

Teacher's Note:

This lesson includes an analysis for Amanda Gorman's speech "The Hill We Climb" given on January 20, 2021 at Joe Biden's Presidential Inauguration. Due to copyright, the full text is not included in this product. I have included a link below to the full text, as well as a link to the video footage:

["The Hill We Climb" Full Text](#)

["The Hill We Climb" Video](#)

PREVIEW

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This lesson also includes an excerpt from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Speech "I've Been To The Mountaintop." I have included links below to the full speech as well as the audio:

["I've Been To The Mountaintop" Full Text](#)

["I've Been To The Mountaintop" Audio](#)

(Excerpt used in this lesson starts at 34:50 of the video)

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Name:

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**“The Hill We Climb” Analysis
Poem by Amanda Gorman**

On January 20, 2021, Amanda Gorman touched the American people when she delivered her poem “The Hill We Climb” at the presidential inauguration. Her grace, maturity, and talent left some audience members in tears. Amanda Gorman is the youngest inaugural poet in US history. She said in an interview afterward, “Never underestimate the power of art as the language of the people.”

Part A: Define the following words.

| | | |
|------------|------|--|
| wade | verb | |
| successors | noun | |
| sow | verb | |
| inertia | noun | |
| reconcile | verb | |

Part B: Listen to and/or read the poem “The Hill We Climb” by Amanda Gorman. Answer the following questions using complete sentences.

1. What figurative language is used here? What is the true meaning of her words?

“When day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade?”

2. What does the following idiom mean? “We braved the belly of the beast.”

3. What evidence of progress does Gorman use to exemplify that America is still growing?

4. What sound device is used here? Where else does Gorman use this same device in the poem?

"To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man."

5. What double meaning is utilized in the following lines? What does it mean?

"We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another."

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6. What poetic device is used in the following lines? What effect does it have?

"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 sun-baked South.

We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover."

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7. How do the ending lines of the poem circle back to the opening lines? What does Gorman mean when she says we should "be" the light?

"For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it.

If only we're brave enough to be it."

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8. What is one theme of the poem? What message does Gorman deliver?

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9. What is the tone of the poem? What words or lines let you know?

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10. What is the purpose of this speech? Who is the audience?

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11. What feelings and emotions did you feel after reading this poem?

Part C: Read the following excerpt from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech. MLK was an African-American clergyman, Nobel Peace Prize winner, and Civil Rights leader. This speech was delivered April 3, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, the evening before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was fatally shot at the Lorraine Motel on April 4, 1968. Answer the questions that follow.

Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation. And I want to thank God, once more, for allowing me to be here with you.

You know, several years ago, I was in New York City autographing the first book that I had written. And while sitting there autographing books, a demented black woman came up. The only question I heard from her was, "Are you Martin Luther King?" And I was looking down writing, and I said, "Yes." And the next minute I felt something beating on my chest. Before I knew it I had been stabbed by this demented woman. I was rushed to Harlem Hospital. It was a dark Saturday afternoon. And that blade had gone through, and the X-rays revealed that the tip of the blade was on the edge of my aorta, the main artery. And once that's punctured, you drown in your own blood—that's the end of you.

It came out in the New York Times the next morning, that if I had merely sneezed, I would have died. Well, about four days later, they allowed me, after the operation, after my chest had been opened, and the blade had been taken out, to move around in the wheel chair in the hospital. They allowed me to read some of the mail that came in, and from all over the states and the world, kind letters came in. I read a few, but one of them I will never forget. I had received one from the President and the Vice-President. I've forgotten what those telegrams said. I'd received a visit and a letter from the Governor of New York, but I've forgotten what that letter said. But there was another letter that came from a little girl, a young girl who was a student at the White Plains High School. And I looked at that letter, and I'll never forget it. It said simply,

"Dear Dr. King,

I am a ninth-grade student at the White Plains High School." And she said, "While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I'm a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune, and of your suffering. And I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I'm simply writing you to say that I'm so happy that you didn't sneeze."

