Much Madness is divinest Sense -

POEM TEXT

Much Madness is divinest Sense -
To a discerning Eye -
Much Sense - the starkest Madness -
'Tis the Majority
In this, as all, prevail -
Assent - and you are sane -
Demur - you're straightway dangerous -
And handled with a Chain -

SUMMARY

A lot of the things people consider crazy are actually completely rational—that is, if people are willing to look at the world objectively and independently. Similarly, much of what's considered normal and sensible is completely crazy. That's because the majority opinion always wins out. If you agree with society's norms, you're accepted into society and considered rational. But if you disagree with these norms, you're immediately seen as a threat—and chained up.

THEMES

MADNESS AND CONFORMITY

The speaker of "Much Madness" argues that the things that society considers irrational or "crazy" are often the most rational things of all. Likewise, plenty of supposedly sensible things are actually "mad." Just because the social majority encourages people to act or think a certain way doesn't mean that this way is sensible, intelligent, or truthful. In fact, some of the most genuine insight and understanding in life—that is, the "divinest Sense"—is appreciated only by those whom society condemns as "dangerously" mad.

Most people can't appreciate true "Sense," the poem suggests, because they're too busy upholding the status quo. They go along with what everyone else thinks so as not to rock the boat; so long as they "assent," or agree, with what society says is right/good/truthful/etc., then they'll be accepted as "sane."

Yet those with a "discerning Eye"—that is, those people who are able to look at the world with sharp, considered judgment—can see right through society's idea of sanity. In fact, within their supposed "madness" lies "divinest sense"—the most sensible sense there is! The word "divinest" suggests that there's even something holy or godly about this sense. Without questioning the status quo, it follows, people might miss out on the deepest, most enlightening truths of all.

The poem thus implores its readers not to take society's ideas about "madness" and "sense"—what's right or wrong, good or bad—at face value, and instead to think for themselves. However, the poem acknowledges that questioning the status quo isn't easy. While agreeing with the majority makes a person seem "sane," questioning the majority view even slightly ("demurring") makes a person immediately seem "dangerous." And society has ways of controlling these "dangerous" people: it "handles" them with a "Chain." In other words, it restricts them, imprisons them, holds them back. Despite the speaker's emphasis on challenging the majority's opinions, then, the poem also acknowledges how difficult doing so can be.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Much Madness is divinest Sense -
To a discerning Eye -

The poem opens with a paradox that makes a bold and intriguing statement: a lot of what is considered "madness" is, in fact, "divinest Sense." By opening in such a way, the poem immediately calls of both these polar opposite categories into question, asking the reader to re-examine the definitions of "madness" and "sense" (or insanity and sanity). The poem isn't necessarily focusing just on *literal* sanity and insanity in a clinical sense, but rather on what the "Majority" of people (as mentioned in line 4) think is normal. This is a poem about outsiders (like Dickinson herself) as much as it is about actual madness.

The alliterative /m/ in "Much Madness" establishes that there is a lot of what is *considered* madness out there in the world—but that, likewise, much of it is misunderstood. Not only is this "madness" frequently misunderstood, it's actually "divinest Sense." Here, sense means something like insight or forward-thinking. The "sense" possessed by some people who get mischaracterized as mad is sometimes the most profound thought of all. A good example might be a writer who is way ahead of their time, like Dickinson herself was. Though she is now considered one of the divinest—as in, best—poets of all time, she was misunderstood in her own day.

The word "divinest" also has connotations of godliness, suggesting that some of these instances of "madness" are actually revelations of the highest order. Note that Dickinson is far from the only poet to draw a link between so-called madness and visionary power—William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Coleridge all draw similar parallels particularly in their thoughts about poetry.

Line 2 helps put the first line into context. It states that the ability to look beyond received ideas of "madness" and "sense" depends upon a "discerning Eye." That is, it takes a certain kind of unflinching wisdom to look at the world clearly and question the status quo. This idea can be applied to numerous moments in human history, which is part of the poem's power. For example, those who pushed for the abolition of slavery had the ability to "discern" that it was morally wrong, and fought against the "majority" position. Likewise with the feminist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. The "Eye" is not specifically about the visual sense; it is a metonymic way of referring to anyone who has the ability to tee the world afresh, and not believe things are a certain way just because that's what everybody else thinks.

