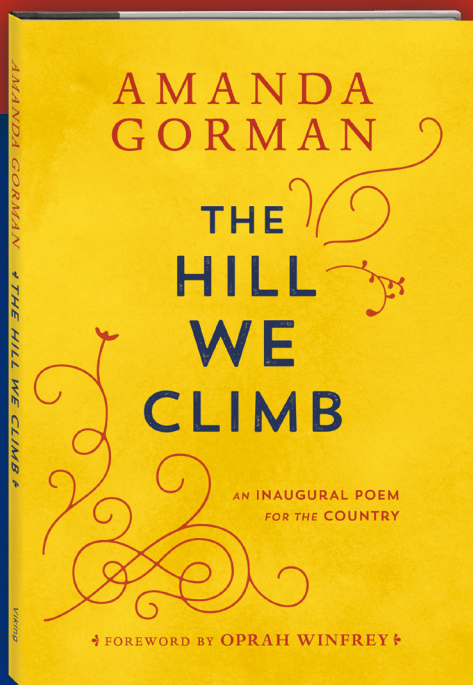




THE DISCUSSION GUIDE TO THE INAUGURAL POEM



BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

IT WAS A BRIGHT AND CRISP MORNING AT THE NATION'S CAPITOL when Amanda Gorman recited her poem "The Hill We Climb," at President Joseph Biden's inauguration on January 20, 2021. For many Americans, the inauguration represented a welcome turning point after four contentious years marked by racism, xenophobia, and white nationalism. A pandemic gripped and divided the country. Thus, a promise of hope filled the air as Inaugural Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman took the stage.

By the time she finished reading the poem she composed for that day, that promise was fulfilled.

ABOUT THE POET

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AMANDA GORMAN is the youngest presidential inaugural poet in US history. She is a committed advocate for the environment, racial equality, and gender justice. Amanda's activism and poetry have been featured on *The Today Show*, PBS Kids, and *CBS This Morning*, and in *The New York Times*, *Vogue*, *Essence*, and *O, The Oprah Magazine*. In 2017, Urban Word named her the first-ever National Youth Poet Laureate of the United States. After graduating cum laude from Harvard University, she now lives in her hometown of Los Angeles.

INTRODUCING THE POEM

We've braved the belly of the beast.
We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,
And the norms and notions of what "just is"
Isn't always justice.

And yet the dawn is ours before we knew it.
Somehow, we do it.
Somehow, we've weathered and witnessed
A nation that isn't broken, but simply
unfinished.

MEETING THE MOMENT✧

Before introducing the poem, ask students about the specific occasion of a presidential inauguration, a significant and historic public event that evokes many expectations. Invite students to consider what expectations audiences might have for this event, generally, and at this moment, specifically. Students should also consider the multiple audiences for the inauguration: What might members of different political parties be listening for? How might an older person's expectations differ from students their age? How might a person of color respond?



PREVIEWING THE POEM✧

Provide students with excerpts from the poem and ask them to journal: What does this line mean to you? What does this line make you think about or wonder?

- ♣ "What 'just is' / Isn't always justice."
- ♣ "A nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished."
- ♣ "being American is more than a pride we inherit"
- ♣ "democracy can be periodically delayed, / It can never be permanently defeated."
- ♣ "History has its eyes on us."

Students could also be introduced to the poem by responding to thematic questions:

- ♣ What is the difference between quiet and peace?
- ♣ How do you define justice?
- ♣ What does it mean to be a work in progress?
- ♣ How can we prevail over catastrophe?

ENGAGING WITH THE POEM

Each activity can be done separately or together. If together, the activities are best done in order, as understanding deepens with each engagement of the poem.

RESPONDING TO GORMAN'S READING✦

Have students watch Gorman's reading of the poem twice. During the first viewing, ask students to simply listen to Gorman's performance and then journal: What ideas stood out and why? Then ask students to listen to Gorman's poem again. As they listen, students should write down words and phrases that stand out. Alternatively, students can draw what they see as they listen to the poem. Ask students to share what they wrote or drew, leading them to unpack their responses.

GETTING UP CLOSE TO THE TEXT✦

Divide students into small groups. Copy the poem onto large poster paper, leaving space around the margins for annotation. In small groups, students silently annotate the poem with what they notice and wonder. Encourage students to respond both to the text and to each others' comments. When finished, students do a gallery walk, noting their observations.

Use this opportunity to discuss various poetic devices. For example, how does Gorman's use of enjambment contribute to the meaning of the poem? Or consider the double meanings of *arm* and the repeated sound of *harm* in stanza 14. Similarly, in the next stanza, discuss the alliterative word play: "we grieved, we grew . . . we hurt, we hoped . . . we tired, we tried." Finally, ask students to list questions they still have. For example, some students may wonder about the "belly of the beast" (stanza 9), which provides an opportunity to identify this biblical allusion to the Old Testament story of Jonah and the whale (see additional allusions below).

