

STUDENT LESSON AND TEACHER MATERIALS

# “The Hill We Climb”

by Amanda Gorman



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## Teacher Lesson Brief

### Preparation:

- This lesson contains a number of links to various internet resources. Please review the links to determine which ones which will be useful for your students.
- Students can read the text of Amanda Gorman’s poem online. If you are able to access printed copies of the poem, distribute them to students.
- Determine whether you would like students to work with the optional part of Activity 2.

### Teacher Notes

#### Activity 1: Poetic Voice for Page and Stage

##### Possible Responses:

3. Students might notice vivid imagery, parallel structures, patterns of sound, repetition and/or contrast, or connection/development of images or ideas from the beginning of the poem to the end.
4. Support students to notice how Gorman performs the lines—how she uses her voice, her phrasing, her gestures, and her facial expression to emphasize an important image or idea.

#### Activity 2: Civic Voice

##### Possible Responses:

1. Some possible themes students might note: the pain of the past; the hope of the future; the democratic work toward a more perfect union; redemption, renewal, and reconciliation; the power of “we”
2. Students should note lines that focus on the idea of the destruction—of the nation, of democracy, of people. They should then notice that the lines about possible destruction are followed by images of prevailing and rebuilding. They might also note the use of the inclusive “we.”

3. Gorman recites her poem about the climb toward the best values of democracy on the very steps that climb to the seat of that democracy.
4. Students should note that Gorman is a poet taking part in an important moment in the civic life of the country. They will have a range of responses for the ways in which her poem urges listeners to participate in American democracy.

### Activity 3:

#### Possible Responses:

1. Students may note the *end rhyme* example: true/ **grew**; and the *alliteration*: we **g**rieved, we **g**rew/ we **h**urt, we **h**oped/ we **t**ired, we **t**ried. When Gorman recites these lines, she punches out the alliterative sounds in each phrase (**g**rieved, **g**rew) and even uses her hands to emphasize the connections between these words.
2. Answers will vary, but students should connect the physical performance to some aspect of the sound patterns or form of the poem on the page.
- 3–4. Answers will vary. For example, if a speaker emphasized the phrase “if nothing else” in the example from #1, they would highlight the ultimate quality of what is described on the next three lines.
- 5–6. Answers can vary. Students might notice that Biden’s speech shares many qualities with a poem. It was written to be spoken, so the writer separates key phrases into their own lines, perhaps to remind him to pause. The speech has many repeating or parallel phrases, which help the listener have a clear sense that they are connected to one another. And the speech contains phrases that are not complete sentences, but work to paint a picture when spoken. Support students to note that many of these techniques are critical to poetry, where the form and sound of the words on the page play a big role in communicating the poem to its audience.

# Background and Context

As part of the inauguration of President Joe Biden on January 21, 2021, poet Amanda Gorman read the poem she composed for the occasion, “The Hill We Climb.”

An **occasional poem** is a poem written for, or to commemorate or reflect on, a particular event. Often, these poems are written to be read aloud.

An **inaugural poem** is a type of occasional poem written to mark a presidential inauguration. But not every inauguration features an inaugural poem. Throughout America’s history, **only four presidents have invited poets to read at their inaugurations.** Most recently, Amanda Gorman wrote and performed “The Hill We Climb” for President Joe Biden’s inauguration in 2021.

## AN OCCASIONAL POEM

In the following activities, we will consider Amanda Gorman’s “The Hill We Climb” as written and as performed.

Begin by reading Gorman’s poem. ([You can find the full text here; scroll down to read.](#))

Then, [watch Gorman’s performance](#) on Inauguration Day.

## Activity 1: Poetic voice for page and stage

**Written poetry:** In writing strictly for the page, writers often strive to convey attitude, mood and personality, and even intended audience, through the choice and arrangement of particular words on the page. “**Voice**” in poetry for the page is conveyed through silent print.

**Performed poetry:** Performers of music and poetry on stage also create and cultivate their own “voice.” In this context, “**voice**” refers to something uniquely powerful in the interpretation or presentation of words out loud.

### Directions:

1. Begin by reading Gorman’s poem silently to yourself. (Your teacher will provide a copy or you can find the full text [here](#); scroll down to read.)
2. Which lines or phrases stick out to you most? If you have a printed copy of the poem, underline or highlight the lines or phrases you chose. Copy 2-3 of your chosen lines or phrases.

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AN OCCASIONAL POEM

3. What is it that strikes you about those particular lines and phrases? Is it the way the words or lines look? The way they sound?

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4. Now, **watch Gorman's performance**. Which lines in "The Hill We Climb" stood out to you when delivered by the poet's actual voice, out loud? If you have a printed copy of the poem, underline or highlight those lines or phrases.