LINES 3-5

Much Sense - the starkest Madness -
'Tis the Majority
In this, as all, prevail -

Line 3 uses antimetabole to flip the sentiment of line 1 on its head—the grammatical construction is the same but "Sense" and "Madness" are switched around. Again, this is about re-evaluating how these categories are defined. Whereas line 1 stated that much of what is considered "madness" is actually profound and insightful, line 3 shows that, similarly, much of what is thought of as "Sense" is actually "Madness." Like line 1, line 3 discusses the difference between "the Majority" and the truth. That is, just because a number of people believe something doesn't make it right—and vice versa.

In fact, much of what is considered "Sense" is actually the "starkest" madness of all. Stark here can mean "severe" or "complete," but also has connotations of exposure. To the "discerning Eye" of line 2, the "madness" in "sense" is plain to see in all its ugliness. Like in line 1, line 3 doesn't offer much by way of specifics—but it asks the reader to think of any situation in which most people in a group believed something or acted in a certain way, only for it to be revealed later as "madness." Note how the alliteration between "Madness" and "Majority" further connects these concepts via sound.

Line 4 develops this argument, stating that, as things stand, "madness" and "sense" are not organized along objective lines of truth—but rather on sheer numbers. In other words, "madness" and "sense" are subject to a kind of mob rule, in which most people believe whatever the "Majority" believes. The capitalization of "Majority" here gives it a fearsome—and, according to the poem, false—authority. Indeed, following the majority tends to make life easier, as is suggested by line 5. It says that, on the subject of "Madness" and "Sense," it's the majority that wins. And the majority doesn't just win on this, but on *everything*. The majority gets to set the norms of society, and anyone who doesn't follow these norms is outcast. Again, the power of this sentiment lies in how non-specific it is—it could apply to economics or sexuality, for example, in equal measure.

LINES 6-7

Assent - and you are sane -
Demur - you're straightway dangerous -

Lines 6 and 7 expand on what's come before, spelling out the formula that the speaker believes governs life. Essentially, it goes like this: if you agree with the "Majority" ("Assent"), then you're considered "sane" and normal; disagree ("Demur") and you're instantly "dangerous." The caesurae in both lines present these two paths as clear choices (almost like the blue and red pills in the *The Matrix*!), placing the reader at the crossroads between "assenting" and "demurring."

The two verbs are also linked to their consequences through sound. "Assent" chimes consonantly through the /n/ and /s/ sounds with "sane," tying agreement to the status quo with acceptance into it. Contrastingly, the alliteration of "demur"—which essentially means "to object"—is joined through the /d/ sound with the concept of danger.

Again, the lines' power is in how general they are. This formula could easily apply, for example, to women's role within patriarchal society, particularly in Dickinson's day: if a woman assents to being a faithful and subservient wife, she'll be seen as normal—if not and she protests, she'll be cast off as an outsider. In this kind of "Majority" rule, there is no space for doubting the way things are done. Questioning how things are makes you "straightway" (immediately) dangerous, because you threaten the established norms of society. Yet history is littered with examples of "Majority" consensus that, in the modern day, are considered examples of collective wrongdoing and unfairness. The poem thus also seems to implicitly ask the reader to consider which of the norms that they abide by might, in fact, be "madness."

LINE 8

And handled with a Chain -

The final line shows the consequences—in the speaker's view—for those who "demur" rather than "assent." People who take this more rebellious path will be "handled with a Chain."

In a literal sense, this is a reference to physical restraint of the kind associated with mental asylums. This was much more common in Dickinson's day than it is now. Restraints were used to purportedly protect the patient from themselves and minimize their risk to others. In Victorian-era asylums, patients

were sometimes chained to chairs or put in straight jackets to prevent certain kinds of behaviors. Of course, the practice is highly questionable both in terms of its effect on the patient and, indeed, its effectiveness in discouraging the behavior it tries to prevent. Regardless, the point that the speaker is making here is that, in a literal sense, if society considers you "mad" then you run the risk of being chained up.

