

FRANK MADDEN



EXPLORING POETRY

Writing and Thinking About Poetry

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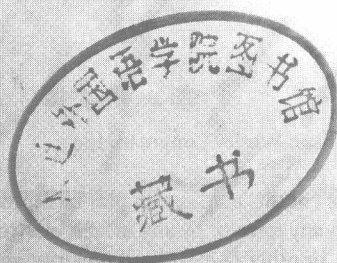
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Exploring Poetry

*Writing and Thinking
About Poetry*

Frank Madden

SUNY Westchester Community College



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For my brother, John: teacher, mentor, poet



PREFACE

We can ask of every assignment or method or text, no matter what its short term effectiveness: Does it get in the way of the live sense of literature? Does it make literature something to be regurgitated, analyzed, categorized, or is it a means toward making literature a more personally meaningful and self-disciplined activity?

—Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*

At the heart of *Exploring Poetry* is the belief that literature can have an important impact on students' lives, but that this impact will be felt only when students experience the "live sense of literature"—the joy, the sorrow, the comfort, and the wisdom that literature offers. Coupled with this belief is an acknowledgment that most students taking literature courses at colleges and universities in this country are not English majors. If asked why they are taking a literature course, they are likely to respond, "Because it's required." Or, "It fit my schedule." It is not evident to many students why literature is important. Other than completing the requirements for a course or curriculum, they don't know *why* they are reading it. Instruction in textual analysis and literary theory alone does not solve this problem. Students must have a stake in the process—a reason to care about literature. And they need the kind of support that will help them read with more confidence. It is the intention of this text to provide this support.

By encouraging students to see their reading in the light of their own experiences, the commentary, questions, and prompts in this book acknowledge the importance of their personal responses and authorize the "meaning making" role students play in the literary experience. The case study in this text expands this role further by helping students understand the relationship between the poems they read and the larger historical and cultural contexts from which these poems spring. Realizing their active role in this process gets students personally involved and gives them a reason to care about literature. Chapters on writing about poetry, critical thinking, and argumentation complete this experience by helping students understand that the construction of a coherent response is a process that changes with rereading and reflection—and that the quality of their interpretations is measured by the strength of the evidence they bring to support them.

Exploring Poetry is designed for instructors who believe, as I do, that a successful experience with poetry requires students' engagement as well as analysis—not only as motivation to complete the requirements of a course but as a prelude to a lifelong relationship with literature.

KEY FEATURES

The key features of this text are intended to support an expansive process of engaging students in the literary experience. By exploring poetry as an “experience” within a world of personal responses and contextual influences, these features encourage students to invest their emotions, to build on their knowledge and experience, and to think critically—to be fully involved with the live sense of literature.

Making Connections

Confident, experienced readers tap their storehouse of emotional and intellectual knowledge naturally, and, when they draw a blank, feel confident that other elements of the work will help them to make sense of it. Less experienced readers, however, need support and guidance to become confident readers. Questions and exercises in Part I, “Making Connections,” are designed to “sensitize” students to the emotional context of poetry by encouraging them to recall their own experiences and to read poems “impressionistically” and with more confidence. This process does not guarantee a masterful analysis, but it does help students acknowledge and build on what they know and feel when they read, enabling them to connect with poems more easily. Acknowledging, reviewing, and thinking critically about the responses students make as they read may provide them with valuable insights into poetry and themselves. These early chapters focus on the process of personal response as a starting point in a recursive sequence leading from engagement and reflection to formal critical tasks and literary interpretation—a journey from participating to observing responses.

Writing About Poetry

From journals to formal critical and research essays, students use writing to learn about poetry. The use of writing as the most important instructional tool in literature classes is well documented. Students who examine their own practices in reading and writing become more self-aware, more independent, and stronger readers and writers.

Critical Thinking

Whether they are reviewing their own judgments or citing evidence to support a critical essay, students are encouraged to think critically about their responses throughout this book. Of special note is Chapter 4, “Argumentation: Interpreting and Evaluating Poetry,” which focuses directly on the processes of critical thinking and argumentation. Explanations, examples, and exercises guide students through the processes of inductive reasoning and substantiation, interpretation and evaluation, and planning and supporting an argument. Issues of purpose, audience, and evidence are central to this discussion, which culminates in the writing of a critical essay.

Two Readers, Two Choices

Langston Hughes's poem "Theme for English B" is highlighted and followed by two sample student essays written from different perspectives. These essays illustrate diversity of opinion, exemplify ways in which the poem might be read, and demonstrate how students' own experiences, behaviors, values, and opinions are tools for deepening their understanding and appreciation of poetry.

