

Poetry in America: Grade 7

In this unit, students study poetry using lessons designed in partnership with Poetry in America, whose mission is to bring poetry to the world. Each sub-unit contains three lessons focused on one poem; students may work through all sub-units at one time, or each sub-unit may be taught independently. In the three lessons within each sub-unit, students look carefully at the language and form the poet uses and reflect on the poem's topic and themes. They have conversations about the poem with their classmates and also listen to poets, celebrities, academics, and everyday citizens discuss the poem in embedded videos within the lessons. Students have the opportunity to try on the poet's use of language, craft, and structure in creative writing assignments.

In Sub-unit 1, students read Kay Ryan's poem "Carrying a Ladder," which conjures up the hilarity, frustrations, and rewards of hauling around a real ladder as a metaphor for describing very real human emotions and experiences.

In Sub-unit 2, students consider what it means to be an immigrant and an American as they read Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus"—the poem etched on the Statue of Liberty.

In Sub-unit 3, students consider the personal and cultural background that African American poet Richard Hayden drew on for his iconic poem "Those Winter Sundays."

Core texts your student will read:

- "Carrying a Ladder" by Kay Ryan
- "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus
- "Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden

What my student will do/learn:

In Sub-unit 1, students work with Kay Ryan's poem "Carrying a Ladder."

- Students work with concrete images and scenes as a means to unpacking the poem's possible figurative meanings.
- Students compose their own extended metaphor poem to express something they "carry" with them.

In Sub-unit 2, students study Emma Lazarus's iconic poem "The New Colossus."

- Students analyze the imagery, symbol, form, and allusion the poet uses to compare the different values of the Old World and the New World.
- Students may interview a friend or family member about their immigration experience, or research recent media pieces that focus on immigration.
- Students write a poem addressed to the Statue of Liberty, describing the modern experience or understanding of what it means to be an immigrant.

In Sub-unit 3, students read Richard Hayden's poem "Those Winter Sundays."

- Students build their knowledge of the blues musical form and the sonnet poetic form and discuss how those influences are reflected in Hayden's poem.
- Students use his poem as an inspiration for writing their own ode to an unsung hero in their life.

Here are some conversation starters that you can use during this unit to promote discussion and encourage continued learning with your student.

Read the poem "Carrying a Ladder" with your student.

1. Which description of carrying a ladder struck you as the funniest? The most accurate?
2. What do you think is meant by the line, "We are always really carrying a ladder, but it's invisible"?
3. Can you share the metaphor poem you wrote about something invisible you carry? (Provide feedback to your student by celebrating their poem and responding to something specific as a reader. For example, "The line in your poem, 'my toes always pinched; my old shoe soles too worn for this new landscape' paints a picture of how awkward it can feel in middle school—a new stage of life that you are still figuring out.")

Read the poem "The New Colossus" with your student.

1. What phrases or images really catch your attention when you think of this poem and the Statue of Liberty? What did those phrases or images make you think about this symbol?
2. As you read the poem together, find some sounds that get repeated in the poem. What types of ideas or emotions are emphasized by these sound patterns?
3. Can you share the piece you wrote in response to "The New Colossus"? (Provide feedback to your student by celebrating their piece and responding to something specific as a reader. For example, "Your description, 'working for the now left little time for dreaming of the future' was a powerful way to describe your grandfather's first few years as an immigrant.")

Read the poem "Those Winter Sundays" with your student.

1. In these lessons, you watched President Biden discuss the poem and his relationship with his father. What did you learn about the President's understanding of this poem?
2. What do you think this poet wants to say about the relationship between this speaker and his father? Which line really seems to communicate this idea to you?
3. Can you share the poem you wrote in the style of "Those Winter Sundays"? (Provide feedback to your student by celebrating their poem and responding to something specific as a reader. For example, "This poem about our neighbor's patience in caring for her elderly mother really celebrates her gentle manner. It is really important to notice things like this. Thank you for sharing it.")