Much Madness Is Divinest Sense Study Guide

Much Madness Is Divinest Sense by Emily Dickinson

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Introduction

The date that "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense" was written has been guessed as 1862, but nobody knows for sure because the poem was not published until almost thirty years later, in 1890, after Dickinson's death. Her poetry was first introduced to the public through the efforts of friends and relatives who discovered her poems, corrected her punctuation, designated titles, and modified some of Dickinson's meanings so as not to offend her audience. It was more than forty years before her original poems were handed over to the United States Library of Congress, where they were thoroughly examined and Dickinson's original versions were restored. The only editing that was done for the later publications was to assign location numbers to each full piece as well as to every poem fragment. "Much Madness" was given the number *435*.

"Much Madness Is Divinest Sense" was published in Dickinson's first collection, which was simply called *Poems* (1890). This poem stands wide open to a variety of interpretations. It can be said to represent her sense of humor, or rebellion, as well as her sense of frustration as an intelligent female living in a world that was dominated by dictatorial males. The poem can also reflect her anger, for although she was described as quiet spoken and demure, Dickinson did not hold back her strongest sentiments when it came to writing them. Read in another view, the poem could be taken to express Dickinson's fear of literal madness.

The poem is deceptively brief and at first glance appears simple. However, within its eight lines is hidden a universal theme that runs so deep that more than a hundred years later its significance is still fresh, its impact is still sharp, and its expressed emotion is still controversial. This poem is so contemporary that Robert Hass, former United States poet laureate (1995-1997), chose to read "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense" to President and Mrs. Clinton at a celebratory meeting in the White House in 1998.

Author Biography

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830, the second daughter of Edward and Emily (Norcross) Dickinson. Her family was well established in the community, her grandfather having been one of the founders of Amherst College and her father having served in both state and federal Congresses. For most of her life, however, Dickinson shunned public life, preferring to detach herself from society and focus, instead, on her writing.

As a child, Dickinson was educated at home, mostly under the guidance of her father, who heavily censored her subject matter in fear that some books might lead her away from his religious beliefs, which he demanded that his daughter accept without argument. Her father must have been torn between recognizing her intellectual curiosity and wanting to control her thoughts, for he bought her books, then hid them after showing them to her, telling her he was concerned that the books might shake her thoughts.

Although Dickinson went on to attend both the Amherst Academy and Hadley Female Seminary (present-day Mount Holyoke College), she did not receive a degree. Her accomplishments in school, however, were famous; her intelligence, her imagination, and her ability to write dazzled many of her teachers. Shortly upon completing her first year of college in 1848, she returned to her family home and remained there until her death, venturing out for only occasional trips.

Although Dickinson seldom left the confines of her father's home and infrequently responded to visitors, she did chance to meet two men, in particular, who would greatly influence her. First there was the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, whom many Dickinson biographers believe inspired her intellectually. Some critics have speculated that Wadsworth was the focal point of many of Dickinson's poems.

The other man who influenced her was Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a literary editor and essayist who had written an article in the April 1862 *Atlantic Monthly* that offered advice for young poets. After reading Higginson's essay, Dickinson began sending poems to him, asking him to evaluate her writing. Higginson was gentle in his suggestions, and he advised her not to publish. Ironically, Higginson would, after Dickinson's death, become instrumental in publishing her first collection.

As she grew older, Dickinson withdrew even further from society and devoted the rest of her life to improving her art. She wrote prolifically. In 1862 alone, it is believed that she wrote a total of 366 poems. Her later poems reflect an examination of the personal self, especially in terms of her emotions, and of the greater concept of self, her soul. Her more mature writing also explores the universal themes of death, knowledge, and immortality.

Dickinson saw less then ten poems published in her lifetime. Her first collection, *Poems*, was published in 1890. "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense" appeared in this collection.

The following year, a second collection, *Poems, Second Series* was published. Both collections were reprinted several times due to popular demand. The first publications of both collections were also heavily edited, so the poems would appear more conventional and pleasing to a general audience.

On May 15, 1886, Dickinson died of Bright's disease. She was buried in Amherst.

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□

Plot Summary

Line 1

Dickinson's poem, "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense," opens with a statement that immediately demands the reader's attention. Dickinson employs her ironic, or contradictory, wit to the full text of this poem, beginning with the paradox in the first line. Questions that may arise with the first two words in this line might concern what she means by "madness." Is Dickinson referring to insanity or anger? To complicate matters, Dickinson throws the reader off by adding the surprising two words at the end of this line, juxtaposing the first impressions with a contradictory second one. The reader might wonder if Dickinson is serious or if she is poking fun at someone or something. Is she enjoying her madness? Is she using madness to rise above a situation in which she feels uncomfortable or trapped? How can madness make sense? And why "divinest Sense?" Does she mean divine in the sense of being godly, or is she referring to something that is merely delightful?

Note the alliteration in this line. There is the double *m* in "much madness," and the *s* at the end of the words "madness," "is," and "divinest." Also, the word, "Sense," has *s* at both the beginning and the end. So this initial line is not only catchy for its contradictory or rebellious twist in meaning, but the use of alliteration makes the line fun to read with the tongue slipping over all the *s* sounds.

Line 2

The word "discerning" in the second line can be understood in a variety of ways. Discerning can mean discriminating in the sense of being cautious; or it can mean astute, or wise. It can also mean sensitive or even shrewd. Depending on the reader's experience with, or attitude toward, madness, the poem can turn on the word "discerning." The reader can interpret this poem as sarcastic, judgmental, or playful. Like all good literature, Dickinson's poem offers space in which the reader can move around, bringing his or her emotions to the work and enjoying it not only through the author's view of life but on a personal level as well.

Line 3

In the third line, Dickinson almost completely turns the first line on its head, placing what was first last and vice versa. Again the line uses alliteration, with *s* appearing five times. And again there is ambiguity here, this time present in the word "starkest." Does the poet mean bleak, harsh, or desolate? Or is she making reference to a sense of completeness? She can also be suggesting the adjective, plain.

By twisting the phrases around between lines one and three, Dickinson may simply be emphasizing her opening statement. She may also be saying that it does not take a lot

of madness to make sense because even the starkest madness is understandable. However, she is stating that too much sense is the harshest madness of all.

With this line, there arises another question. What does she mean by "Sense?" Is this common sense? Is she implying sanity or rationality? These questions about the meaning of "Sense," to which she is referring, actually make up the core of the whole poem. It is upon a definition of "Sense" that the poem is written, is it not? Does not the poet want the reader to think about who defines that which is referred to as sense?

