

Poetry in America: Grade 6

In this unit, students study poetry using lessons designed in partnership with Poetry in America, whose mission is to bring poetry into classrooms and living rooms around 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. Students have time to understand what the poem is describing, to look carefully at the language and form the poet uses, and to 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 work with Richard Blanco's poem "Looking for The Gulf Motel," which recalls a childhood vacation with his Cuban immigrant family.

In Sub-unit 2, Coleman Barks's poem "Glad" playfully juxtaposes a young girl's heroics on the soccer field with the imagery and diction of an epic gladiatorial battle.

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:

- "Looking for The Gulf Motel" by Richard Blanco
- "Glad" by Coleman Barks
- "Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden

What my student will do/learn:

In Sub-unit 1, students work with Richard Blanco's poem "Looking for The Gulf Motel."

- Students discuss how Blanco uses the "mirror effect" to allow readers to connect their own childhood memories to his descriptions of special times with his family.
- Students take a turn at composing their own version of a "Gulf Motel" poem.

In Sub-unit 2, students work with Coleman Barks's poem "Glad."

- Students analyze Barks's use of language and the sonnet form to help them reflect on what the poem may be saying about the meaning of winning and losing.
- Students have the chance to write a poem about their own "Glad" moment of unexpected heroism.

In Sub-unit 3, students work with 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 “Looking for The Gulf Motel” with your student.

1. What line in the poem gave you a strong picture of this family?
2. Which line or description made you think of something in your own experience?
3. Can you point out a place where Blanco used a sensory detail that helped you see, smell, taste, or hear what he was describing?
4. Can you share the poem you wrote in the style of “Looking for The Gulf Motel”? (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 stomach climbs and dives along with the roller coaster,’ reminds me of how much you love amusement parks.”)

Read the poem “Glad” with your student.

1. What makes this one girl feel glad—in spite of her team’s loss? Which line best describes her sense of being glad?
2. Who were the gladiators? Why do you think the poet wants us to think of gladiators when we read this poem?
3. Can you share the poem you wrote in the style of “Glad”? (Provide feedback to your student by celebrating their poem and responding to something specific as a reader. For example, “It was a great idea to write about your mile run in PE class as an epic journey! I like the sounds when you describe the start as ‘a crowd of crabby competitors.’”)

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. What are some of the sounds that stick out to you as you read the poem? What types of emotions do you think those sounds communicate?
4. 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.”)