Much Madness is divinest Sense
EMILY DICKINSON

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—

The right to dissent, to be a member of the minority, to espouse a new or unpopular idea or cause, is one of the most valued parts of the American dream of freedom and liberation. Yet America is a country of contradictions; its practices are not always in harmony with its ideals. America has not always been kind to its dissenters—the suffragists who first fought for women's right to vote, the “bonus army” of World War I veterans, the early labor organizers, the supporters of Martin Luther King, Jr. This short, powerful poem sums up this American paradox.

DEFINITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

Emily Dickinson had a fierce independence of mind and spirit. In her physical life, she seemed to express this independence in a negative way, for she withdrew from society, finally becoming an almost total recluse. In the life of the mind and spirit, she gave more positive expression to her independence. She championed the cause of abolition of slavery, for example. Above all, she expressed her devotion to the supreme value of individuality and to freedom in the many hundreds of short, brilliant poems that make her one of our greatest poets.

discerning (line 2) Observing with understanding; clearly recognizing a difference.

starkest (line 3) Most extreme; sheerest.

prevail (line 5) Triumph; be victorious.

assent (line 6) Agree.

demur (line 7) Disagree; object.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Emily Dickinson's words are skillfully used to mean something more than appears on the surface. The first line is a paradox. The only way “Madness” can be “Sense” is if there are two different points of view about the meanings of these words. Whose definition of “Madness” is used in this line? of “Sense”? In your own words, what does the whole line mean?

2. The third line is the same paradox in reverse. In this line, whose definition of “Sense” is used? of “Madness”? In your own words, what does this line mean?

3. Does the word “Eye” (line 2) literally mean “eye”? If not, what does it actually mean? (This use of a part for the whole is called synecdoche.)

4. By denotation, the word “Majority” (line 4) means simply “the greater number of people.” By connotation, what additional meaning does the word have as it is used in this poem?

5. The word “Chain” in the last line is another example of synecdoche. What larger idea does the word “Chain” suggest to your mind? Name two or three other objects that could be used to suggest the same larger idea that “Chain” represents.

6. What is the poet's viewpoint of much minority opinion? of much minority opinion? of the treatment of the minority by the majority? Do you agree?

7. This poem indirectly suggests a second message about the dangers of unthinking acceptance of word labels, such as “madness” and “sense.” Why can words such as “progress,” “rights,” and “freedom” be misleading?