Lines 4-5

It is lines four and five that offer a possible answer to these questions, in part, at least. "'Tis the majority" who defines sanity and sense. This does not mean that their definition is correct. Dickinson is only implying that since the majority has the rule, "as All," their definition is that which "prevails." This might lead the reader's thoughts to the question: What if madness was in the majority? Then, the next question might be, What is madness?

Line 6

The word "Assent" implies abiding by or, in more oppressive terms, acquiescing. If the reader is familiar with details in Dickinson's life, such as her domineering father and the small-town pressures of Christian conversion that Dickinson experienced in Amherst during her time, this word takes on stronger emotions. Dickinson was torn between her natural shyness, her sensitivity, and her innate sense of rebellion. Understanding these variant forces in her life helps the reader to appreciate the weight of the contradictions and emotional battles that she confronted. To give in to the dominant forces was to be declared sane, safe, and proper. If she assented, more than likely, she was also left alone, something that she craved.

This conflict is a universal one. It defines the relationship between parents and children; families and villages; tribes and states. To go along with the majority is to find peace, at least in some situations, but it is not always a comfortable peace. It is sometimes a peace that comes at a high price, the price of one's own private sanity.

Line 7

The use of the word "Demur" is fascinating. The word means to object, or protest. However, spelled with an additional *e*, "demure," the word takes on nearly the opposite meaning of modest, or shy. "Demure" is a word that is often used in describing Dickinson's personality. In the seventh line, however, she uses the word in contrast with "Assent."

Immediately after using this word, she inserts a dash, which is sharp and pointed, almost weaponlike. If a person opposes the majority, he or she is held at bay, because

to protest is to be more than just wrong, it is to be dangerous. The adjective that she uses in this line, "straightway," reflects back to the straight form of the dash that precedes it; and it implies immediacy: no trial by peers, no justification. Whoever balks at the majority rule will be considered worse than a traitor. They will be denied any rights and quickly taken away. It is also interesting that when the language in line six (in which Dickinson mentions sanity) is compared to line seven, the latter is written with much more interesting words. This gives the reader a hint that Dickinson might enjoy leaning toward madness. ***Line 8*** Line eight suggests that not only will the objector be declared insane and taken away, he or she will either be confined with chains or beaten with them. The word "handled" is again a bit ambiguous, but the sentiment is very clear: either all freedoms will cease to exist, or the perpetrator will feel pain. Whether chained or beaten, the picture is not very pleasant. It is so unpleasant that the poem suggests that one should take very seriously the attitude of madness, because the consequences can be severe.

Themes

Madness Versus Sanity

The main, or at least most obvious, theme of this poem deals with the argument over the definition of sanity and its opposite, madness. Sanity is an ambiguous term. It takes on its definition from its surroundings. What is considered sane in one society might be defined as crazy in another. The passage of time also alters the definition.

Dickinson is also correct in pointing out that the majority classifies what is sane and what is not. In any group, rules of conduct are determined by the majority. Deviation from this standard cannot be tolerated if the majority of the group is to "prevail." In some way, those who object must be ostracized or else they will threaten the group's goals. Although the words "sanity" and "madness" have definite meanings recognized by modern readers, in Dickinson's time, these concepts were often used when discussing women's rights or the attempts to suppress them.

Individuality

The individual versus the group is a perpetual battle for balance. For the creative spirit to expand and explore, the individual must be given the freedom to think differently from the traditions of the group. Innovations occur when imagination is unconfined.

This said, it is easy to understand Dickinson's concerns for the needs of the individual. She was an artist and therefore had a unique way of thinking. The pressures on her to conform were powerful. Not only was her voice out of place in her community but also her era. For her to be confined to the manners of the women who surrounded her would be akin to a spiritual death. Though the majority prevailed, she had the strength of her individuality to help her maintain her vision, but it is likely that she was often told how dangerous it was.

Rebellion

An implied theme of this poem is rebellion. Although Dickinson does not discuss whether she rebelled against the majority rule, the reader can infer that she is at least thinking about it. If she has contemplated the concepts behind the ambiguity of madness and sanity, then she has most likely considered going against the rules of the majority. From her opening statement that madness is divine, the reader can infer that Dickinson prefers madness to the strictures of sanity. She wrote in some of her letters that she rebelled against the religious conversions that most of her peers were going through□the rebellious spirit was definitely available to her. She also went against her father's wishes by reading books other than the Bible. To conclude that, in this poem, she was a willing partner to those who "demur" does not require a great leap of assumption.

Feminism

Another implied theme, it can be argued, is a sense of early feminism. Although it is never mentioned in this poem, a feminist reading of the poem can relate it to writings by other women of Dickinson's time as well as contemporary female authors who discuss oppression in terms of madness. In male-dominated societies like the one in which Dickinson lived, the majority rule was in the hands of men, whether they were in the majority or not. Men were the lawmakers and thus represented the majority. They defined what was considered sane. To rise against their oppression and demand a voice is a feminist theme.

Style

Ambiguity

Dickinson's poems often employ ambiguity. Most accomplished writers realize that to allow ambiguity to exist in their works is to invite the reader to come to their own conclusions about the meaning of the work. In this way, the reader takes part in the writing. The story or the poem is not just the author's experience□it is also a mirror reflecting the reader's life. Dickinson was aware of this, and her ability to leave things unexplained is a mark of high literary capability and understanding. In this poem, Dickinson uses many words that are ambiguous in meaning, such as "madness," "Sense," "divinest," "discerning," and "starkest."

Suggestion

Suggestion goes hand in hand with ambiguity. By using ambiguous words, Dickinson sets up an environment in which she can point to situations without completely stating them. In "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense," there is the suggestion of rebellion, although Dickinson never comes straight out and declares it. There is also the suggestion of feminism, even if she was not thinking in those terms. She was aware of the limitations imposed on her because she was female, but she never mentions this outright. The reader might also infer that she herself leans toward those who think in terms of madness, as she grants them a benefit of the divine.

Alliteration

One of the most prevalent poetic forms that Dickinson uses in this poem is that of alliteration, the repetition of consonants. The *s* is the letter she uses most frequently for this effect. Actually, it is used in every line except for the last one. In doing this, Dickinson sets up a particular sound that is not broken until the last line, thus calling attention to the conclusion of the poem. The sound of *s* is soft and slippery, so the reader moves along the poem rather smoothly until the final moment. The last line is more straightforward and blunt, with the lack of alliteration and the sound of *s* creating the illusion of harshness and punishment.

Rhyme

There is only one official rhyme in this poem. It occurs in lines six and eight with the words "sane" and "Chain." As the only rhyme, it brings attention to itself. There's an interesting connection between these two words. Dickinson appears to be emphasizing that it is those who declare themselves sane who will administer the chains. By doing this, she ties together the last three lines of the poem with the image of the oppressed and the oppressor.