Samples of Student Writing

There are five student essays and many other samples of students' writing throughout the text.

The Poems

The poems in this book, a broad selection of both classic and contemporary pieces, have been chosen for their quality, diversity, and appeal to students.

A Case Study on Poems and Painting

A case study, "**Thinking About Interpretation, Poetry and Painting**," includes nine famous paintings and poems written about them. This casebook concludes with a process, a student's journal responses and semantic maps, and product, the final draft of her essay that compares Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* and Anne Sexton's poem about it.

Questions and Prompts

Questions throughout this book tap students' responses without implying right or wrong answers. They encourage students to reflect and evaluate. Prompts in this book help students flesh out, clarify, and support their responses. They encourage students to ask their own questions—questions that open up, not shut down, additional possibilities. They respect the reader's role and encourage divergent response, but emphasize that the value of an assertion lies not in itself but in the nature of its supporting evidence.

Voice

The narrative "voice" of *Exploring Poetry* is informal and conversational. This book is intended to be read by students—to be accessible, friendly, and informative.

ORGANIZATION: USING THIS TEXT

Exploring Poetry can be used in many different ways. Its explanations, prompts, and poems are resources to be chosen by instructors and students as needed, in

or out of sequence, with maximum flexibility. Although the reading and writing activities in this book are organized in a sequence of increasing complexity, the recursive nature of both writing and responding to poetry is emphasized throughout.

For instructors who want to emphasize a reader-response approach and ask their students to keep journals or write response essays about the poems they read, **Part I, "Making Connections,"** provides a rich source of material. These chapters are more than an exploration of poetry. They are an exploration of the students who read and write about it. Students are encouraged to think about the ways that their own backgrounds and personalities, their understanding of others, their knowledge of texts and contexts—their "meaning making" processes—influence their responses to poetry. Questions that accompany the poems help students clarify their responses and develop them into text-supportable hypotheses and essays. **Chapter 1, "Participation: Personal Response and Critical Thinking,"** helps students develop connections to poetry through their own backgrounds and experiences. **Chapter 2, "Communication: Writing About Poetry,"** introduces students to aspects of literary craft through discussions of voice, description, and comparison—fostering the sensitivity to language necessary for a complete experience with literature. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the writing process, samples of drafts, and a final response essay.

Instructors who favor a more text-based approach may choose to skip Part 1 and move directly to **Part II, "Analysis and Argumentation."** **Chapter 3, "Exploration and Analysis: The Elements of Poetry,"** emphasizes the importance of close reading and analysis. A general introduction to poetry is followed by a comprehensive explanation of the elements that make poetry a distinct form. Carefully chosen selections illustrate and support these explanations. Wherever possible, explanations of the elements are illustrated with reference to students' experiences and are accompanied by specific examples from poems in the text.

Chapter 4, "Argumentation: Interpreting and Evaluating Poetry," guides students through the processes of critical thinking, reading, writing, and research. Students are reminded of the ways in which they use critical thinking in their own lives, and how similar methods of analysis and support can be used to interpret and evaluate poetry. Inductive thinking, substantiation, interpretation, and evaluation are explained and discussed. The use of argumentation to develop critical essays is presented and supported by student entries, giving students insights into how to develop their own ideas. Based on the elements discussed in Chapter 3, students are provided with questions, prompts, and checklists to help them develop standards. A comprehensive discussion of argumentation helps students see the difference between response and critical essays and suggests specific questions to ask when constructing an effective argument. The chapter concludes with a student's critical essay.

Part III, Alphabetically Arranged Anthology The readings cover a broad selection of classic and contemporary pieces, each chosen for its quality, diversity, and appeal to students.

Appendix A, "Critical Approaches to Literature," is a succinct discussion of major critical theories.

Appendix B, "Research and Documentation—Some Basics," explains what must be documented to evaluate Internet sources, plagiarism, the physical layout of a research essay, and the correct format for MLA documentation.

The **Glossary** provides a useful reference tool.

