or touch has the potential to unnerve us. So the well carries an element of *danger* as well as mystery—an element that will become more important as the poem goes on.

LINES 7-12

Like looking every time you please
In an abyss's face!
The grass does not appear afraid,
I often wonder he
Can stand so close and look so bold
At what is awe to me.

In lines 7-12, the poem becomes less general and more personal, as the speaker describes their own feelings about wells.

First, the speaker compares peering down a well to "looking [...] In an abyss's face!" As with "A neighbor from another world," this comparison carries a touch of hyperbole. An "abyss" can refer to a vast chasm, gulf, or void, whether literal or metaphorical; in some literary contexts, "the abyss" can even mean the pit of hell. Regardless, the simile suggests that, while the speaker seems happy to look down the well "every time [they] please," they're also a little *scared* by the well's mysterious depths. The well is a source of both fascination and fear.

By contrast, the speaker notes that "The grass" surrounding the well "does not appear afraid." Building on this lively personification, the speaker marvels:

> I often wonder he
> Can stand so close and look so bold
> At what is awe to me.

The contrast between the grass ("he") and the speaker is playfully ironic. Unlike the speaker, the grass is rooted in place and has no reason to fear falling down a well. It's not really a surprise, then, that it seems more "bold" than the human who's "awe[d]" by the well's depths. (In this context, "awe" can imply both "wonder" and fear; in one draft of the poem, Dickinson actually considered using the word "dread" rather than "awe.")

The contrast also hints at a larger division between humans and the natural world. The grass doesn't have thoughts or emotions to speak of, so its apparent "bold[ness]" around the edge of the well is really just a lack of conscious feeling. Apart from some animals, perhaps, the kind of dread or "awe" that troubles the human psyche doesn't trouble nature at all.

By this second and third stanza, the form of the poem has become clear: as usual, Dickinson is working in common meter (quatrains of alternating iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter). It's a compact, song-like form. Common meter is also a staple of the church hymns Dickinson heard growing up, so it made a fitting vehicle for her own (often irreverent) spiritual meditations on nature, death, and so on.

LINES 13-16

Related somehow they may be,
The sedge stands next the sea -
Where he is floorless
And does no timidity betray

Lines 13-16 juxtapose the image of grass around a well with another, "Related" image: that of "sedge stand[ing] next" to "the sea." Sedge is a long, grass-like plant that grows along some shorelines. The speaker suggests that the grass and sedge images are related "somehow." After all, a home water well and the sea are different in many ways—but they're alike in at least a few respects. Both contain water, both are so deep that one can't see the bottom of them, and both can be dangerous for people to fall into.

The repetition of the verb "stands" (see line 11: "stand so close") stresses that, like the grass beside the well, the sedge is upright and unafraid. It's securely rooted, so it has no problem occupying the border of something dangerous—something whose depths seem bottomless. As the speaker puts it, the sedge "betray[s]," or reveals, no "timidity" despite standing next to the "floorless" sea.

Notice the lack of punctuation at the end of this stanza, which coincides with the end of a sentence. Dickinson even omits her characteristic dash, as if leaving the stanza itself "floorless" and suspended. Notice, too, that the speaker refers to the sea (or

perhaps the sedge) as "he," again personifying things in nature and imagining them as more human-like than they actually are. This pattern becomes important when the speaker later refers to nature as "haunted."

In reality, the sedge looks fearless because it can't feel fear in the way people do. But by describing it as though it *could* feel fear, and has somehow overcome that emotion, the speaker draws an implicit contrast between themselves and the plant (or between humanity and nature in general). The speaker implies that, since they're only human, *they* feel timid when standing beside the sea—just as they do when peering into a well.

LINES 17-20

But nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost.

In lines 17-20, the speaker turns from discussing "grass," "sedge," and "sea" to pondering "nature" as a whole. The speaker personifies nature as "her"—as in Mother Nature or some equivalent figure—and describes her through a complex metaphor:

> But nature is a stranger yet;
> The ones that cite her most
> Have never passed her haunted house,
> Nor simplified her ghost.