Tone

Because she uses ambiguous words in this poem, it is difficult to determine the tone that Dickinson intended for "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense." Is she being cynical or humorous; is she depressed? Or is she writing these words because she has figured out the system and wants to pass the news along? Is she celebrating madness? Is she exposing the nonsense of those who claim to know what sanity is? The last line is rather disheartening with its image of the chain, but Dickinson could be ridiculing the oppressor. She could be telling them that despite their use of restraining devices, she is still free. After all, there is her reference to the divine in the first line. Also, regardless of the threats of the majority, Dickinson was able to write this poem, proving that their attempts to control her thoughts have failed.

Historical Context

Civil War

While Dickinson wrote this poem, chances are the Civil War was in progress. She never mentions this war in her poems; however, in her letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she comes in contact with the effects of battle. She wrote quite often to Higginson, including during the time that he served in the war. She also corresponded with him after he was injured, while he was in the hospital, so she was aware of the pain and suffering on a somewhat personal level.

Calvinism and Transcendentalism

Calvinism was the dominant religion in New England in Dickinson's time. The Calvinists believed in a church-dominated society, the absolute sovereignty of God's will, and punishment for sins. They emphasized materialism and logic, from which the Puritan ethic of hard work is derived. They also believed that salvation only came through faith in God, and if chosen by God, one could not resist. This religion promoted the group over the individual, and concrete reality over imagination or intuition. At a certain point in the young adult's life, a statement of conversion to these beliefs was common practice.

Dickinson, in her letters and her poetry, makes allusions to these Calvinist beliefs, as well as her rebellion against them. She refused to convert. Her concepts of God did not match those of the church, despite her father's efforts to convince Dickinson her father was an orthodox Calvinist.

Instead, Dickinson turned to nature and her own instincts and intuitions about the sacredness of this life. Most critics agree that she was influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), an essayist, philosopher, and poet, who proposed an alternative philosophy. Emerson helped found the transcendentalist movement. Transcendentalists believed that answers about this reality could be found by the individual in quiet meditations on nature. They promoted the individual and self-reliance. Emerson also encouraged everyone, especially those inclined to write, to live a hermit's life, to withdraw from society in order not to be contaminated with the materialism and professed logic of the group.

Suffrage

The United States women's suffrage movement began in the middle of the nineteenth century in the northeastern states. Women, such as Lucretia Mott and Lucy Stone, discovered that when they spoke out for such reforms as the antislavery and temperance movements, they were told they had no voice. This attempt to silence them inspired the women to organize.

These early feminists, meeting for the first time as a group at the Seneca Falls Convention, held in New York State on July 20, 1848, made many demands for improvements in their status, the most controversial of all being the right to vote. At that time, they were more concerned with social, economic, legal, and educational issues. After the Civil War, when the Fifteenth Amendment offered suffrage only to black men, the suffrage movement went into crisis, as some women in the movement refused to support the new amendment, demanding that women be included. This caused a schism in the movement.

It was during this time, in 1869, that the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), headed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, was created. One of its main focuses was a demand for a Sixteenth Amendment, which would give women the right to vote. This suffrage group became more radical, more vocal, and, therefore, more visible, thus addressing their issues to a wider audience of women. The more conservative organization, the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), founded that same year, included Thomas Wentworth Higginson among its supporters, the essayist with whom Dickinson maintained a lifetime correspondence.

In 1890, four years after Dickinson's death and the same year that her first book of poems was published, the two segments of the movement reunited into the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Elizabeth Cady Stanton was elected president and Susan B. Anthony, vice president. It was decided at this point that the movement should drop all other issues and focus their efforts on recruiting new members and winning the right to vote. However, women's right to vote would not be won until 1920 with the nineteenth amendment.

Literature and Literary Movements

Literature that was available during Dickinson's time and that influenced her included the works of William Shakespeare, John Keats, Helen Hunt Jackson, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and probably Ralph Waldo Emerson. Although Walt Whitman was her contemporary, she was dissuaded from reading him because his writing was said to be disgraceful. Dickinson also read the Bible.

Literary movements during the nineteenth century in America included the romantic movement, which reached the United States around the year 1820. This movement provided a tool with which authors attempted to create a distinctive American voice. The romantics viewed nature and art as more important than science. Self-awareness was promoted as a way of understanding the universe. Previous to this movement, a focus on self was considered selfish, a word that was imbued with a derogatory tone. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were two of the more dominant writers associated with the Romantics.

The romantic movement is closely associated with the transcendentalists, among whom were found Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Unlike many other movements, the transcendentalists insisted on and promoted the individual, to the point

that they made no rules for, or definitions of, their movement. They encouraged unconventional thought, believing that to fall into the traps of accepted conventions was dangerous. Other authors influenced by the transcendentalists were Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain.

In sharp contrast to the transcendentalists were the poets who are often referred to as the Brahmin Poets, most of whom were also Harvard professors. These poets were heavily influenced by European literature, which caused their philosophies and writings to be much more conservative than the Transcendentalists. The most prominent writers in this group included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and James Russell Lowell.

Critical Overview

Although there is little direct criticism of "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense," the range of comments over the years signifies how Dickinson's reputation as a poet has grown. *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells, contains many critical essays on the writing of Dickinson in general, which collectively demonstrate the increased appreciation of her writing over time. It begins with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who writes, in the preface to Dickinson's first published collection in 1890:

> the verses of Emily Dickinson belong emphatically to what Emerson has long since called 'the Poetry of the Portfolio,'□something produced absolutely without the thought of publication, and solely by way of the expression of the writer's own mind.

Higginson believed that it was because of this attitude that Dickinson had the freedom of "daring thoughts." Three years after the publication of this collection, Arlo Bates, a novelist and editor of a Boston newspaper, writes that "there is hardly a line in the entire volume and certainly not a stanza, which cannot be objected to upon the score of technical imperfection." He softens his criticism by then adding that there also was hardly a line, "which fails to throw out some gleam of genuine original power, of imagination, and of real emotional thought."

Jumping ahead to the twentieth century, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Conrad Aiken, who edited some of Dickinson's poems, had this to say about her writing:

> Once one adjusts oneself to the spinsterly angularity of the [poetic] mode, its lack of eloquence or rhetorical speed, its naive and often prosaic directness, one discovers felicities of thought and phrase on every page. The magic is terse and sure.