FINDING PATTERNS AND REPETITION✦

Invite students to examine patterns and repetition. Ask: What words, ideas, or images repeat? What purpose does this repetition serve? For example, Gorman writes, "If we merge mercy with might, and might with right, / Then love becomes our legacy, / And change, our children's birthright." How does the rhyming and repetition impact the messaging? Similarly, point out the decision to repeatedly use the collective pronoun "we" throughout. Who is "we" in Gorman's view?

UNPACKING ALLUSIONS✿

One of the features of Gorman’s poem is its intertextuality—how it references other historical and literary texts through skillful allusion. Students may not know all of these allusions. Ask them to research the allusions in pairs or small groups, identify where the allusions occur, and discuss their effects. How do these texts “talk” to one another? Point out that many of the allusions are rooted in social justice and civil rights and why this is important.

- ✿ “Sermon on the Mount,” biblical story (title)
- ✿ “Gettysburg Address,” speech by Abraham Lincoln (stanza 10)
- ✿ “The Preamble to the Constitution” (stanza 12)
- ✿ “I Have a Dream,” speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (stanza 13)
- ✿ “History Has Its Eyes on You,” song by Lin-Manuel Miranda (stanza 18)
- ✿ “Still I Rise,” poem by Maya Angelou (stanza 24)
- ✿ “I, too” and “Still Here,” poems by Langston Hughes (stanza 25)

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER (THEME)✿

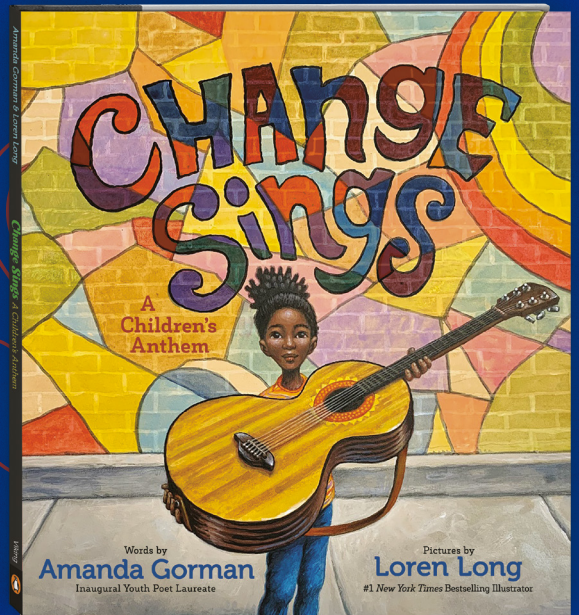
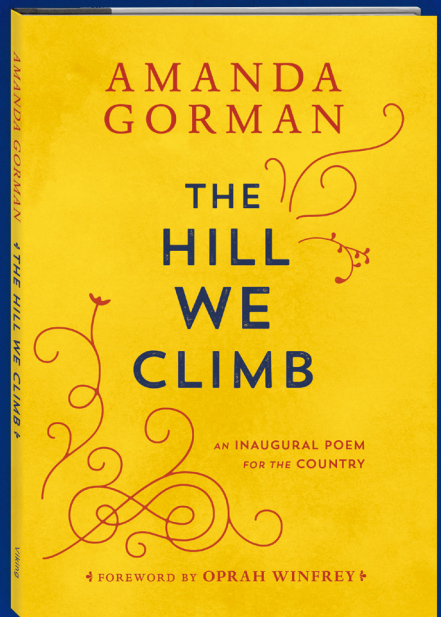
Meaningful analysis of Gorman’s poem demands a critical conversation around its context. Revisit stanzas through a sociopolitical lens: What current events and issues, such as the Black Lives Matter and other racial justice movements, does the poem ask us to think about?

Ultimately, Gorman’s poem presents readers with an argument—an argument for a particular vision of the United States. Ask students to mark lines where Gorman defines what America is and isn’t. Gorman presents a vision of America that is “unfinished” but relentlessly hopeful. The title implies that America is still on its way “up” but has yet to reach its peak. Discuss: What barriers continue to stand in the way of America fulfilling its full promise? And what are one, two, or three things that students can do today, tomorrow, and in the future to make that happen?

THREE WAYS TO EXTEND THIS LESSON

- 1 Encourage students to compare “The Hill We Climb” with previous inaugural poems.
- 2 Encourage students to perform their own renditions of “The Hill We Climb.”
- 3 Deepen students’ understanding of social justice by studying protest poems, songs, and spoken word.

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GORMAN
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