

Voice of the Poet

By Judith R. Merz

Self-described “skinny Black girl/descended from slaves and raised by a single mother,” National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman not only offered a message of hope to those who witnessed her presentation at the 2021 U.S. Inauguration ceremonies but also ignited a new blaze of appreciation for poetry. Garbed in bright yellow with a bold red headband, she personified the flame of fervor that drives prose to poetry and kindles new understanding in readers and listeners. Her free verse, sprinkled with well-placed rhymes, illustrated how poets as wordsmiths can move and inspire beyond the bounds of conventional language, using both figures of speech and elements of sound and tone.

Her poem was built on a key metaphor wrapped in a clear and current reference. “The Hill We Climb” captured the metaphor of citizens struggling toward unity in a country divided politically and reeling from an attack on its seat of government. But it also offered a subtle allusion to Capitol Hill—the place of chaos on January 6 as well as the site of the peaceful transfer of power on January 20. In literally climbing the hill to reach the site, the people of the United States—the “we” in the title—were also metaphorically conquering the uphill challenges of coming together after a divisive and disturbing event.

But even more compelling than the metaphor at the heart of the poem was its use of sound to drive the message forward and make it “stick” in the mind of listeners. Gorman’s oral delivery took alliteration, repetition, and rhyme to a new level of effectiveness. We are striving, she said, to “compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and/conditions of man”—and the alliteration (in this case, repeated hard-c sound) rocked listeners through the thought. She noted “that even as we grieved, we grew/that even as we hurt, we hoped/that even as we tired, we tried”—and the juxtapositioning of terms increased attention to both sound and meaning. Not surprisingly, her concluding lines offered a brilliant blend of metaphor and sound sure to echo through the ages: “For there is always light/if only we’re brave enough to see it/If only we’re brave enough to be it.”

Although her message was poignant, Gorman’s particular achievement in her Inauguration performance was igniting appreciation for poetry’s form and substance—an impact so astounding that she was promptly invited to present a poem during pregame festivities for Super Bowl LV, a venue more noted for high-production pop music than for the gentler cadences of poetry! In “Chorus of the Captains,” she compared an educator, nurse, and Marine—“warriors” and “champions” in fighting the pandemic—to the team captains preparing for the ultimately less impactful battle on the football field.

For lovers of language, Amanda Gorman burned a new awareness of poetry into the consciousness of Americans, sparking an understanding of its power and igniting a new thirst for the clarion voice of the poet.

Gorman, Amanda. (2021, Jan. 20). *The hill we climb* [Poem]. Available at <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/20/politics/amanda-gorman-inaugural-poem-transcript/index.html>