Having earlier confessed their fear of the sea, the speaker now imagines nature in general as a "stranger": an alien, unsettling presence. The speaker suggests that people who claim to know nature well—who confidently "cite" her in an intellectual, academic way—are fooling themselves. Those people have "never passed" nature's "haunted house"; that is, they've never explored nature enough to discover its mysterious and frightening side. (For example, they may never have peered into the groundwater at the bottom of a well, or stood beside a deep ocean—or if they have, they haven't admitted their fear to themselves.)

"Nor" have these people ever "simplified" nature's "ghost": boiled down the mysteries of nature to some simple explanation. The poem is implying that such an explanation is impossible, but also, perhaps, that these overconfident people have never even *attempted* one. In other words, they're not curious enough to investigate nature in the way a scientist or artist might. Instead, they discuss her knowingly ("cite her") without bothering to explore her at all.

About a year before writing this poem, Dickinson wrote in a letter to her friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson: "Nature is a Haunted House—but Art—a House that tries to be haunted." This has become one of the most famous observations Dickinson ever made about art or poetry. It suggests that art tries to capture nature's enigmas without trying to explain them. Clearly, Dickinson is playing with a similar idea in this stanza, which suggests that the "mystery pervad[ing] a well" also pervades nature as a whole. The "ghost" within nature may not be a god, exactly, but it's some element that humans can never fully explain. Nature will always remain "haunt[ng]" to us, and always, in some sense, "a stranger."

LINES 21-24

To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get.

The poem ends with a complex, paradoxical statement—the kind that appears often in Dickinson's poems. Dickinson likes to challenge the reader with poetic riddles, as if mirroring the "myster[ies]" of nature, or the world, in the labyrinth of her language.

This particular paradox builds on the earlier personification of nature ("her"):

> To pity those that know her not
> Is helped by the regret
> That those who know her, know her less
> The nearer her they get.

To untangle this statement, it helps to know that Dickinson considered "soothed" as an alternative word choice for "helped." The speaker means, then, that the "pity" one might feel for one group of people ("those" unfamiliar with nature) is *alleviated* by the "regret" one might feel on behalf of a second group ("those" who *are* familiar with nature). One might pity the first group because they're sheltered and incurious; they talk confidently about nature without ever exploring her mysteries. Meanwhile, the second group explores her mysteries but, regrettably, finds that they never get any closer to solving them. Instead, the more they learn about nature, the more they realize how much they *still have* to learn. Studying nature (as a scientist, philosopher, poet, etc.) becomes an education in their own limits as human beings.

The speaker clearly places themselves in the second group. They're intimately familiar with the "haunted" side of nature: they encounter it every time they peer down a well or stand beside the sea. They know more than the sheltered people, but in a sense, they can't really blame that group for staying sheltered. Even becoming a full-time naturalist won't make nature less of a "stranger": nature will always remain mysterious, sublime, and haunting.

SYMBOLS

THE WELL

The poem treats wells as symbols of the world's deep mysteries, as well as humans' attempt to understand them.

A typical water well consists of a pit dug deep into the earth, allowing groundwater to flow into it. The poem describes such wells as full of "mystery." It compares their dizzying depths to those of an "abyss[]" or "sea," and links their mystery with the "strange[ness]" of nature itself. For the speaker, they inspire an "awe" that's a combination of wonder and fear.

In all these ways, wells represent humanity's attempt to *tap into* the world's mysteries, just as a well-digger taps into groundwater. When people confront those mysteries directly, they are at once disorienting, compelling, and frightening, like the depths of a well as seen from ground level. People want to bring those mysteries closer to their understanding, just as one might draw up well water, but can never fully exhaust them or get to the bottom of them.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-12:** "What mystery pervades a well! / The water lives so far - / A neighbor from another world / Residing in a jar / Whose limit none have ever seen, / But just his lid of glass - / Like looking every time you please / In an abyss's face! / The grass does not appear afraid, / I often wonder he / Can stand so close and look so bold / At what is awe to me."

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors and similes help illustrate the eerie mysteries of "well[s]," "the sea," and "nature."