Archibald MacLeish, a well-known, American, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, offered his evaluation of Dickinson's poetry as it was studied in the 1960s. He writes that Dickinson was one of the most important modern poets, despite the fact that "her forms are among the simplest of which the English language is capable." These remarks were not meant to be derogatory. Rather, he continues, saying form for Dickinson was not the basis of her poems. "In Emily's poems, however, things are otherwise arranged." He then praises Dickinson for her imagery, not the kind of images that are visible through the eye but rather the mental images that she constructs to represent abstract feelings. To make his comments clearer, MacLeish uses, as an example, a line from Dickinson: "that white sustenance / despair." He refers to this ability of hers to make abstraction appear in picture form as images that are presented "directly to the imagination by the suggestion of words." MacLeish ends by calling Dickinson's tone "wholly spontaneous" and writes that "it is the voice rather than the form which supplies the key to her work."

Her voice is particular to her, "and when that particular voice is Emily Dickinson's at her most particular best they [the poems] can be very great poetry indeed."

More recently, novelist Joyce Carol Oates has written several articles about Dickinson's poetry. In her "'*Soul at the White Heat*': The Romance of Emily Dickinson's Poetry," published in *Critical Inquiry*, Oates writes:

> No one who has read even a few of Dickinson's extraordinary poems can fail to sense the heroic nature of this poet's quest. It is riddlesome, obsessive, haunting, very often frustrating . . . but above all heroic.

Oates continues that Dickinson's poetry reflects the poet's attempts "to realize the soul," which, according to Oates, "is nothing less than the attempt to create a poetry of transcendence□the kind that outlives its human habitation and its name." Oates praises the poet's ability to explore not only what is known but also what is unconscious, which Dickinson exposes through "contradictory forces . . . held in suspension." It is through Dickinson's poetry that readers gain "a heightened sense of the mind's uncharted possibilities," Oates writes. "Here is an American artist of words as inexhaustible as Shakespeare, as ingeniously skillful in her craft as Yeats, a poet whom we can set with confidence beside the greatest poets of modern times."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Hart has degrees in English literature and creative writing and is a published writer of literary themes. In this essay, Hart ponders the inspiration behind Dickinson's poem in an attempt to identify the allusion to madness.

Many literary critics and literary historians believe that Ralph Waldo Emerson influenced Dickinson. Knowing even the vaguest details of Dickinson's reclusive life reinforces this conclusion, as Emerson encouraged a pulling into oneself by limiting social contacts. Emerson also, as espoused in his essay "Self-Reliance," advocated individualism. Reading Dickinson's poem "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense," with Emerson's writing in mind, influences the reader to interpret this poem in a way that might illustrate a rebellious nature in Dickinson. Between the lines, the reader can envision a young poet who is determined to defy the majority rule and is willing to fight for her individuality. However, when this poem is read with some of Dickinson's own works in mind, the analysis takes on a different tone. Could it be literal madness that Dickinson is referring to and not just a general allusion to society's labeling a nonconformist as being mad? In other words, was Dickinson afraid that she might have a mental illness? Was she afraid of going insane? If this is true, is the emotion behind this poem fear rather than rebellion?

The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson (1950), edited by Thomas H. Johnson, contains a subject index in the back pages. A thorough search of this index results in no mention of words such as rebellion, individuality, or self-reliance. Yet these are the concepts that Dickinson supposedly learned from reading Emerson, and these are the themes that a reader could easily conclude are emphasized in Dickinson's poem "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense."

Emerson also wrote that a person should trust their own thoughts. The problem, he believed, was that people who took the time to listen to their thoughts, often forgot them, or worse, were coerced out of them once they left the confines and privacy of their home and went out into society. Society, for its own benefit, seeks conformity. Society has an aversion, he wrote, to free thinkers and creators, as it maintains its power through regulated custom. Society functions on naming things, Emerson believed. The things that society deemed bad were not necessarily inherently evil; it was, after all, just a name applied to something that society feared would cause trouble for the majority. In Emerson's mind, the only bad things in life were whatever denied him the right to believe in, and think for, himself.

By taking these concepts of Emerson's and applying them as a background for Dickinson's poem, the reader will find an almost perfect match. Dickinson's poem implies the same sentiments. For instance, Dickinson writes that the majority defines the term "madness" and judges it to be wrong. The majority dictates the rules, and those rules demand conformity. To go against the majority means the perpetrator will be punished. In other words, to be a self-thinker means to be eventually locked up in chains. Is it no wonder that, as Emerson wrote, the conformist has a much easier road?

However, Dickinson's poem takes up the issue of madness. Why does she use this word? Although Emerson mentions that taking the road of the nonconformist may not be easy, he does not refer to madness as a consequence.

Returning to the subject index of the collection of Dickinson's poems, one finds many references to madness. The word "madness" itself is listed, as well as references to a haunted brain, a cleaving in the brain, and a funeral in the brain. Subject listings under "soul" include storms within the soul, a numbness of the soul, and a paralysis of the soul. With much more emphasis in Dickinson's writing on the subject of mental strain as opposed to individuality or self-reliance, the true theme of this poem may well be the fear the author had of being deemed mad.

Dickinson's references to madness appear in several of her poems. In her poem "It Struck Me□ Every Day□" (number 362), she discusses a storm that both appears to be present every day and yet is still fresh. She writes that the storm burned her in the night, "It blistered to My Dream□." She also mentions that she thought the storm would be brief, "But Nature lost the Date of This□ / and left it in the Sky□." The storm creeps up on her during the day. Each day she thinks she is rid of it, but suddenly it flashes through the clouds. It builds up in intensity until it is like a fire that burns her when she sleeps. This is one example that could prove that Dickinson struggled with a sense of mental imbalance in her life.

In her poem, "We Grow Accustomed to the Dark□" (number 419), Dickinson first refers to how eyes adjust to the dark after stepping out of a lighted room. Then she moves to another concept of darkness, "And so of larger□Darknesses□ / Those Evenings of the Brain□," when she can find no light within. She continues her thoughts by stating that eventually, even the brain can adjust to the darkness within, "And Life steps almost straight." In this poem, it sounds as if she has grown accustomed to going in and out of some kind of mental problem. There are moments when she feels lost in the darkness but has learned to cope with it. She does not say, however, that she found a light. She only states that her brain "Adjusts itself to Midnight□."

One of her more popular poems, "I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain" (number 280), deals with the sense of madness quite directly. Dickinson describes a falling into madness in this poem. She writes, "My Mind was going numb□," then relates, "a Plank in Reason, broke, / And I dropped down, and down□." The straightforward mention of "reason" suffering some kind of misfortune makes it hard not to conclude that Dickinson is specifically referring to some kind of madness. She is not using a metaphor of a storm in this poem. She is openly declaring that she felt as if something in her brain had died.