That said, the more dominant meaning of "Chain" here seems to be metaphorical. The line is talking about the less obvious ways in which society restrains and restricts people who dare to question or go beyond its norms.

These chains could be social, psychological, and/or economic. There is also a possible third connotation of the word: slavery. It wasn't so long ago that the "Western" world enslaved people on a regular basis—it was "normal," the "Sense" of the day. Indeed, the slave trade was one of the most prominent issues of debate, disagreement, and conflict in Dickinson's day. The master-slave dynamic shows up a number of her poems, though it's not possible to say definitively that this is the reference here.

In any case, it's clear in this final line that people pay a price for speaking up against commonly accepted social norms.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

For such a short poem, "Much Madness is divinest Sense" features quite a lot of alliteration. In the first two words, the alliterative /m/ sounds create a sense of "muchness." That is, by having the same starting letter in such close proximity ("Much Madness"), the line creates the *sound* of numerousness. There is a lot of "Madness," and in turn a lot of the so-called madness is actually "Sense." This alliteration is repeated in line 3, while line 4 offers yet another alliterative /m/ sound with the word "Majority." This chimes with "Madness," suggesting that it is the status quo that more often than not gets things wrong.

Across lines 1 and 2, the /d/ in "divinest" and "discerning" links the two concepts together. In essence, this suggests that having a "discerning Eye" that can accurately distinguish between "Madness" and "Sense" is closer to the "divine," which can be understood here as "truth." That is, the ability to discern—without slavishly following the status quo—brings people closer to truth, even if that truth goes against the grain of the "Majority."

In line 7, "demur" alliterates with "dangerous." This speaks to the way in which people who dare to question society and its norms are considered a threat. The link is balanced by the consonant /s/ and /n/ in line 6, which link "assent" with "sane."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "M," "M," "d"
- **Line 2:** "d"
- **Line 3:** "M," "S," "s," "M"
- **Line 4:** "M"
- **Line 5:** "a," "a"
- **Line 6:** "A," "a," "a"
- **Line 7:** "D," "d"

CONSONANCE

Consonance, like alliteration, is used quite a bit for such a short poem. This insistence on repeated sound gives the poem an almost nursery rhyme-like quality, allowing its message to sound fable-like. The first three lines in particular are dominated by /m/ and /s/ sounds that nearly drown out every other consonant. This is fitting, given that these are the letters that start each competing subject of the poem (that is, "madness" vs. "sense"). The rush of these two particular sounds, then, reflect the poem's main thematic preoccupation, as well as a sort of blurring between these two opposite concepts.

Like alliteration, consonance is generally used throughout the poem to tie different words together, indicating that there is a conceptual connection between them. In line 5, for example, the /l/ sounds in "all" and in "prevail" join these words together. To "prevail" means to achieve a kind of victory, so here the sound reflects that the "Majority"—the "all"—dominates society and defines what is normal and what is not.

Later, on line 6, "Assent" and "Sane" are joined by their /n/ and /s/ sounds. In this line, as in line 7, the speaker is drawing a causal link between an individual's reaction in relation to the "Majority" and its following consequence. So here, the act of "assenting"—which essentially means expressing agreement—results in acceptance by the majority: "assent - and you are sane." Do what everyone else does, in other words, and everyone will view you as normal.

As mentioned, line 7 uses a similar method:

> Demur - you're straightway dangerous -

This, of course, is alliteration as well. But the /d/ and /r/ sounds in "demur" and "dangerous" form a kind of mirror of one another, underscoring the link between demurring as an act and being outcast as "dangerous" as a consequence. In other words, to disagree is to be regarded with suspicion.