First, the speaker compares well water to an otherworldly creature in a remote container:

> A neighbor from another world
> Residing in a jar
> Whose limit none have ever seen,
> But just his lid of glass -

The "lid of glass" refers to the glassy surface of the water (here imagined as the top of the "jar" the water "Resid[es]" in). The speaker then compares this watery surface to the "face" of an "abyss[]"—meaning a huge void or pit. (Or, in some contexts, the pit of hell!) Both the metaphor and the simile depict the water at the bottom of the well as remote, alien, intriguing, and frightening.

Later, the speaker describes the "sea" as "floorless," meaning that it has no bottom. (Or none that people can reach and live to tell the tale. In Dickinson's day, submarine technology was in its infancy, and humans could not yet explore the deepest parts of the oceans.) Just as the previous metaphors evoked the scary, disorienting depths that open up under the earth, this metaphor evokes the scary, uncharted depths that lurk under the sea.

Later, the metaphors in lines 17-20 cast all of "nature" in the same spooky light:

> But nature is a stranger yet;
> The ones that cite her most
> Have never passed her haunted house,
> Nor simplified her ghost.

In other words, just as a "ghost" inhabits a "haunted house," some dangerous, alien power seems to inhabit all of nature. Humans who *think* they understand this power ("The ones that cite" it confidently) are fooling themselves. Nature can't be "simplified" into some tidy explanation; in fact, humanity can barely begin to understand it at all.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-6:** "A neighbor from another world / Residing in a jar / Whose limit none have ever seen, / But just his lid of glass -"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Like looking every time you please / In an abyss's face!"
- **Lines 14-15:** "the sea - / Where he is floorless"
- **Line 17:** "But nature is a stranger yet;"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Have never passed her haunted house, / Nor simplified her ghost."

PERSONIFICATION

Virtually every line of the poem involves some form of personification. In order, the poem personifies the following:

- The "water" in a well, which the speaker compares to "A neighbor from another world" living "in a jar." (Of course, an otherworldly being might not technically be a *person*, but "neighbor" typically has human connotations.)
- The "grass" growing around a well. The speaker imagines this grass as impressively fearless, since the well is so dangerously deep and the grass "stand[s] so close" to it.
- The "sedge" (grassy vegetation) growing beside "the sea." Again, the speaker claims to be impressed by the sedge's lack of "timidity" in close proximity to

danger. (Once more, the personification is humorously ironic: grass and sedge are rooted in place and don't really need to fear falling in a well or drowning in the sea.)
- "Nature," portrayed here as a female spirit (like the folk figure of Mother Nature). The speaker envisions nature as a ghostly "stranger" inhabiting a "haunted house." In other words, the speaker considers "her" mysterious, eerie, and impossible to "know" in depth.

Finally, the speaker compares the well to an "abyss[]," which they imagine as having a "face." This image might be considered a quasi-personification (although humans aren't the only creatures with faces). It captures the way a well, with its round shape and glinting surface, seems to stare back at those who stare into it.

All these personifications drive home the idea that the speaker sees the world—including its inanimate and nonhuman elements—as alive, dynamic, and "haunted."

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-3
- Lines 4-6
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 17-24

PARADOX

The poem's use of paradox—an ambiguous, counterintuitive, riddle-like device—reflects its overall concern with "mystery."

For example, while describing the "mystery" that "pervades a well," the speaker compares the water at the bottom of a well to "A neighbor from another world." This comparison seems to contradict itself slightly: after all, a "neighbor" is someone who lives close by, whereas "another world" is by definition far away. Yet the paradoxical phrasing captures the way well water can seem both near *and* far: it may be drawn from one's own backyard, yet come from hidden sources deep underground. As a result, it might strike the viewer as a kind of alien presence lurking beneath home.

The poem's final stanza is also rife with paradox. Personifying "nature" as a feminine spirit, the speaker declares:

> To pity those that know her not
> Is helped by the regret
> That those who know her, know her less
> The nearer her they get.

How can this be? How is it possible to "know" nature "less" as one becomes *more* familiar with it? (Also, why would "regret" on behalf of people familiar with nature "help[]," or offset, "pity" for people who are *un*familiar?)