Again in 1862, Dickinson wrote a poem that begins "The first Day's Night had come□" (number 410), in which she talks about her soul being unable to sing. She tries to fix the soul's strings, but the next day is so horrible that she loses her sight. When she reflects on that day, which she refers to having happened several years prior, she states that she is still a bit confused about it all.

and Something's odd□within□
that person that I was□
and this One□do not feel the same□
could it be Madness□this?

Although she believed in Emerson's philosophy of life and took to heart his suggestions of living a secluded life and fighting for the right to think original thoughts, Dickinson's poetry makes it obvious too that she suffered more than just the humiliation and frustration of fighting for her individuality. Her huge collection of poems, as well as the letters that she wrote, is testament to her creativity and insight. Taking into account the times in which she lived and the domineering father that she had, there is little argument about the courage that she must have had to fight conformity. This does not, however, mean that she did not suffer. Upon reading Emerson, she might have even suffered more, as suggested in another poem.

In 1864, she wrote "A Door Just Opened on a Street" (number 953) in which she describes a type of awakening. The image present in the poem is that of the speaker walking, lost somewhere, when suddenly as she passes a house, the door opens to her. While the door is ajar, the speaker enjoys "an instant's Width of Warmth disclosed□ / and Wealth□and Company." Unfortunately, just as suddenly, the door closes, and because of this experience, the speaker now suffers doubly. She is not only lost but she is also experiencing misery. In this poem, Dickinson seems to imply that when she was lost, at least that was all that was on her mind. She was trying to find her way. However, when the door opened, she saw that someone was living in a manner that was quite different from hers. That way of living exuded warmth. For a brief second, she felt that she had found something or someone with whom she could share her thoughts. It was far better not knowing that such a way of life existed for it made her feel even more lost when she had to go back to her way of life.

Taking a small leap of conjecture, one could conclude that in some ways, reading Emerson made Dickinson's life even more miserable than before. Prior to having her mind opened by his words, Dickinson might not have thought about rebelling against the majority. She might not have taken so seriously his instructions that people should explore their own thoughts and trust their intuitions. Once she did read his thoughts, however, she could not forget them. Although his words might have opened up her mind, they also might have confused her, for she had very few supports available to her to reinforce her way of thinking.

Another poem, referred to as "I Felt a Cleaving in My Mind□" (number 937), was also written in 1864. The cleaving that Dickinson felt was "As if my Brain had split□." She then goes on to explain that after feeling her brain break apart, she tried to fix it, much like she had earlier tried to fix the strings of her soul. She was, again, unsuccessful. "The thought behind, I strove to join / Unto the thought before□," she writes, but everything unraveled. In her attempt to understand some unnamed concept, Dickinson, in this poem, tells the reader that she could not match what she had once believed with some new information that she has received. Her thoughts are jumbled. They no longer make sense. She cannot find any connection between them.

Returning to the original poem, "Much Madness," after reading Dickinson's meditations of her feelings of being lost, of her brain suffering a funeral, or being torn apart, much more depth is added to the interpretation. It is hard to maintain that Dickinson was making some general reference to a cultural madness. The subject of madness is very serious for the author. Whether she officially suffered from mental illness is not important; that she suffered is. Her adjacent poems make it very clear that she was frightened at times, that she was miserable, and that she sometimes felt she had lost the voice of her soul and might truly go mad.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Kattelman holds a Ph.D. in theatre from Ohio State University. In this essay, Kattelman discusses how Dickinson's poem can be best understood by studying both the structure of text and the poet's life.

The magic of poetry is that it packs a great deal of meaning into very few, well-chosen words. The greatest of poets are experts at manipulating word choice and syntax to convey an entire world of images and concepts. Emily Dickinson was among these masters. She was able to compress numerous images and ideas into a few short lines, thus creating some very powerful, but also very cryptic poems. Her economy of expression produced some wonderful poetry but also created a unique challenge for the reader. The brevity of her poems can make it difficult to glean her intention. To gain the most complete understanding of a Dickinson poem, it is useful to analyze it in more than one way. By looking specifically at the text itself, a reader can gain one level of meaning. The use of punctuation, capitalization, meter, etc., all provide clues as to what the poet is "trying to say." To gain an additional level of meaning, one can examine the poem in relation to the poet's life. Even though there may not be a direct correlation to events that were occurring, an added layer of understanding can be obtained. "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense" is an excellent example of a poem whose meaning can be revealed through a combination of these two types of analyses. Upon first reading, the poem conveys a sense of irony and defiance. Here is a soul that rebukes the notion of "common sense" and is able to see a larger truth. The speaker of the poem recognizes the "insanity of sanity." While this is definitely an aspect of the poem, this surface reading does not transmit all of the subtle nuances of meaning that can be found within these eight lines. By combining what can be gleaned from the text itself with information known about Dickinson's life, a reader can gain a deeper understanding of the poem. Many critics agree that this technique can actually produce a more specific meaning from each poem. As Cristanne Miller notes in her book *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*,

> The poet's metaphors and extended analogies, her peculiar
> brevity, lack of normal punctuation, irregular
> manipulation of grammar, syntax, and word combination
> all invite multiple, non-referential interpretations
> of what she means. Tempering this multiplicity
> with a historical understanding of the poet's life and
> the language theories and practice available to her focuses
> the possibilities of meaning.

"Much Madness Is Divinest Sense" contains many of the typical textual elements used throughout Dickinson's poetry, including a strange pattern of capitalization, wordplay, alliteration, and liberal use of the dash as punctuation. Each textual element has a specific effect on the reader, pushing him closer to the intended impact of the entire poem. For example, capitalizing words such as "Sense," "Majority," and "All" personifies them. They move from the category of "what" into the category of "who." Once

capitalized, the words gain specificity, now strongly referring to the people behind the concepts. Instead of any "majority," it is the ultimate "Majority" who are represented in the poem. Capitalization of the word "Eye" in the second line emphasizes a pun on the pronoun "I." When Dickinson writes, "To a discerning Eye," it is specifically the speaker of the poem to which she refers. The speaker is the "discerning I"; she is the one able to recognize the absurdity of blindly following society's dictates. A similar wordplay occurs in the fifth line of the poem with the capitalization of the word "All." Here again, this personified word can be replaced with a pronoun: "I'll." So, the speaker of the poem proclaims, "I'll prevail," reemphasizing the righteousness of following one's own dictates and not giving in to societal pressure. Capitalization in the poem also helps to emphasize the important words, and points out the contrast that Dickinson presents. The terms "Much Madness," "Sense," "Much Sense," and "Madness" draw the reader's focus and emphasize the juxtaposition of these contrasting notions.