Line 8 uses consonance too, with three /n/ sounds across the line:

> And handled with a Chain -

The consonance works a little different here than from the

previous two lines. Here, the /n/ sounds come to dominate the line, which represents the way that chains act as a physical restriction—or indeed, the way social and psychological norms work as restraints too. The line lacks sonic movement or flexibility precisely because it discusses this kind of physical or mental limitation.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "M," "M," "d," "s," "S," "s"
- **Line 2:** "d," "s"
- **Line 3:** "M," "S," "s," "s," "s," "M," "ss"
- **Line 4:** "M"
- **Line 5:** "ll," "l"
- **Line 6:** "ss," "n," "s," "n"
- **Line 7:** "D," "r ," "r," "d," "r"
- **Line 8:** "n," "d," "n," "d," "d," "n"

CAESURA

"Much Madness is divinest Sense" is quite a stop-start, jolty kind of poem. This effect is achieved, in part, by the use of caesura.

Line 3 is the first example of this. Here, the characteristic Dickinson dash (which she used frequently throughout her work) is placed between "Sense" and "the." Essentially, this functions as a replacement for the expected verb, which would be "is": "Much Sense *is* the starkest Madness." The reader already anticipates this verb because of its use in line 1, which is essentially the mirror image of this line. The practical function of the dash caesura is to avoid too much disruption to the meter of the line, which would come if the word "is" was used. But it also, perhaps more importantly, helps create the sense of received wisdom being flipped on its head. The speaker is trying to get the reader to think about the ways in which "Madness" can be "Sense" (and vice versa) and creating this grammatical link between lines 1 and 3 makes this topsy-turvyness more apparent. With an "is," lines 1 and 3 would be to separate statements—the speaker wants them to be read together, two sides of the same conceptual coin.

The next caesura is in line 5. This is primarily just for pacing, allowing the "as all" to sound longer (since there's a pause at either end of this phrase). This helps to emphasize the far reach of the "Majority" reigning over society's norms. The caesurae in lines 6 and 7 both function in the same way as that in line 3. They create a sense of casual logic between the verbs found at the start of both lines, and the consequences that follow these actions (and the caesura themselves). To assent means to agree or approve, while to demur means to protest. The caesurae help present these verbs—"assent" and "demur"—as representing a clear and stark choice, two distinctly different paths with distinctly different outcomes.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "-"
- **Line 5:** ",," ",,"
- **Line 6:** "-"
- **Line 7:** "-"

PARADOX

The whole poem hinges on a paradox: that often what passes for "Madness" is actually "Sense," and vice versa. This is obviously an initially jarring idea for the reader, because it takes two opposing categories—sanity and insanity—and essentially says that they should actually be understood the other way round, as meaning the opposite of what people think they do. Part of the poem's power is in the fact that it doesn't offer too much by way of specifics, but it does offer clues to help in unpicking this paradox. It is the "discerning Eye" that can see that "divinest Sense" contained in "Madness," and it's the "Majority" who imposes "starkest Madness" on "Much Sense." Put simply, then, the poem argues that people should question the received ideas of society—and that just because many people believe something or act in a certain way, this doesn't make them right.

This could apply to anything that the status quo agrees on at any given time. To pick a random example, it used to be considered perfectly sensible ("*Sense*"-*ible*) to put children to work with physical labor—now, this is something of which the status quo would certainly disapprove—or deem "madness"!

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Much Madness is divinest Sense - / To a discerning Eye - / Much Sense - the starkest Madness - / 'Tis the Majority"

METAPHOR

"Much Madness is divinest Sense" uses metaphor once—in the last line with the reference to a "Chain." This line refers to the consequences of "demurring," which essentially means rebelling against or making objections to the status quo. Anyone that disagrees with the "Majority" (according to this poem) automatically falls into this category, and will be "handled with a Chain."

The line does make sense taken literally: humanity has a long history of physically restraining those people who are deemed "mad." And indeed, this was still quite common in the 19th century—chaining someone to a wall or chair, or locking them up in a straight jacket.