SUPPLEMENTS

A Workshop Guide for Creative Writing This laminated reference tool offers suggestions for students to keep in mind in a workshop situation—both as a participant and presenter. Blank space is provided for students to record additional guidelines provided by their instructor. Available FREE when value-packed with *Exploring Poetry*. Ask your Longman representative for details. ISBN 0-321-09539-1

The Longman Journal for Creative Writing This journal is designed to help students explore and discover their own writing habits and styles. Various features are provided that will incite students to practice many forms of writing such as: freewriting, concrete and abstract description, exploring the past, and exploring dreams. In addition, there are numerous exercises and activities on a variety of topics including: poetic and prose forms, image, voice, character, plot, setting, sound and rhythm, and theme. A great deal of space is also provided for students to record their thoughts and ideas whenever the urge strikes. Available FREE when value-packed with *Exploring Poetry*. Ask your Longman representative for details. ISBN 0-321-09540-5

Responding to Literature: A Writer's Journal This writer's journal provides students with their own personal space for writing. Writing prompts for responding to fiction, poetry, and drama are included. Available FREE when value-packed with *Exploring Poetry*. Ask your Longman representative for details. ISBN 0-321-09541-1

The Longman Guide to Columbia Online Style This 32-page booklet includes an overview of Columbia Online Style (COS), guidelines for finding and evaluating electronic sources, and examples for citing electronic sources. COS is a documentation style developed specifically for citing electronic sources. Available FREE when value-packed with *Exploring Poetry*. Ask your Longman representative for details. ISBN 0-321-06745-2

Researching On-line, Fifth Edition This supplement shows students how to do research on the Internet in an easy-to-follow, step-by-step format. Internet resources, such as the Internet, e-mail, and "real-time discussion," are explained with straightforward language and clear examples. ISBN 0-321-09277-5

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Penguin Program In cooperation with Penguin Putnam Inc., one of Longman's sibling companies, we are proud to offer a variety of Penguin paperbacks at a significant discount when packaged with any Longman title. Excellent additions to any literature course, Penguin titles give students the opportunity to explore contemporary and classic works.

Analyzing Literature, Second Edition This brief supplement provides critical reading strategies, writing advice, and sample student papers to help students interpret and discuss literary works in a variety of genres. Suggestions for collaborative activities and online research on literary topics are also featured, as are numerous exercises and writing assignments. ISBN 0-321-05504-7

Audio- and Videotapes For qualified adoptors, an impressive selection of videotapes and Longman audiotapes is available to enrich students' experience of poetry.

Exploring Literature Web site The *Exploring Literature* Web site can be found at <http://www.ablongman.com/madden>. This site includes in-depth information about featured authors, activities for writing about poetry, and helpful links to poetry and research sites.

English Pages (<http://www.ablongman.com/englishpages>) This Web site provides professors and students with continuously updated resources for reading, writing, and research practice in four areas: composition, literature, technical writing, and basic skills. Features include simulated searches, where students simulate the process of finding and evaluating information on the World Wide Web, and first-person essays that show students how everyday men and women have applied what they have learned in composition to a wide variety of writing issues and research topics.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to many people over the years who have had a direct and indirect influence on my teaching philosophy—and on the writing of this book. Most notable among these teacher-scholars is Louise Rosenblatt, my teacher at NYU

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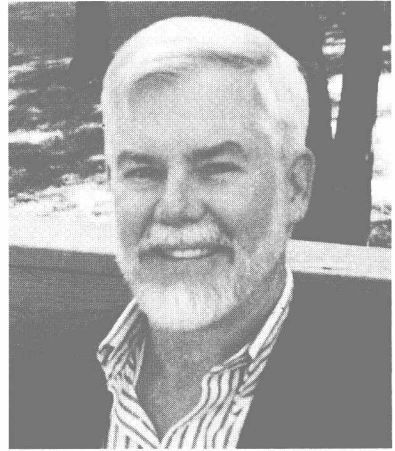
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♦ ABOUT THE AUTHOR ♦

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Frank Madden is Professor and Chair of the English Department at SUNY Westchester Community College. His undergraduate degree is from St. John's University, where he played baseball, and his Ph.D. is from New York University. He has taught in graduate programs at CCNY, Iona College, and the New School for Social Research, and in 1998 was Chair of the NCTE College Section Institute on the Teaching of Literature. He is a recipient of the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, the Foundation for Westchester Community College Faculty Award for Excellence in Scholarship, and the Phi Delta Kappan Educator of the Year Award from Iona College. He was Chair of the College Section of the NCTE from 1995–1998 and has served on the Executive Committees of the NCTE, the MLA-ADE, the SUNY Council on Writing, and as Chair of the MLA ad hoc Committee on Teaching. He is currently Chair of TYCA and serves on the CCCC and NCTE Executive Committees. His articles and chapters about the teaching of literature have appeared in a variety of books and journals, including College English, College Literature, English Journal, Computers and Composition, Computers and the Humanities, and the ADE Bulletin. He is author of Exploring Literature (Longman, 2001) and Exploring Fiction (Longman, 2002). He lives in Brewster, New York, with his wife, Sharon, and they have two daughters, Michelle and Suzanne.



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