The primary punctuation mark found in "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense" is the dash. This is in keeping with Dickinson's preferred style of the time. Earlier in her career, she was fond of using exclamation marks to add emphasis to her words. Eventually she shifted away from this practice, however, and replaced it with a liberal usage of the dash. In her essay, "Emily Dickinson's Volcanic Punctuation," Kamilla Denman notes this phenomenon,

> By 1862, the exclamation mark is increasingly rare. In this period, Dickinson becomes anarchic in her use of the dash, both in terms of its replacement of almost every other mark of punctuation and in its placement between almost every one of the parts of speech.

These dashes serve to break Dickinson's words into small "packets" of words, each of which can be scrutinized individually and then combined to unveil a broader meaning. They also provide a strong visual element that controls the poem's rhythm. Some critics have presumed that Dickinson's use of the dash is an indication of her tortured mental state, while others see it as a strategy of defiance. She refused to give in to the traditional use of punctuation, thus confounding those whose tastes run toward the conventional. While a strong case could be made for either argument, the latter is certainly in keeping with the spirit of this particular poem. Dickinson not only writes a poem about defying the norms of society but also practices this defiance within the poem by creating her own use of the dash.

Now that the textual elements have provided some insights into this poem, what can be learned by relating the poem to Dickinson's life? First, of course, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the poet's biography. Little is known about Dickinson's day-to-day existence, but some major facts about the poet can shed some light on the poem at hand. It is well known that Dickinson was reclusive. While many poets and artists have been known to retreat into his/her "own world," Dickinson took her retreat to pathological extremes. As Harold Bloom notes, "We know that Dickinson began, in her twenties, a gradual retreat into the confines of the Homestead, the house in which she was born, until for the last fifteen years of her life. She did not leave its grounds and saw

no one but her brother and sister." When one keeps these facts about Dickinson's existence in mind a deeper understanding of "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense" surfaces. The poem takes on a strong element of paranoia. Instead of standing as a casual observation of the insanity of society's norms, it becomes a personal declaration of the wisdom that comes from following one's own convictions. The poem carries a different meaning than if a rebel who was publicly espousing antiestablishment ideas had written it. It is much more subtle and contains a message of passive resistance.

Particular episodes from Dickinson's life also provide added information about what she might have been using this poem to convey. The poem moves from a private sphere to a public sphere and can be read as an indication of how Dickinson came to her strong need for seclusion. As a child, Dickinson would avoid doing things she considered unpleasant by physically locking herself up. As Donna Dickenson notes in her book *Emily Dickinson*, "In youth, Dickinson defied her father's insistence that she attend church by the simple ploy of locking herself up in the cellar." This was her power. Dickinson chose to lock herself away rather than allowing society (or her father) to control her thoughts and actions. Instead of giving in to expected behavior, she defied the norms and withdrew from "the game." She had her own strong beliefs and refused to give in to the coercion of society. She was aware of the consequences of being different and chose to avoid the same by locking herself away. Through these actions she deprived society of the opportunity to force her to conform. She would not be "handled with a Chain." Instead, she would choose her own path and create her own reality. Of course, the irony here is that, although Dickinson was not literally imprisoned, she became figuratively imprisoned through her own, self-imposed seclusion.

Emily Dickinson was an accomplished poet whose brilliance, unfortunately, was never recognized within her lifetime. With just a few lines, she was able to create an entire tapestry of ideas. "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense" is an excellent example of the numerous layers of meaning that can be contained in eight brief lines. In this poem, she puts forth a philosophical premise, creates interest through use of meter, capitalization, wordplay, and alliteration and provides insight into her own life and beliefs. The poem's text and Dickinson's biography reflexively illuminate one another. There has been some debate among critics as to whether a poet's biography should influence a poem's interpretation or meaning. Many believe that a poem should be considered a stand-alone text and that biographical elements from a poet's life should not influence the interpretation. Most scholars of Dickinson, however, take the opposing view. They see her life as fundamental to the understanding of her work. A combination of these two critical views provides the greatest opportunity for the appreciation and explication of Dickinson's poetry, however. There is no reason one should choose one technique over the other. Any clues that can shed light upon a poem should be considered useful, whether they are episodes from the poet's life, or elements contained within the text itself. Pairing these interpretive techniques provides the most complete understanding of "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense" and of the other poems in Dickinson's body of work.

Source: Beth Kattelman, Critical Essay on "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

MacDonald is an instructor of English Literature and media studies. In this essay, MacDonald considers Emily Dickinson's poem in terms of the historical context of the period as well as the notion of the individual versus the majority.

A woman who experienced a difficult relationship with the outside world, Emily Dickinson wrote countless poems on the themes of madness, religion, and marginalization. "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense" is one of the more disturbing among these because of the dark imagery of confinement and fear found within the short eight-line poem.

The poem begins: "Much Madness is divinest Sense□ / To a discerning Eye□" indicating not only that madness itself is the subject of this poem but that Dickinson sees a divide between what society accepts as "common sense" and what social norm dictates as a stigmatized label (madness). Indeed, transcendentalists of the period (for example, Henry David Thoreau and Emerson, whom we know Dickinson read) rejected the "normalizing" policies of the majority and instead argued that there was a divine or transcendent wisdom available through nature that the majority might miss. Thus, Thoreau, when imprisoned for civil disobedience, famously retorts in response to Emerson's question "What are you doing in here?" "The question is, what are you doing out there?" Certainly, at the time that Dickinson wrote "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense," the issue of madness versus sanity, or the individual versus the majority, was a pressing social concern in the United States. In addition, the Civil War (a war that was to cost the lives of thousands Americans and devastate the South) had begun in 1861. One reading of Dickinson's poem, therefore, must take into account the fact that, as Beth Maclay Doriani (in *Emily Dickinson: A Daughter of Prophecy*) and others have suggested:

> Dickinson's poetry should be seen as part of the range of response to the Civil War offered by contemporary writers. Her verse, emerging from an era that was questioning the purity of the nation, certainly challenges audiences to consider their spiritual groundings.

Many people in the North questioned the sanity of pursuing the war itself. At the same time, many Southerners and Northerners would have accepted (as a matter of common sense) that slavery was necessary for the economy of the South. Only the "madness" of a higher "divine sense" would have suggested that the morally correct action was to free the slaves. Dickinson, however, clearly was not limiting her critique to the Civil War. She was also responding to the slavery that was forced on dissenters. Having chosen to remain single, live in seclusion, and find solace in the written word, she herself certainly represented one form of dissent against a majority opinion which stipulated that women should marry and lead lives for the benefit and entertainment of men.