But given that the rest of the poem avoids becoming too specific about its subject, it's fair to interpret this line as a metaphor—especially given that line 5's "all" has made it clear that the poem is not just about actual "madness," but also about

the fact that it's difficult to speak out against the majority in society more generally. The chain referred to in the final line doesn't have to be a physical chain, then, but can be taken as a metaphor for any of the ways in which society restrains or restricts people who don't fit in. These figurative "chains" might be societal pressures about how to act, how to dress, what to aspire to, and what to expect from life. These restraints can be social (e.g. peer pressure), psychological, or economic.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "And handled with a Chain -"

SYNECDOCHE

Synecdoche is used in line 2 with the phrase "discerning Eye." Line 2 is a continuation of the first line, stating how it is possible to truthfully observe the "divinest Sense" in "Madness." The speaker suggests that it is only a "discerning Eye" that can see the world this way. The speaker does not mean a single, literal eye. Instead, this "discerning Eye" refers to the ability to see the world as it really is, and/or to a person who possess that ability. In this sense, this can be thought of as both synecdoche and a metonym: a synecdoche because a part, the eye, is standing in for the whole, a person with insight; and a metonym because the eye can be thought of as standing in for sight itself.

Both interpretations are at play here. The speaker is saying that only those people willing to challenge the status quo—people who don't slavishly follow and agree with whatever the "Majority" thinks—will be able to discern truth in supposed "madness." The figure of speech here thus partly functions as a reference to a person or people more generally, namely those who are brave and hungry for truth regardless of the social cost.

The "Eye" is also a reference to a certain kind of mindset. The visual sense is equated with the ability to think clearly and independently, and a willingness to hold society's received ideas up to the light. So the "Eye" simultaneously stands for people *and* their way of seeing the world. The reverse implication is that the "Majority" of people do not have "discerning Eye[s]"—they just accept the way the world is at face value, preferring an easy life of "assenting" over the complications that come with rebellion.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "discerning Eye"

ANTIMETABOLE

Antimetabole is used in lines 1 and 3 (collectively). Essentially, line 3 is a reversal of line 1.

Much Madness is divinest Sense -

vs:

Much Sense - the starkest Madness -

If line 1 states that much of "Madness" is actually "Sense," then line 3 argues that the reverse is true also: a lot of what is taken for "Sense" is in fact "Madness." It's a slightly unusual instance of antimetabole because of the intervening line in between these two statements, but the grammar and similar syntax of lines 1 and 3 are so similar that they are clearly intended as a pair. In fact, the way in which line 3 lacks a verb—using a dash instead—means that this line *needs* the verb from line 1 to make sense. The "is" from line 1 applies to line 3 as well; in other words, the speaker is saying "Much Sense **is** the starkest Madness," and we know this because of the "is" in the first line.

The aim of the antimetabole here is to provoke thought in readers, asking them to consider the way in which "Madness" and "Sense" could be understood differently. What is something about society, the poem asks, that is actually madness masquerading as normality—and vice versa? The parallel structure allows the contrasting adjectives in each line to intensify this question: "Much madness" is described as being "**divinest** Sense," which suggests that this is the truest kind of "sense" and perhaps is close to God (in that this kind of sense is "divine"). By contrast, the "Much Sense" of line 3 is often the "**starkest** Madness." In other words, it's the *worst* form of madness, because it imposes itself on people as truth.

Where Antimetabole appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Much Madness is divinest Sense -"
- **Line 3:** "Much Sense - the starkest Madness -"

VOCABULARY

Divinest (Line 1) - The most "divine." Divine can refer to God or godliness, implying that "Much Madness" is often a kind of spiritual insight. But divine can also mean, more widely, pleasing or delightful—the best.

Discerning (Line 2) - To recognize, understand and/or distinguish. The "discerning Eye" refers to people with a capacity for seeing the word truthfully and objectively—because they can think for themselves.

Starkest (Line 3) - This can mean the "most complete," implying that this kind of "Madness"—the one that pretends to be "Sense"—is the worst of all. The word also has connotations of being naked or bare.

'Tis (Line 4) - Archaic form of "it is."

