

“The Hill We Climb”: Writing an Occasional Poem!
Lisa O’Neill

Age: This lesson can be used with high schoolers or adapted for middle-schoolers

Materials: All you need for this exercise is a pencil, this paper, and your imagination

Summary: Occasional poems are poems that are written for a certain occasion. In this lesson, we are going to work with the poem of Amanda Gorman who, at 22 years old, is the youngest ever poet to read an original poem at a presidential inauguration. She read her poem on the occasion of Joe Biden/Kamala Harris becoming president and vice-president on January 20, 2021. You can watch the poem here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wz4YuEvJ3y4&ab_channel=ABCNews

You will read and reflect on her poem. I want you to think about what lines and words and images stand out to you and why. Then, you will have a chance to write your own occasional poem! Let’s begin!

STEP 1: Read this information about Amanda Gorman and answer the questions after. It is helpful sometimes to know the context of (or information related to) a poem. This information is related to that.

From the *New York Times*:

An Introduction to the 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.

Encouraged by her mother, an English teacher, Ms. Gorman began writing poems as a child, finding her voice as she assembled words on the page. Where other young poets turn inward, she draws inspiration from events in the news.

In an interview with Adeel Hassan, she talks about what she felt as a child:

“I grew up at this incredibly odd intersection in Los Angeles, where it felt like the Black ’hood met Black elegance met white gentrification met Latin culture met wetlands. Traversing between these worlds, either to go to a private school in Malibu, or then come back home to my family’s two-bedroom apartment, gave me an appreciation for different cultures and realities, but also made me feel like an outsider. I’m sure my single mother, Joan Wicks, might describe me as a precocious child, but looking back in elementary school I often self-described myself as a plain ‘weird’ child. I spent most of elementary school convinced that I was an alien. Literally.”

It has been a remarkable journey for Ms. Gorman to have traveled from feeling like an alien to becoming first the Youth Poet of Los Angeles, then, three years later, the first National Youth Poet Laureate and now the youngest inaugural poet in U.S. history.

...Ms. Gorman often turns to her literary mantra, “I am the daughter of Black writers, who are descended from Freedom Fighters, who broke the chains who changed the world. They call me.”

Response questions:

What does she say above that stands out for you?

Why?

STEP 2: Read to learn a bit about occasional poetry and answer questions underneath.

From the *New York Times*:

What Is Occasional Poetry? Understanding the Tradition of “The Hill We Climb”

As its name suggests, occasional poetry documents and reflects upon particular occasions, events both public and private, grand and less grand...

Through the ages, kings and queens have summoned poets to celebrate their triumphs. Since John F. Kennedy, most incoming Democratic presidents have invited poets to mark their accession to the highest office in the land.

...Ms. Gorman was contacted by the Biden inaugural committee in late December. She was given no specific instructions on what to write but was urged to focus on unity and hope...She set out to write a poem that would inspire hope and foster a sense of

collective purpose, at a moment when Americans are reeling from a deadly pandemic, political violence and partisan division.

... she had written most of the inaugural poem before the Jan. 6 siege at the U.S. Capitol, but stayed awake late into the night to finish, “adding verses about the apocalyptic scene that unfolded at the Capitol that day.”

Response question:

Before you dive into the poem itself, put yourself in Ms. Gorman’s shoes. If you were asked to write a poem by the Biden inaugural committee, what are some things you might want it to communicate? Why?

STEP 3: Read the poem! When reading a poem, it is helpful to read it two times. The first time, you can just read and let it wash over you. You are looking for overall impressions. And the second time, you are looking for details, circling words that stand out and writing notes to yourself in the margins. This is called “active reading.” An active reading allows us to really understand more about writing and what it means to us. **Read the poem twice, circling and writing in the margins the second time, and then answer the questions after.**

The Hill We Climb

When day comes we ask ourselves,
where can we find light in this never-ending shade?
The loss we carry,
a sea we must wade

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 just-ice

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

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 a 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 we'll forever be tied together, victorious
Not because we will never again know defeat
but because we will never again sow division

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 our own time
Then victory won't lie in the blade
But in all the bridges we've made
That is the promised 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 force that would shatter our nation
rather than share it
Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy
And this effort very nearly succeeded
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 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?

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

So let us leave behind a country
better than the 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 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
and every known nook of our nation and
every corner called our country,
our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,
battered and beautiful

When day comes we step out of the shade,
afame 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

Response Questions

1) What words, phrases, or images did you circle or comment on? Why did these stand out to you?

2) Throughout the poem we find references to events from the news. Identify these lines. What do these references invite readers to reflect on about America and Americans?

3) In the title of her poem Gorman employs the metaphor of a hill. Beyond a part of a landscape, what does this image suggest to you? What else might a hill represent? Where else does this image appear in the poem? Also, what hills have YOU had to climb in your life?

4) Her last lines are powerful. What do you think she means by:
“For there is always light,
if only we’re brave enough to see it
If only we’re brave enough to be it”

5) What do you think she was trying to say to Americans on this particular inauguration day when Biden became president and Harris vice-president with this poem?

STEP 4: TIME TO WRITE!

Consider writing your own occasional poem inspired by a news event that moves, angers, saddens or inspires you.

Here is a list of some news events (this list is not complete but I'm offering to get you started thinking; use one of these or your own): building of the border wall (or stopping of the building of it); immigration issues like family separation and deportation; the pandemic and all the other crises related to it: COVID-19 deaths, frontline workers, economic issues, evictions; recent elections (presidential or for congress/senate); the capital insurrection; Biden's ban on new private prison contracts; melting of the icecaps because of climate change; uprising around racial justice from the summer of 2020.

You can also write about the presidential inauguration that just happened if you choose.

If it is helpful to you, you can brainstorm some ideas before writing or you can jump in. Your poem does not have to rhyme or follow a specific structure but it can if you want to.

Think about: What do you want to say about this particular event? What would you want someone else to know?

