

Unit 3 Rationale

WHY THIS POETRY UNIT IS IMPORTANT

For many readers—adults and children alike—poetry can be challenging. Readers often find poems inaccessible and suspect that they contain secret meanings they cannot decode. In fact, poetry’s reliance on symbolic and figurative language opens up rather than closes off meaning, giving readers the power of personal interpretation. This unit teaches students tools and strategies for approaching poetry, training them in the methods and devices poets use and equipping them to read and interpret both formal and free verse poems. It gives them continual opportunities to create poems themselves, allowing them to practice what they have learned. The poems in this unit are drawn from various literary traditions over the last several centuries, and they range from William Blake’s 18th-century verse to the work of such contemporary writers as Virgil Suárez and Marie Howe. We have not chosen poems written specifically for children; instead, we have selected poems both younger and older readers will enjoy. The poets come from many backgrounds and nations: the poets included are of European, Middle Eastern, African American, Native American, and Hispanic descent. The poems themselves are similarly diverse; some employ precise meter and rhyme schemes, while others use free verse and experimentation. Uniting them all is their engagement with language and its potential. A central goal of this unit is teaching students how to explore that potential. American poet Emily Dickinson once compared poetry to “possibility,” perhaps a surprising metaphor in her time, but one that is apt. Poems are often ambiguous, using figurative language to yoke together apparent opposites, to allow imagination and creativity to flourish, to startle readers with glimpses of the world as it might be. Rather than conceal one secret meaning, available only to privileged readers who understand how to unlock a poem, the best poems open themselves to many possible interpretations. To that end, this unit encourages students to express their views on a poem and it shies away from listing one “correct” meaning. That’s not to say that wrong interpretations are impossible—Walt Whitman, who died in 1892, did not write poems about World War I. Many student responses, however, are valid, so long as those interpretations are rationally supported by evidence from the poem’s text, which is what the CCSS-ELA requires. This unit, which focuses on poetry, like others in this curriculum is built to the CCSS-ELA, and routinely encourages and enables students to read texts closely and carefully. To accomplish that, and in recognition of the differences between poetry and other genres of writing, this unit’s structure, materials, and activities differ at times from those of other CKLATM units. Throughout the unit, students practice close reading and writing. They learn about many of the formal elements of poetry as they identify those elements arising organically from the text. They also pair that work with writing poetry themselves. This allows them to

demonstrate their understanding and analysis of the poems through creative application and to become detailed writers. In turn, this bolsters their ability to analyze others' writing. These activities offer students a number of tools with which to approach poetry, building their confidence to interpret poems and their engagement in the task.