

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Thank You, Amanda Gorman

John Amen · Wednesday, January 27th, 2021

The 2021 inaugural poet, Amanda Gorman, embodied thoughtful confidence, equanimity, and a fluidity of style, her voice euphonic, her hand movements like balletic accentuations. In 2021, when the US, or at least most of it, or, well, more than half of it, is finally recognizing the way in which Black Americans have been long, systemically and systematically under attack, the choice to spotlight a twenty-two-year-old Black poet was particularly felicitous, an acknowledgment that Black millennials – culturally, sociologically, and politically – are today’s catalysts, a group with the potential to greatly impact the country’s future.

Choosing Gorman as the inaugural poet was also an acknowledgment by the Biden campaign that Black voters, including young Black voters, were a major reason for his victory in the 2020 election.

Of greatest importance, of course, was [the content of Gorman’s poem](#). Striking are her lines:

That even as we grieved, we grew.
That even as we hurt, we hoped.
That even as we tired, we tried.
That we’ll forever be tied together, victorious.
Not because we will never again know defeat, but because we will never again sow
division.

And:

We did not feel prepared to be the heirs of such a terrifying hour.

And her calls for unity:

We will rise from the golden hills of the West.
We will rise from the windswept Northeast where our forefathers first realized
revolution.
We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the Midwestern states.

We will rise from the sunbaked South.
We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover.

Gorman doesn't echo the mordant commentaries of Langston Hughes or James Baldwin, though certainly Hughes's "dream deferred" and Baldwin's allusion to "monstrous innocence" reside in the subtext of her poem.

She doesn't voice the specific tenets of Black Lives Matter, though certainly her involvement in the inauguration is in part due to the actions and persistence of BLM.

While Gorman focuses primarily on the positive "dream" aspect of MLK's vision, her use of the words "shade," "beast," and "blade," among others, reflects an awareness of King's timeless riff on Shakespeare: "this sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent."

The inaugural poem[i], including Gorman's, is idealistic by necessity, constructed (and included in the inaugural proceedings) as a way to aestheticize politics, to remind citizens across the political spectrum that democratic processes are founded on ageless values, ideals, and archetypal/epic intentions. "The Hill We Climb" calls for all citizens to find the courage, maturity, and broadmindedness to be true to themselves without pathologizing the people with whom they might, sometimes intensely, disagree.

Gorman's poem was written and read with a unifying intent, urging *us* to embrace our better sides, to "compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man." Reconfiguring many sources, including the Bible, beat poetics, and slam-poetry/spoken-word stylistics, Gorman strived for universal relevance, achieving an all-inclusive context. She wasn't a minority spokesperson, she was, or at least aspired to be, representative of the country at large.

"The Hill We Climb" is accessible yet evocative, replete with sublimities yet direct, audacious yet nonconfrontational. Gorman reminded us that our "democratic experiment," so dubbed by George Washington and in turn Alex de Tocqueville, is at heart a noble one. She challenged us that "there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it."

Amanda Gorman reminded us, as an inaugural poet should, that the problems inherent to our country's history and society, particularly as they are divisively epitomized and symptomized today, can be best navigated, and at times even reconciled, with grace, dignity, and love.

[i] There have been six inaugural poems presented during inaugural proceedings since 1961: <https://poets.org/inaugural-poems-history>

(Photo courtesy of REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque)

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