This seeming contradiction is what the poem ultimately challenges the reader to untangle. Here's one way to interpret the paradox: it's easy to feel sorry for people who are ignorant about nature. But this feeling might be tempered by the realization that people who *aren't* ignorant have a whole different problem. Namely, the more one learns about nature, the more new questions and mysteries it poses. In a sense, then, ignorance is bliss; expertise about the natural world mostly reveals how much one still has to learn.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "A neighbor from another world"
- **Lines 21-24:** "To pity those that know her not / Is helped by the regret / That those who know her, know her less / The nearer her they get."

REPETITION

The poem repeats a few key words and phrases, mainly by way of drawing comparisons and contrasts.

For example, "stand" and "stands" occur in parallel contexts in lines 11 and 14. The speaker first describes the grass that can "stand" fearlessly around a well, then the sedge that fearlessly "stands" beside the sea. This pair of "Related" images (line 13) reinforces a key point: that simple plants can stand tall in situations where human beings feel "timidity" or fear (at the edge of a deep pit or deep ocean, for example). This point, in turn, helps illustrate the unbridgeable gap between humanity and nature, which makes the latter seem like an otherworldly "stranger."

The final stanza is also full of repetition:

> To pity those that know her not
> Is helped by the regret
> That those who know her, know her less
> The nearer her they get.

The mix of repetition and variation helps the speaker draw a sharp contrast: between "those" people who "know her" (meaning nature) and "those" who "know her not." Implicitly, the speaker belongs to the first group, meaning they're informed enough to know the *limits* of their knowledge.

More subtly, the repeated emphasis on "know her" evokes a kind of insistent *longing* to understand nature. Some human beings—naturalists, poets, etc.—forever strive to bridge that knowledge gap, but the quest is always impossible.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "stand"

- **Line 14:** "stands"
- **Line 21:** "those," "know her"
- **Line 23:** "those," "know her," "know her"

HYPERBOLE

The opening stanzas describe the "well" and its "water" in hyperbolic terms. First, the speaker calls the well water "A neighbor from another world." That's not literally true, of course, but the exaggeration highlights the water's distance from ordinary life on the ground surface. (The word "neighbor," which usually connotes *closeness*, gives the description a paradoxical flavor.)

Next, the speaker claims that "none have ever seen" the "limit," or bottom, of the well. This might not be literally true, either: whoever drilled or dug the well probably saw the bottom (though it's possible that they didn't due to darkness and/or groundwater rising as they worked). Also, wells tend to dry up from time to time, making their floors visible in direct sunlight (unless they're *really* deep!). The exaggeration indicates that the bottom of a well is *usually* invisible from ground level.

Finally, the simile in lines 7-8 claims that peering into a well is "Like looking every time you please / In an abyss's face!" The word "abyss" refers to a huge chasm or void, or sometimes to the pit of hell (as in John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*, which describes hell as "The dark, unbottomed, infinite Abyss"). Obviously, a backyard well isn't anywhere near on the same scale—but it seems to fill the speaker with trepidation anyway. Indeed, as a conventional metaphor or cliché, "gazing into the abyss" can mean confronting a sense of terror or despair. Along with the exclamation point, then, the speaker's hyperbole conveys their *attitude* toward wells: a mix of fascination, fear, and "awe."

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "A neighbor from another world"
- **Line 5:** "Whose limit none have ever seen,"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Like looking every time you please / In an abyss's face!"

VOCABULARY

Pervades (Line 1) - Fills; permeates.

Limit (Line 5) - Boundary or furthest point (here meaning the bottom of the well).

Abyss (Line 8) - An extremely deep pit, chasm, or void. Can also refer to the bottomless pit of hell.

Bold (Line 11) - Boldly, fearlessly. ("Bold" is used here as an adverb, not an adjective.)

Awe (Line 12) - Here implying a combination of terror and wonder.

Sedge (Line 14) - Grass-like vegetation that grows along some shorelines.

Floorless (Line 15) - A metaphor meaning "bottomless" or "having no solid ground underneath."

Timidity (Line 16) - Nervousness or fear (i.e., of the bottomless ocean).

Betray (Line 16) - Reveal; exhibit.

Cite (Line 18) - Invoke or refer to, often in an academic context. (Here, Dickinson links the word with people who talk about nature in a removed, intellectual way.)