Were these the same lines you identified in your own reading?

- If yes, what is it about the lines that gave them such resonance on both the page and stage?

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- If not, why not? What is different when the poem is read aloud?

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5. Now, try reading "The Hill We Climb" aloud.

Did you read any parts differently from how Gorman read them? Why? Take a few moments to note any differences between your performance and hers.

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## Activity 2: Civic Voice

**Situating the text in history:** Amanda Gorman wrote “The Hill We Climb” in part as a **response** to the storming of the **Capitol** on January 6, 2021, when rioters charged the steps and broke into the halls of Congress. At the inauguration of President Biden two weeks after this insurrection, Gorman read her poem aloud while standing on those same steps.

**Civic Voice:** “Voice” is also a term used to describe participation in the wider society. The word captures the idea that expressing your political opinions is part of being a citizen. For example, we often encourage one another to vote, or to participate in the political process in other ways, in order to “make your voice heard.”

### Directions:

1. Reread the poem and annotate repeated ideas or topics. Identify and discuss the poem’s key **themes**.

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2. Can you identify moments in the poem that seem to be written in *response* to the insurrection (the storming of the Capitol)? Note 2-3 phrases or lines and explain what those lines communicate about how Americans should respond to this crisis.

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## AN OCCASIONAL POEM

3. Take a moment to consider the significance not only of the *occasion*, but also the *location*, at which Gorman read her poem aloud. How does the setting for her performance amplify the significance of her words?

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4. How is Gorman’s poem an expression of “civic voice”?

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### Optional:

Watch [Amanda Gorman’s TED Talk](#) about her understanding of the role of poetry in civic and political life. Then discuss:

- In what ways does Amanda Gorman feel that poetry is the voice of the people?
- Gorman says that poetry is not about having the right answers, but about asking the right questions. What questions do you think she is trying to ask her listeners in “The Hill We Climb”?

## Activity 3: Poetry and Prose

Now that we've explored different meanings of "voice," let's look at the relationship between different forms of writing and **voice**. How might the way poetry and prose are written suggest the way they should be read aloud—where pauses should be or where emphasis should fall?

### Terms:

**End Rhyme:** *End rhyme* is when the last word or syllables in two or more lines rhyme with each other.

**Alliteration:** *Alliteration* is the repetition of initial letter(s) or sound(s) in a group of words.

**Assonance:** *Assonance* occurs when nearby words (rhyming or non-rhyming) have the same vowel sound, but the consonants are different. Example: the repetition of the short "a" sound in *ladder/matter*.

### Directions:

Poetry: To begin, watch Amanda Gorman's performance while rereading "The Hill We Climb."

1. Consider how Gorman recites the following lines:

Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:  
That even as we grieved, we grew  
That even as we hurt, we hoped  
That even as we tired, we tried

What sound patterns and rhythms stand out to you as you hear her read?

AN OCCASIONAL POEM

- 2. Can you identify 1-2 additional places where Gorman appears to make a deliberate choice in how she recites based on the techniques of poetry (end rhyme, alliteration, assonance, etc.) that she has employed?

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- 3. Can you imagine other ways to recite these same words, phrases, or entire lines? If so, how would you recite them? Explain why you would recite them that way.

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- 4. How could your different ways of reciting affect the meaning of the text?

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**Prose:**

Now let's watch President Biden deliver his inaugural speech.

5. Look over the printed version of his speech. Can you point to key parts of the text and identify how certain pauses or points of emphasis he made might have been influenced by how the writing appears on the page?
  
6. Which parts of the speech read like prose, and why? Which parts read like poetry, and why? Which features make this speech fit your understanding of prose and/or poetry?

## Activity 4: Write an Occasional Poem

Amanda Gorman's occasional poem was written to celebrate the Inauguration of a president. But many other events can also inspire a poet to create an **occasional poem**. **Occasional poems** are usually meant to celebrate or address a public event in a way that will be meaningful to those who have gathered for an occasion. Now it is your turn to create a poem that celebrates or reflects on an event or occasion that you want to commemorate publicly.

- Think about an event that stands out in your mind. Maybe it is an event that shaped you, or shaped your family or your society in some way.
- It might be a personal event that you feel has communal significance and is important to commemorate with others—an achievement, a fun occasion or milestone with friends, your grandmother's birthday.
- It might be a bigger event or issue that feels important - a neighborhood issue or a news event that you want to reflect on.

Write an occasional poem to commemorate or reflect on your event. Consider the images, words, and sounds that can help communicate the event and its impact to your audience.



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