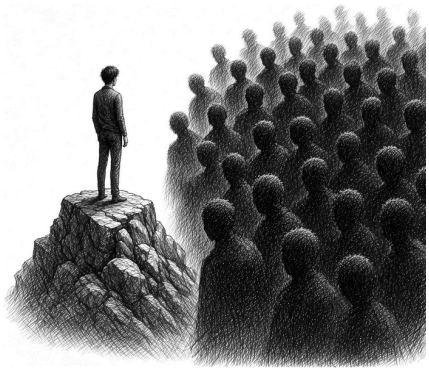
Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



Much Madness Is Divinest Sense

by Emily Dickinson

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.6

Dickinson wrote the poem around 1862; it was published in 1890. She lived an unusual, private life, and many neighbors thought her strange. The poem is built on paradoxes: statements that seem to contradict themselves but reveal a truth.

THE POEM

Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye;
Much sense the starkest madness.
'T is the majority
In this, as all, prevails.
Assent, and you are sane;
Demur, -- you're straightway dangerous,
And handled with a chain.

VOCABULARY

divinest — most holy or wise

discerning — able to judge well, perceptive

starkest — most complete, total

majority — the larger number of people

prevails — wins, rules

assent — agree

demur — object, disagree

straightway — immediately

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain the paradox in the first three lines.

2. What kind of person can see that “madness” may be “divinest sense”?

3. Who decides what counts as sane, according to the poem?

4. What happens to someone who will “Demur”?

5. Can you think of a person in history who was called mad or dangerous but was later proved right?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short poem (6–10 lines) built on a paradox, such as “the loudest silence” or “the bravest fear,” that reveals a truth about people.

Much Madness Is Divinest Sense — Answer Key

1. What looks like madness is often true wisdom, and what looks like common sense is often complete madness; it depends on who is judging.
2. Someone with "a discerning eye," who thinks independently.
3. "the majority": whoever agrees with the crowd is called sane.
4. They are called "straightway dangerous, / And handled with a chain": punished, locked up or silenced.
5. Accept supported examples (e.g. Galileo).

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/much-madness-is-divinest-sense-emily-dickinson/