Simplified (Line 20) - Boiled down; reduced in complexity. Here, Dickinson is using the word in a curious and metaphorical way: "simplif[ying]" nature's "ghost" might mean solving nature's mysteries or reducing its complexities (through explanation, illustration, etc.).

Helped (Lines 21-22) - Here meaning *alleviated* (i.e., the "regret" felt on behalf of one group alleviates the "pity" felt for the other). In one version of the poem, Dickinson considered the word "soothed" as an alternative here.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"What mystery pervades a well!" shares the same form as most Emily Dickinson poems: quatrains (four-line stanzas) written in common meter, or alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. (See the Meter section of this guide for a more detailed explanation.) The poem has six of these quatrains, making it relatively long by Dickinson standards; many of her poems consist of just a few stanzas. The second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme.

Common meter appears in many traditional Protestant hymns, including those Dickinson heard in church throughout her early years. Her use of this form frequently combines reverence and irreverence as she ponders the "myster[ies]" of heaven and earth. Common meter is also called *ballad meter* and appears in many poetic ballads and popular song lyrics. It's a simple, musical form that has helped make Dickinson's work perennially popular despite the complexities and peculiarities of her language.

METER

The poem uses common meter, or alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. An *iamb* is a metrical unit consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable; iambic *tetrameter* lines have four of these units and iambic *trimeter* lines have three.

Put more simply, the first and third lines of each stanza tend to follow this rhythm: da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM. The second and fourth lines tend to follow this rhythm: da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM. Listen to how this pattern sounds in lines 1-2, for example:

> What mys- | tery | pervades | a well!
> The wa- | ter lives | so far -

Common meter, also called *common measure* or *ballad meter*, is a staple of hymns and ballads. Dickinson uses this meter in the vast majority of her poems, sometimes as a way of irreverently tweaking the Protestant hymns that were commonplace in her time and culture (19th-century New England). It's musical, memorable, and concise—qualities that suit her pithy and often playful style.

RHYME SCHEME

Like most Dickinson poems, this one preserves the standard rhyme scheme of the ballad: that is, she rhymes on alternating lines (ABCB, etc.). For instance, lines 2 and 4 of this poem rhyme ("far"/"jar"), whereas lines 1 and 3 do not.

Within this standard pattern, Dickinson incorporates slant rhymes ("glass"/"face," "sea"/"betray") that keep her style unpredictable and idiosyncratic. Such idiosyncrasies contribute to the "mystery" of the poem—and of her poetry in general, which often has a paradoxical, riddling quality.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem appears to be the same as the speaker of most of Dickinson's poems. They're not named, gendered, or otherwise identified, and can be read as something like the voice of the poet herself. (However, Dickinson once warned her friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person." In other words, her speakers aren't *exactly* her.)

This speaker is simultaneously fascinated by and fearful of wells. They feel "awe[d]" and "afraid" when peering down well shafts—an experience they compare to gazing at the "abyss[]"—yet they also seem happy that they can do so "every time [they] please." (Clearly, they live in a time and place, such as Dickinson's 19th-century New England, where open water wells are common.) Moreover, they feel the same dizzying sense of mystery, awe, and dread when contemplating the bottomless "sea" or "nature" as a whole.

At the end, the speaker distinguishes between (1) people who think they know nature, but aren't really familiar with it and (2) people who *are* familiar with nature, and as a result, "know" how much they *don't* know about it. Implicitly, the speaker places themselves in the second category. Nature not only awes, terrifies, and captivates them but humbles them as well.

SETTING

The poem has three implied settings, the final two of which overlap:

1. An outdoor "well" and its immediate vicinity (lines 1-12).
2. The "sea" and seashore (lines 13-16).
3. "Nature" as a whole (lines 17-24).

Notice how these settings move from small to large, local to global, the backyard to the entire natural world. Dickinson begins by plumbing the "mystery" of a water well, but in the end, she gestures toward the mysteries of Earth as a whole.