While it is not always purposeful to discuss the author in terms of the art (as has been historically debated by such acclaimed scholars as Rolande Barthes, J. K. Wimsat, and Monroe C. Beardsley), in the case of Emily Dickinson, one must consider her own undeniable presence in her poetry. Indeed, Thomas Wentworth Higginson notes, in *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson* "[her] work, that is, of persons who wrote for the relief of their own minds, and without thought of publication . . . will have at least the merit of perfect freedom." Higginson, the man largely responsible for the first serious attention to Dickinson's poetry, argues that Dickinson's work has "perfect freedom" because she wrote for herself, rather than the scrupulous eye of the public or critic. Thus, her work often exudes an honesty that cannot be found elsewhere. Bliss Carmen, too, notes her unique "untarnished expression," in *A Note on Emily Dickinson*, in 1896, stating that "She borrowed from no one; she was never commonplace. . . . The region of her brooding was that sequestered domain where our profoundest convictions have origin." Further, the fact that Emily Dickinson was a recluse who lived most of her life indoors, confined to her father's estate, has much bearing on the remarkable quality of her poetry. As Higginson notes:

> In [the case] . . . of mental conflict, we can only wonder
> at the gift of vivid imagination by which this
> recluse woman can delineate, by a few touches, the
> very crises of a lyric mental struggle.

Dickinson's own idiosyncratic life choice almost certainly seemed madness, possibly even dan- gerous, to a majority of Americans. Literally seen as a possible madwoman in her own attic by some, the subject of madness and the perception of insanity was something that was a personal issue to the reclusive author. That is not to suggest that Dickinson herself was mad; she was not. However, social perceptions of a woman who willingly shut herself up in her father's house for all of her adult life were not always kind.

The late nineteenth century was a time when the social and cultural history of both madness and insanity was being severely questioned. Indeed, the trope of the sane/mad inversion reached its literary apogee in this period; by the 1860s, there was widespread psychiatric and public condemnation of chaining or restraining insane patients, something Dickinson specifically refers to in the final line of the poem: "And handled with a Chain□." However, while Dickinson's reference to chaining can obviously be seen to refer to the inhumane treatment of the insane or the "mad," it also, of course, conjures up images of slavery. Undoubtedly, dangerous slaves (those who refused to assent to their slavery), were shackled and frequently resold in the deep South. Dickinson recognizes that her own dissent, and indeed the dissent of any minority, may lead to similar treatment□chaining and silencing□so that "the Majority / In This, as All, prevail□." Thus, the tone of the poem is grim, suggesting the futility of resistance or dissent.

The opening lines of Dickinson's poem make two interesting suggestions: first, that there is a difference in the degree of madness that is acceptable, and second, coupling "Madness" (capital "M") with "Divinest" suggests not only that Madness is an important issue, but also that it is connected with the divine on some level. Moreover, it is

significant that Dickinson chooses to write "Much Madness" instead of simply "Madness." Thus Dickinson becomes the "discerning Eye" who sees the sense in what the "Majority" has otherwise stigmatized as madness. Clearly, Dickinson plays upon the word "Eye," also seen as "I"; she is able to "discern" (to comprehend) the "Madness" both with her physical eyes and with her person.

Dickinson's difficult and often confusing relationship with God is well documented among scholarly discourse and is recognizable in Dickinson's own letters to friends. Mary Augusta Jordon notes that early on, Dickinson writes: "my mother does not care for thought, and father, too busy with his briefs to notice what we do. . . . They are religious, except me." Because it is known that Emily Dickinson had read Emerson's essays, one must pay attention to the fact that there is a difference between the "divine" of traditional Christianity and the "divine" spoken of by the transcendentalists who emphasized personal experience and the role of nature in revealing "truth." On the one hand, Dickinson clearly mistrusted God and the divine, as is evidenced in many of her religious poems. Her poetry, therefore, is often rich with jeering irony and sarcasm. Others, however, are convinced that she was prophetic through her poetry.

One Dickinson scholar, Beth Maclay Doriani, insists that Emily Dickinson revised the convention of faith and expressed these visions, often with the intention of undermining them, through her poetry. In discussing Dickinson's religious poems, she argues that they "serve as powerful reminders of the mysteriousness of life, death, and God; they call their readers to consider what lies beyond the visible world." Indeed, the lines "Much Madness is divinest Sense□ / To a discerning Eye□ / Much Sense□ the starkest Madness□ / 'Tis the Majority" invoke images of the mystery associated with mental illness and conjure further vividly distinct pictures, as Doriani notes. Particularly, in this poem, Doriani argues that Dickinson "expresses the traditional idea of prophetic ecstasy or 'madness' as yielding divine truth . . . [giving] the lines [a] . . . distinctive emotional impulse." Consequently, the "discerning Eye" (I) of the poem is the "Majority" of social and cultural influence/opinion who have the power to label behavior "normal" or "mad." But the poem also questions madness itself□questions whether the invisibility of the label "madness," the unknowable quality of madness, is perhaps closer to the divine: "Much Madness" coupled later with "Much Sense" furthers this notion and also alludes to the notion of a "common sense" that is being ignored.

Finally, the poem displays an anger toward (mental/social) conflict, madness, and struggle. The anger is ambiguous at times: "Much Madness is divinest Sense□"; and more overt at others: "Demur□you're straightway dangerous□ / And handled with a Chain." As with most Dickinson poems, the motifs addressed in this poem are brief□the problematic notions associated with these social issues are teasingly short in description, always leaving the reader hungry for further thought. However, if her choice of language is slight, it is also clever and hard-hitting. The simplicity of her poems brush these larger issues□in this case, of patriarchal power, of the treatment of the insane, of the possible association with divine wisdom and a relationship with God□but they brush them enough that one contemplates the idea long after the lines have been read. She uses capital letters to indicate which words hold the most importance, such as Much, Madness, Sense, Eye, Majority, Assent, Demur, Chain. Each word she chooses

carefully to have an impact far beyond the simplicity of the word itself. Dickinson addresses some of the most controversial issues of the nineteenth century and, indeed, in the current one. In this, Dickinson is truly genius.

Source: Deneka Candace MacDonald, Critical Essay on "Much Madness Is Divinest Sense," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

There is a wide selection of audiotapes, recorded by various artists, of Dickinson's poetry. Julie Harris reads from Dickinson's poetry and letters in a tape called *Emily Dickinson Self-Portrait*. Harris won a Tony Award in 1977 for her portrayal of Dickinson in the one-woman play *The Belle of Amherst*.

Topics for Further Study

Find a complete collection of Dickinson's poems that contains a subject or category classification of her poetry. Choose at least five poems that could be interpreted as focusing on issues of self, identity, oppression, or some other topic that could be taken as a feminist concern. Write a paper as if you were a feminist theorist studying these particular poems.

The treatment of those who were deemed insane was a topic often discussed during the nineteenth century. Research the history of the asylums that existed in the United States during this time period, especially those in New England, focusing mainly on the female population that inhabited these institutions. What was the most significant malady? What were the treatments?

