

The Hill We Climb

Amanda Gorman



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Lesson Plans for “The Hill We Climb” by Amanda Gorman

Amanda Gorman’s poem for the Biden inauguration, “The Hill We Climb,” has sparked many conversations throughout the nation. We offer these Shared Inquiry lesson plans to help teachers and students explore and discuss the poem, and we welcome hearing about your experiences doing so! Please contact Punit Dhandhanian at punit@greatbooks.org to share you and your students’ insights.

Because poems are especially rich texts in which words may be used in ways that are unusual and surprising, we recommend having students [watch](#) (or [read a transcript of](#)) “The Hill We Climb” at least twice before engaging in a Shared Inquiry discussion of it.

About Amanda Gorman

Amanda Gorman was named the US National Youth Poet Laureate in 2017, becoming the first person to receive the honor. She delivered her poem “The Hill We Climb” during the inauguration ceremony for Joe Biden on January 20, 2021. At 22, Gorman is the youngest poet ever to speak at a presidential inauguration. More information about Gorman is available [here](#), and more information about the US presidential inauguration’s history can be found [here](#).

Prereading (5–10 minutes)

Student learning objective: To activate and build background knowledge related to a poem

1. Choose one or more of the suggested prereading questions below to explore with students.
 2. Use follow-up questions to help students further explain their ideas.
 3. Keep the activity relatively brief (5–10 minutes).
- What do you know about what traditionally happens during a presidential inauguration? Why might an incoming president invite a poet to read during this ceremony?
 - A traditional motto of the United States is *E pluribus unum*, which is Latin for “Out of many, one.” What are some examples of the ways that Americans are “many”?
 - Considering the events leading up to this inauguration, why might some Americans feel they are trying to climb a hill?
 - What helps you “find light” in times that seem dark?

First Viewing with Noticing (20–25 minutes)

Student learning objective: To watch a video attentively, noting reactions and sharing and comparing them with others

1. Prepare students to watch the video by asking them to keep track of what they notice (for example, Gorman’s facial expressions, hand gestures, repeated words, etc.). No detail is too big or too small.
2. Ask students to share what they noticed, and use follow-up questions to help them develop and explain their responses. You may also invite students to share any questions they may have.
3. Help students answer any questions that signal a significant problem with comprehension.

Second Viewing (or Reading) with Note-Taking (20–25 minutes)

Student learning objective: To rewatch or reread a poem purposefully in order to gain a better understanding of it by doing one of the following:

- Exploring different responses to a poem by explaining and comparing notes
 - Exploring how a literary element contributes to a poem’s meaning
1. Choose one of the note-taking options below to conduct during the second viewing or reading of the poem.
 2. Prepare students to watch or listen with purpose by briefly explaining the note-taking suggestion you want them to use. (If you are doing a second viewing, encourage students to continue noticing Gorman’s facial expressions, body language, and tone.)
 3. After viewing or reading, ask students to share their notes on some of the lines or stanzas in the poem (you may wish to choose lines or stanzas you consider especially rich or interpretive). For each line or stanza, have a few volunteers share how they marked it and explain why. Focus on asking follow-up questions and encouraging students with different answers to share them.

Note-Taking Options

Contrasting Note

- Students mark a **P** where Gorman speaks about the **past** and an **F** where she speaks about the **future**.

Follow-up questions: What is Gorman saying about the past (or the future) here? What do you think she wants her audience to understand?

Literary Element Note

- Students mark an **AV** where Gorman uses an **action verb** in the poem.

Follow-up questions: What emotion does this verb create in you? Does the verb call up any images or other associations?

- Students mark an **S** where the **sound** of Gorman’s words seems important (e.g., alliteration, rhyme, or assonance).

Follow-up questions: What is the sound that seems significant here? What effect does this sound have on your understanding of the line or stanza?

Shared Inquiry Discussion (25–30 minutes)

Student learning objective: To develop and refine an individually satisfying, text-centered answer to a problem of meaning by sharing ideas, supporting them with evidence, and responding to the comments and questions of other students

Suggested Focus and Cluster Questions

To use a suggested set of questions for discussion, start with a focus question and ask the cluster questions when they fit naturally into the conversation. Cluster questions help students develop their ideas while looking closely at specific parts of the poem. It is not necessary to ask every cluster question during discussion.

Option 1

Focus question: Why does Gorman end by saying, “For there is always light, / if only we’re brave enough to see it / if only we’re brave enough to be it”?

- How is seeing the light different from being the light? Why do seeing the light and being the light both require bravery?
- Why does Gorman open the poem with Americans asking themselves, “Where can we find light in this never-ending shade?”
- What does it mean that “the dawn is ours / before we knew it”?
- Why does Gorman describe so many difficulties and hardships?
- What does Gorman mean when she says, “This is the era of just redemption”?
- Why does Gorman describe Americans stepping “out of the shade, / aflame and unafraid”?

Option 2

Focus question: What does Gorman believe we must do to “live up to our own time”?

- What does it mean to have “braved the belly of the beast”?
- Why does Gorman describe the nation as not “broken / but simply unfinished”?
- What is the difference between “striving to form a union that is perfect” and “striving to forge a union with purpose”?
- Why does Gorman include that “Scripture tells us to envision / that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree / And no one shall make them afraid”?
- Why does Gorman say that Americans will “rise” from many parts of the country and “rebuild, reconcile and recover”?
- Why does Gorman see Americans as emerging “battered and beautiful”?

Writing and Extension Options

- **Interpretive essay:** Have students develop their response to the focus question into an essay, using their post-discussion answer and supporting evidence as the basis.
- **Evaluative essay:** Have students write about one of the following questions or a question of your choice:
 - » How convincing do you find Gorman’s vision of a rebuilt America?
 - » What kind of action do you think is most needed in America today?

- **Text-to-text comparison:** Have students compare and contrast Gorman’s poem to one of the following texts:
 - » “[The Gift Outright](#),” Robert Frost’s poem for John F. Kennedy’s 1961 inauguration
 - » “[On the Pulse of Morning](#),” Maya Angelou’s poem for Bill Clinton’s 1993 inauguration
 - » [Joe Biden’s inaugural address](#)
 - » “[One Last Time](#)” from *Hamilton: An American Musical*