Prevail (Line 5) - To win or come out on top; the poem here is saying that the "Majority" always decides what is normal and isn't.

Assent (Line 6) - To express agreement.

Demur (Line 7) - To raise objections.

Straightway (Line 7) - Immediately.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Much Madness is divinest Sense" doesn't fall into any traditional poetic form or pattern. Broadly speaking, the first three lines state the poem's main premise: that much of "Madness" is "Sense," and vice versa. Lines 4 and 5 link this to the thinking and behavior of the "Majority"—the status quo. Lines 6-8 state the choices that face people in relation to the "Majority." Agreement means acceptance, while raising objection means restriction and restraint.

The poem makes frequent use of dashes—a characteristic element of Dickinson's poetry—to create a sense of abruptness and difficult thought. It's not an easy idea to process—that madness is sense, and sense madness—and the jerkiness of the poem's form helps to demonstrate this difficult thought—the kind required to have a "discerning Eye"—in action.

METER

"Much Madness is divinest Sense" doesn't have a strict meter. It is, by and large, written in iambic tetrameter and trimeter, in that it can mostly be grouped into either four or three feet of unstressed-stressed syllables. Take a look at the first few lines, which, though not totally consistent, generally alternate between these two meters:

> Much Mad- | ness is | divi- | nest Sense -
> To a | discern | ing Eye -
> Much Sense | - the stark- | est Mad | ness -
> 'Tis the | Major- | ity
> In this, | as all,| prevail -

There are clearly some substitutions here, some of which are more important than others. For example, line 3 has a feminine ending, with its extra unstressed syllable. More evocative, though, is the act that the first feet of lines 1 and 3 can potentially be thought of as spondees (feet consisting of two stressed syllables):

> Much Mad

and

> Much sense

The "Much" in each line is stressed by the reader, emphasizing the, well, "muchness." In other words, the meter here helps the poem's argument that *a lot* of what is madness is sense and vice versa.

Interesting metrical variations also pop up in lines 6 and 7:

> Assent | - and you | are sane -
> Demur | - you're straight | way dan- | gerous -

The first of these two lines is about agreeing with the status quo, and expectedly fits into perfect iambic trimeter. The next line is much more ambiguous, which seems apt considering this line is talking about rebelling against what other people think. We *could* scan it as iambic tetrameter, but that sounds pretty forced when read aloud. More naturally, stresses seem to fall on three syllables in a row with "straightway dan-," adding emphasis to this phrase about just how risky it is to speak up in society.

Perhaps it is the last line that feels most metrically regular, and this line not coincidentally helps introduce the idea of restriction or restraint:

> And handled with a Chain -

The abrupt ending of the poem combined with the onset of metrical regularity makes it feel almost as if the text itself is being led away in chains.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't have a regular rhyme scheme. There is a slant rhyme between lines 2 and 4 with the words "Eye" and "Majority." This brings them together conceptually while at the same time establishing them as opposites. They both relate to ways of seeing the world—the "discerning Eye" looks at things independently, whereas the "Majority" just sees what it's told to see.

There is one full rhyme, which is between "sane" (line 6) and "Chain" (line 8). Again, this creates a sense of contrast, underlining the choice that faces people between "assenting" and "demurring" to the "Majority." The first word represents acceptance into the status quo, the second the consequences of rebelling. The full rhyme here also gives the poem a sense of closure.

SPEAKER

The speaker in this poem is undefined. However, they clearly feel themselves to be at odds with general society—that is, with the "Majority." The speaker challenges the reader to rethink their own ideas of "Madness" and "Sense," perhaps implying that this is an issue that touches the speaker's life personally. If the speaker is read as Dickinson herself, for example, the poem becomes a kind of allegory for the way in which the literary

world of her time wasn't ready for her daring and original poetry. Even beyond her writing, the poem resonates with the mythic shyness and solitude of Dickinson's life—her status quo-defying refusal to get married, for example.

In any case, the speaker aims to show two possible paths to the reader, and their consequences. "Assenting" to the "Majority" view means being accepted by society, while disagreeing with the "Majority" equals exile and mistreatment. In this, then, the speaker is issuing a kind of warning.

