

Meet Amanda Gorman, America's First Youth Poet Laureate

An Introduction to a Poet...

Do you know who Amanda Gorman is? After Jan. 20, many more people will know her name since, at 22, she is now the youngest inaugural poet in U.S. history. Committed to connecting literacy to the project of democracy, she considers reading and writing to be instruments of social change.





Introduction: *(pick is linked to Ted Talk)*

How a 22-year Old L.A. Native Became Biden's Inauguration Poet!

Like most of us, Amanda Gorman has been cooped up at home because of the pandemic. In her case, that meant staying in her West Los Angeles apartment binge-watching “[The Great British Baking Show](#).” Unlike most of us, she got some very exciting news recently via Zoom: She’d been handpicked to read a poem at President Joe Biden’s [inauguration](#).

The first lady, [Jill Biden](#), is a fan of her work and convinced the inaugural committee that Gorman would be a perfect fit. Gorman, all of 22, became the youth poet laureate of Los Angeles at age 16 in 2014 and the [first national youth poet laureate](#) three years later.

On Wednesday January 20th, she became the youngest poet to write and recite a piece at a presidential inauguration, following in the considerably more experienced footsteps of [Maya Angelou](#) and [Robert Frost](#).

Her precocious path was paved with both opportunities and challenges, an early passion for language and the diverse influences of her native city. Gorman grew up near Westchester but spent the bulk of her time around the [New Roads School](#), a socioeconomically diverse private school in Santa Monica. Her mother, Joan Wicks, teaches middle school in Watts. Shuttling among the neighborhoods gave Gorman a window onto the deep inequities that divide ZIP Codes.

“Having a mom who is a teacher had a huge impact on me,” said Gorman, who witnessed her ability to empower young people through language. Long before she began reading her own poetry aloud in grand spaces for grand occasions — from the Fourth of July to the inauguration of a new president of Harvard University — Gorman was falling in love, simultaneously, with the written and spoken word.



Her relationship with poetry dates at least to the third grade, when her teacher read Ray Bradbury’s “Dandelion Wine” to the class. She can’t recall what metaphor caught her attention, but she remembers that it reverberated inside her.

Gorman still keeps a children’s version of “Jane Eyre” that she bought at a dollar store, the artifact of a habit that racked up late fees at several L.A. libraries. Once a book becomes a part of

her, she has a hard time giving it back. “My friends will be, like, ‘You’d love this book. Let me lend it to you,’” she said. “And I’m, like, ‘Listen to me: Don’t.’”

Her first foray into public speaking came even earlier: a second-grade monologue in the voice of Chief Osceola of Florida’s Seminole tribe.

“I’m sure anyone who saw it was kind of aghast at this 15-pound Black girl who was pretending to die on stage as a Native American chief,” she said. “But I think it was important in my development because I really wanted to do justice to the story and bring it to life. It was the first time that I really leaned into the performance of text.”



Gorman is a lot better at it now, but still working on her confidence as a public speaker. In fact, like her predecessor [Angelou](#) and [the president-elect](#), she grapples with a speech impediment.

All writers, she said, experience anxiety about the quality of their work. “But for me, there was this other echelon of pressure, which is: Can I *say* that which needs to be said?” Gorman has labored to perfect sounds most people take for granted. The R has been a particular challenge. The girl who would grow up to perform in front of Lin-Manuel Miranda, Al Gore, Hillary Clinton and Malala Yousafzai struggled for years not to say “poetry.”

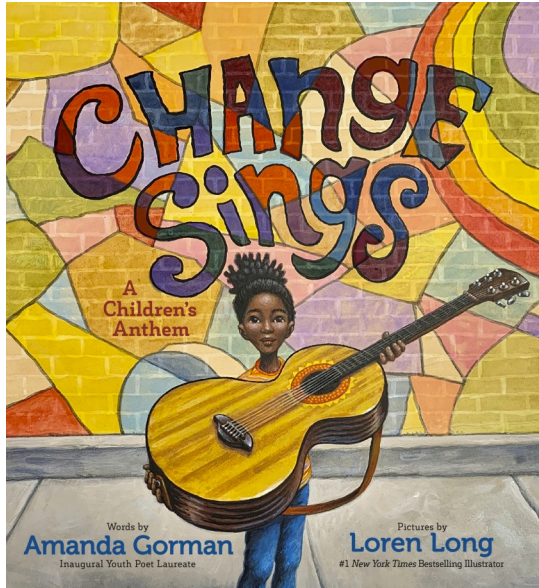
“But I don’t look at my disability as a weakness,” said Gorman. “It’s made me the performer that I am and the storyteller that I strive to be. When you have to teach yourself how to say sounds,

when you have to be highly concerned about pronunciation, it gives you a certain awareness of sonics, of the auditory experience.”

Whereas Angelou had strangers at the supermarket inquiring about her progress in the run-up to her reading at Bill Clinton’s inauguration, Gorman has written her poem in pandemic-induced solitude. But the enormity of the task was not lost on her. While writing “The Hill We Climb” — which should take about six minutes to read at the ceremony in Washington, D.C. — the poet listened to music that helped put her “in a historic and epic mind-set,” including soundtracks from “The Crown,” “Lincoln,” “Darkest Hour” and “Hamilton.”