The film *Beautiful Dreamer* (1991) captures a portion of the lives of Dr. Maurice Burke and Walt Whitman as they come together in an attempt to look at insanity in a new and creative way. Watch this movie, then watch *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, another movie that deals with people who have been deemed insane. Compare the themes in these two movies. After watching both videos, write your own poem dealing with some aspect of madness and sanity.

Dickinson wrote hundreds of letters in her lifetime. In most of these letters, she included one or more poems. Pretend that you are Dickinson and that you have sent a poem to one of your closest friends. Make up a letter to go with this poem. Expand on Dickinson's ideas of how the definitions of sanity and madness are somewhat arbitrary concepts. Go deeper into her feelings of suppression in regards to her sense of individuality.

Compare and Contrast

1800s: The first women's rights convention is held in Seneca Falls, New York. Several years later, in Rochester, Susan B. Anthony registers and votes, stating that the 14th amendment gives her that right. Several days later she is arrested. At her trial, the judge does not allow her to testify on her own behalf, dismisses the jury, rules her guilty, and fines her $100, which she does not pay.

1900s: The Equal Rights Amendment bans sex discrimination in employment and education. Shortly after, Shirley Chisholm becomes the first black American to run for president. In 1974, Ella Grasso becomes the first woman governor.

Today: The women's rights movement has spread internationally, with United States women supporting causes in China, India, Africa, Afghanistan, and other countries. Women in Congress are still outnumbered: 9 out of 100 are women senators, 47 out of 436 are representatives.

1800s: The Civil War frees slaves, but more than 600 thousand people are killed in the battles.

1900s: During the twentieth century, America becomes involved in five separate wars, World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam, Korean, and Gulf Wars, with a total of more than 200 thousand casualties.

Today: The twenty-first century begins with an unexpected attack by terrorists on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. This attack precipitates the United States declaration of war on terrorism. Initial casualties in America are more than 3,000. International casualties are yet unknown.

1800s: The most prominent literary movements in the United States include the romantics and the transcendentalists.

1900s: As this century opens, realism gives way to a modernist movement in which experimentation is promoted. Writers such as Hilda Doolittle, e. e. cummings, Ezra Pound, and William Faulkner are associated with this period.

Today: Postmodernism spreads outside the confines of literature and is defined in general terms of non-realism and the nontraditional. Authors associated with this movement include Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Toni Morrison, among others.

What Do I Read Next?

Edgar Allan Poe's *Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (1966) contains the short story "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" in which a young man finds himself invited to a dinner party at a state institution for the insane. During the course of the meal, the so-called keepers of the institution tell the guest about the procedures of imprisonment that must be maintained to keep the insane people under control. As the dinner proceeds, the guest starts questioning the sanity of the keepers themselves. Poe explores the thin line between sanity and madness, a topic that nineteenth-century society found fascinating.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays were one of the great influences in Dickinson's life. *Self- Reliance: The Wisdom of Ralph Waldo Emerson as Inspiration for Daily Living* (1991) contains some of Emerson's best essays, including "Self-Reliance," "The Over-Soul," and "Spiritual Laws."

Michel Foucault is a French philosopher who focuses on social evolution. In *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1988), he expresses his thoughts on the history of how civilizations have dealt with insanity. Beginning in 1500, when the insane were simply considered eccentric, to the nineteenth century when asylums were in vogue, this book offers the reader a glimpse into the ever-changing role of people whose thoughts and/or behavior fell outside the boundaries of what was considered sane.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman first published the novella "The Yellow Wallpaper" in 1899. In this tale, she creates a narrator who is oppressed by her husband and who finds her freedom only by escaping into insanity. This story, which can be found in *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Stories* (1989) published by Bantam Classics, has become a symbol of oppressed women in every age, despite the fact that it was written in the early part of the nineteenth century.

Edited by Diana Scott, *Bread and Roses: An Anthology of 19th-20th Century Poetry by Women Writers* (1983) is a collection that contains representative women poets from both Britain and the United States. This anthology offers a rare opportunity to gain an overall view of the women who were writing during both centuries as well as the topics that concerned them.

Sylvia Plath was a poet who, in the 1950s, openly dealt with issues in her personal life, such as her depression, family relationships, individuality, rebellion, and sexuality. In addition to her poetry, Plath wrote an autobiographical novel in 1963, *The Bell Jar*, in which she tells the story of a young woman's mental breakdown.

In the 1970s, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar published their groundbreaking volume of feminist literary criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth- Century Imagination*. In this book, Gilbert and Gubar offer critical studies of Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Charlotte Brönte, and other notable women

novelists of the era. Perhaps more importantly, they also challenge prevailing thoughts about female creativity and offer some startling new insights that revolutionized literary criticism about women. The book was reprinted by Yale University Press in 2000.

Dickinson's poetry is often compared to that of one of her contemporaries, Walt Whitman. Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855, is a good place to start for such a comparison because it helps to illustrate the different outlooks of the time period.

Further Study

Dickinson, Emily, *Emily Dickinson Poems: First and Second Series*, edited by Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Tood, The World Publishing Company, 1992.

With a total of 1,775 poems, this is an authoritative collection of all her work. The poems are thoughtfully categorized and ordered.

Dickinson, Emily, *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson*, edited by Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith, Paris Press, 1998.

This book contains the personal letters that Dickinson sent to her sister-in-law. The letters have been described as, at times, fierce and erotic. Susan was one of Dickinson's rare friends as well as one of her most valued readers of her poetry.

Farr, Judith, ed., *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice Hall, 1995.

This book provides a wider vision of what the critics have to say about Dickinson's work. Whether you agree or disagree with their conclusions, the studies of her work offer different ways of reading her poetry.

Fuller, Jamie, *The Diary of Emily Dickinson: A Novel*, St. Martin's Press, 1996.

This fictional work supposedly contains reprints from a private diary that Dickinson kept between March 1867 and April 1868. The diary, which cast some light on Dickinson's private life, was said to have been found in a wall of her family home during renovations in 1916.

Liebling, Jerome, Christopher Benfy, and Polly Longsworth, *The Dickinsons of Amherst*, University Press of New England, 2001.

This is a collection of photographs that capture the buildings and landscape of Dickinson's world. The book contains more than a hundred pictures, including portraits of the Dickinson family. The book also includes essays by Dickinson scholars.

Sewall, Richard Benson, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, Harvard University Press, 1994.

First published in 1974, this book won the National Book Award. It is the first biography of Dickinson to rely on factual information, instead of on hearsay or speculation, and, as such, remains the definitive study of the poet and her work.

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Miller, Cristanne, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*, Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 2.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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