Home wells were common in the New England of Dickinson's day, where municipal plumbing systems were primitive and rare. Users would typically draw water directly from their wells via bucket-and-pulley systems (hence the opportunity to stare down the well shaft). Indeed, private wells remain common in today's New England, especially in rural and suburban areas, though they are now typically covered and connected to indoor plumbing systems.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson published only a handful of poems during her lifetime and grew famously reclusive as she aged. However, it would be a mistake to view her *only* as a literary recluse or to think that she didn't intend for her poetry to be read in the future. She ordered many of her poems into sequences that she sewed into fascicles (or booklets), which her family discovered after her death. She also frequently enclosed poems in letters to family and friends. "What mystery pervades a well!" dates roughly to 1877 and was originally sent to Dickinson's sister-in-law, Susan; it was published posthumously in 1896.

Though she lived in the 19th century, some critics classify Dickinson as a forerunner of modernism (a 20th-century literary movement) for her psychological subtlety and experimentation with form. She was, certainly, one of the greatest voices of American Romanticism, a school of thought that believed in the importance of the self, nature, and one's individual relationship with God.

Dickinson's thought and work were also influenced by contemporary American transcendentalist writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson; by the novels of the Victorian English writer Charlotte Brontë; by Shakespeare's plays and poems; and by the English Romantics of the early 1800s, including William

Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Growing up in a religious community meant Dickinson was also familiar with the *Book of Common Prayer*. Her poems engage both with the form and content of these prayers. For example, this poem showcases her characteristic common meter and explores "nature," "awe," and dread, themes that Dickinson revisited again and again in her work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dickinson's prime writing years coincided with one of the most tumultuous periods in American history: the Civil War (1861 to 1865) and its aftermath. However, Dickinson rarely addressed the political world directly in her poetry, preferring either to write about her immediate surroundings or to take a much wider philosophical perspective.

Dickinson also grew up in a religious community and came of age during the religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening. Dickinson herself was even swept up by this religious movement for a time. Though she ultimately rejected organized religion, her poems remain preoccupied with theological concerns. Many express wonder about the afterlife, speculating on what it's like to meet God—if that's what happens when people die (something Dickinson wasn't sure about).

Dickinson also questions the existence of God and heaven in her work. Her poems can be irreverent, even blasphemous, as she tests out what exactly she believes. This poem expresses her conviction that nature is "haunted" by some "myster[ious]" presence, but she doesn't define what that presence is. (God? Pagan spirits? Something else?) Her "haunted house" metaphor echoes a famous statement she made in an 1876 letter to her friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson: "Nature is a Haunted House—but Ar—a House that tries to be haunted." This poem dates to the following year, illustrating the way Dickinson often toyed with similar ideas in her poetry and correspondence.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life — A biography of Dickinson at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- A Dickinson Doc — A short film about Dickinson from the Voices & Visions series. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HO9IRypzUDI)
- The Original Text — Read the original, handwritten poem (including variant versions) at the Emily Dickinson Archive. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/12172399)
- The Dickinson Museum — Explore further Dickinson resources via the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, Massachusetts. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- Dickinson and Hauntedness — An essay on the "Haunted House" of Dickinson's art. (https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1133&context=english_facpub)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
- A Light exists in Spring
- A Murmur in the Trees—to note—
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- An awful Tempest mashed the air—
- As imperceptibly as grief
- A still—Volcano—Life—
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Before I got my eye put out
- Fame is a fickle food
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I cannot live with You –
- I cautious, scanned my little life
- I could bring You Jewels—had I a mind to—
- I did not reach Thee
- I died for Beauty—but was scarce
- I dwell in Possibility –
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- If I can stop one heart from breaking
- I had been hungry, all the Years
- I have a Bird in spring
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I like a look of Agony
- I like to see it lap the Miles
- I measure every Grief I meet
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- It was not Death, for I stood up
- I—Years—had been—from Home—
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Nature is what we see
- One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted
- Publication — is the Auction
- Safe in their Alabaster Chambers
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
- The Bustle in a House
- The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants
- There came a Wind like a Bugle
- There is no Frigate like a Book
- There's a certain Slant of light
- There's been a Death, in the Opposite House

- The saddest noise, the sweetest noise
- The Sky is low — the Clouds are mean
- The Soul has bandaged moments
- The Soul selects her own Society
- The Wind – tapped like a tired Man –
- They shut me up in Prose –
- This is my letter to the world
- We grow accustomed to the Dark
- Whose cheek is this?
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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