SETTING

"Much Madness is divinest Sense" is quite an abstract poem. It is a sequence of thoughts and statements, a kind of logical argument, and so doesn't depend on establishing a stable sense of place. In the widest sense, the poem is set in the speaker's mind because the poem's eight lines represent how the speaker perceives the world. There is a sense of isolation to the poem's setting, then, but this could also be to do with the back story of the poet herself. In its attempt to show the way the "Majority" imposes itself on individuals, the poem is also set, generally speaking, within human society.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) became one of the greatest and most influential of writers without publishing more than a handful of poems during her lifetime. After 1865, she rarely even left her family home in Amherst, Massachusetts. But her intense, philosophical poetry ranged far beyond the borders of that small world.

Dickinson's distinctive poetic voice combines down-to-earth forms (like her famous ballad stanzas) with startling, evocative word choices and profound insights into time, nature, and love. One of her favorite techniques, the use of an expectant em-dash to end lines, is on vivid display in "Much Madness is divinest Sense." Dickinson also wrote frequently about "madness" and mental distress, as in "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain," "I Felt a Cleaving in my Mind," and "A Little Madness in the Spring."

This poem, like almost all of Dickinson's work, didn't see the light of day until after her death; Dickinson mostly eschewed publication, mistrusting its conformity and commercialism. But she was actively involved in the literary world around her: she admired Charlotte Brontë and William Wordsworth, met Ralph Waldo Emerson, and shared a general American Transcendentalist interest in the workings of the imagination and the power of nature.

Dickinson only became widely known posthumously, when her sister Lavinia discovered a cache of nearly 1,800 secret poems and brought them to publication with the help of a (sometimes combative) group of Dickinson's family and friends. It was a fortunate rescue: Dickinson's poetry would become some of the most influential and beloved in the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson's passionate personality and volcanic intellect wouldn't have been too comfortable for many of the people around her in 19th-century rural Massachusetts. In that respectable, conventional time and place, women weren't expected to be geniuses.

And the 19th century in general was a pretty tough time to be a woman who wanted to write. Dickinson's hero Charlotte Brontë was only one of the great 19th-century women writers who published under a male pen name—and many of those writers, like George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) and George Sand (Amantine Dupin), are still better-known by their pseudonyms today.

As an unmarried woman living in the 19th century, Dickinson was denied much of the freedom and influence of her male counterparts. She was infamously reclusive, often communicating with friends through letters alone, and considered eccentric by neighbors. Her sense of isolation can be sensed in much of her work, including this poem.

Dickinson also wrote most of her poetry during the American Civil war, which ran from 1861 to 1865. She was firmly on the Union side of that bloody conflict; in one of her letters, she writes with delight about the ignominious defeat of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who was reportedly trying to make his escape disguised in a woman's skirt when he was finally captured.

However, Dickinson rarely addressed the political world around her directly in her poetry, preferring either to write about her immediate surroundings or to take a much wider philosophical perspective.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Other Poems by Dickinson — A link to numerous other Emily Dickinson poems. (https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poems/45673)
- On Playing Emily Dickinson — A clip in which actor Cynthia Nixon discusses playing Emily Dickinson in the film A Quiet Passion. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_SId6che2k)
- Educational Resources — Resources for students about Emily Dickinson provided by the Dickinson museum (which is situated in her old house).

(https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/education/resources-for-students-and-teachers/)

- Possible Inspiration from Emerson — An essay called "Self-Reliance" by Ralph Waldo Emerson, in which he discusses the relationship between society and the individual. (https://emersoncentral.com/texts/essays-first-series/self-reliance/)
- How Society Treats the "Mad" — An interesting Paris Review article looking at the history of madness. (https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/04/22/madness-and-meaning/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- An awful Tempest mashed the air—
- As imperceptibly as grief
- 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 dwell in Possibility –
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- If I can stop one heart from breaking
- 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—
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- 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—
- 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
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

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