Gorman also wrote her poem while watching [pro-Trump extremists storm the U.S. Capitol](#), a scene she found “jarring and violating” but not surprising. “I think we’d seen the signs and symptoms for a while,” she said.

The attack on Congress made its way into her work — not as a rupture but as a harsh fact of our history. “I wasn’t trying to write something in which those events were painted as an irregularity or different from an America that I know,” said Gorman. “America is messy. It’s still in its early development of all that we can become. And I have to recognize that in the poem. I can’t ignore that or erase it. And so I crafted an inaugural poem that recognizes these scars and these wounds. Hopefully, it will move us toward healing them.”



Gorman, who majored in sociology at Harvard, has spoken up in public forums about a broad range of issues, including [racism and police brutality](#); [abortion bans in the U.S.](#); and the [incarceration of migrant children](#). She is also the first person to announce her intention to run for president in 2036, the first election cycle in which she'll be old enough to do so. Seeing Vice President-elect Kamala Harris poised to take office has reinvigorated her plans.

“There’s no denying that a victory for her is a victory for all of us who would like to see ourselves represented as women of color in office,” she said. “It makes it more imaginable. Once little girls can see it, little girls can be it. Because they can be anything that they want, but that representation to make the dream exist in the first place is huge — even for me.”

When she’s not watching cooking shows, Gorman copes with isolation by reading books to prepare her for that future. She picked up former President Obama’s “[A Promised Land](#)” the day it came out. She’s also reading Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s “Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History,” which interrogates long-standing historical narratives from the Haitian Revolution to the Alamo.

In September, Gorman will release “Change Sings,” the first of two children’s books. The poet says she was driven by the desire to publish a book “in which kids could see themselves represented as change-makers in history, rather than just observers.” It will be illustrated by Loren Long, who created the art in Obama’s “[Of Thee I Sing](#): A Letter to My Daughters.”

On occasion, Gorman ventures beyond her apartment to a hill overlooking Los Angeles. Looking out at the landscape, she’s marveled that “growing up, I was surrounded by so many colors and so many tongues and so many ways of thinking. And it’s very rare that you can have so many of those things in one place.”

“I miss and love everything,” she added. “Everywhere I’ve been and everywhere I have not. Once things are safe, I’m going to spend as much time as I can reabsorbing the city.”

Despite her many accomplishments, Gorman has yet to obtain a driver’s license. But she’s not too worried about it. Her twin sister, she said, will likely “drag me to Disneyland once it’s safe, so maybe she can just drive me around.”

- *New York Times*

Amanda Gorman's Inaugural Speech. "The Hill We Climb"



[Link to speech...](#)

Written Speech...

"The Hill We Climb" by Amanda Gorman



Directions: Read using your close reading skills and take advantage of the read alouds Highlighted in blue.

Amanda Gorman: (00:00)

Mr. President, Dr. Biden, Madam Vice President, Mr. Emhoff, Americans and the world, when day comes we ask ourselves where can we find light in this never-ending shade? The loss we carry asea we must wade. We've braved the belly of the beast. We've learned that quiet isn't always peace. In 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. We, the successors of a country and a time where a skinny black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother can dream of becoming president only to find herself reciting for one.

Amanda Gorman: (01:10)

And yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine, but that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect. We are striving to forge our union with purpose. To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters, and conditions of man. And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but what stands before us. We close the divide because we know to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside. We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another. We seek harm to none and harmony for all. 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 that will forever be tied together victorious. Not because we will never again know defeat, but because we will never again sow division.

Amanda Gorman: (02:22)

Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid. If we're to live up to her own time, then victory won't lie in the blade, but in all the bridges we've made. That is the promise to glade, the hill we climb if only we dare. It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit. It's the past we step into and how we repair it. We've seen a forest that would shatter our nation rather than share it. Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy. This effort very nearly succeeded.

Amanda Gorman: (03:07)

But while democracy can be periodically delayed, it can never be permanently defeated. In this truth, in this faith we trust for while we have our eyes on the future, history has its eyes on us. This is the era of just redemption. We feared it at its inception. We did not feel prepared to be the heirs of such a terrifying hour, but within it, we found the power to author a new chapter, to offer hope and laughter to ourselves so while once we asked, how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe? Now we assert, how could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?

Amanda Gorman: (03:56)

We will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be a country that is bruised, but whole, benevolent, but bold, fierce, and free. We will not be turned around or interrupted by intimidation because we know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation. Our blunders become their burdens. But one thing is certain, if we merge mercy with might and might with right, then love becomes our legacy and change our children's birthright.

Amanda Gorman: (04:36)

So let us leave behind a country better than one we were left with. Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one. We will rise from the gold-limbed hills of the West. We will rise from the wind-swept Northeast where our forefathers first realized revolution. We will rise from the Lake Rim cities of the Midwestern states. We will rise from the sun-baked South. We will rebuild, reconcile and recover in every known nook of our nation, in every corner called our country our people diverse and beautiful will emerge battered and beautiful. When day comes, we step out of the shade aflame and unafraid. The new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light. If only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it.

Assignment: Go to our Canvas page and complete the assignment titled, "The Miracle of Morning". I have higher expectations for this assignment. Please make multiple inferences for each stanza for the poem written by Amanda Gorman.