And I want to say tonight—I want to say tonight that I too am happy that I didn't sneeze. Because if I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters. And I knew that as they were sitting in, they were really standing up for the best in the American dream, and taking the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1961, when we decided to take a ride for freedom and ended segregation in inter-state travel.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1962, when Negroes in Albany, Georgia, decided to straighten their backs up. And whenever men and women straighten their backs up, they are going somewhere, because a man can't ride your back unless it is bent.

If I had sneezed -- If I had sneezed I wouldn't have been here in 1963, when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation, and brought into being the Civil Rights Bill.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have had a chance later that year, in August, to try to tell America about a dream that I had had.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been down in Selma, Alabama, to see the great Movement there.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been in Memphis to see a community rally around those brothers and sisters who are suffering.

I'm so happy that I didn't sneeze.

And they were telling me—. Now, it doesn't matter, now. It really doesn't matter what happens now. I left Atlanta this morning, and as we got started on the plane, there were six of us. The pilot said over the public address system, "We are sorry for the delay, but we have Dr. Martin Luther King on the plane. And to be sure that all of the bags were checked, and to be sure that nothing would be wrong with on the plane, we had to check out everything carefully. And we've had the plane protected and guarded all night."

And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

1. What anecdote does MLK use in his speech?

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2. Why does MLK mention he has forgotten what the President, Vice President, and New York governor wrote to him while he was in the hospital? What message does it send to audience members?

3. What anaphora does Dr. King use in his speech? What impact does it have?

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4. What is the overall tone of this excerpt of Dr. King's speech?

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5. Why did the pilots have to keep the plane protected all night?

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6. Why isn't MLK concerned about longevity?

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7. What is the metaphorical Promised Land?

8. Why do you believe MLK is so confident that Americans will reach the Promised Land? Would he be proud of America today? Explain.

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Part D: Connect the two speeches you've read today. Answer the following questions.

1. What metaphors does each author use to express their individual messages? Do you think both metaphors complement each other? Why or why not? (Hint: think of both titles.)

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2. How are the themes in both speeches similar to another?

3. Both speakers ask Americans to rise up. Consider the historical contexts of both speeches. What is each speaker asking Americans to rise up to do?

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4. What lines stand out to you the most from both poems? Explain.

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5. What does it mean to be American? What does it mean to live the American dream?

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“The Hill We Climb” ANSWER GUIDE

Poem by Amanda Gorman

On January 20, 2021, Amanda Gorman touched the American people when she delivered her poem “The Hill We Climb” at the presidential inauguration. Her grace, maturity, and talent left some audience members in tears. Amanda Gorman is the youngest inaugural poet in US history. She said in an interview afterward, “Never underestimate the power of art as the language of the people.”

Part A: Define the following words.

| | | |
|------------|------|--|
| wade | verb | To walk with great effort through water. |
| successors | noun | a person or thing that comes after another. |
| sow | verb | To cause to appear, or spread. |
| inertia | noun | a tendency to do nothing or to remain unchanged. |
| reconcile | verb | restore friendly relations between; to create harmony. |

Part B: Listen to and/or read the poem “The Hill We Climb” by Amanda Gorman. Answer the following questions using complete sentences.

1. What figurative language is used here? What is the true meaning of her words?

“When day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade?”

Gorman uses a metaphor referring to hope and happiness as light; and hardships, violence, and bigotry equals the darkness or never-ending shade. She is saying that many Americans are lost because it feels impossible to be hopeful in a world with never-ending tragedies.

2. What does the following idiom mean? “We braved the belly of the beast.”

It means that we have already been through the most precarious, troubling times, and as a nation, we survived. We can and will survive again.

3. What evidence of progress does Gorman use to exemplify that America is still growing?

She states that her speaking at this event is progress in itself. America was once a country of slaves, and now, she, who is descended from slaves and raised by a single mother, can realistically dream of becoming president one day, and be welcomed on stage at the inauguration to share her words.

4. What sound device is used here? Where else does Gorman use this same device in the poem?

“To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man.”

Gorman uses alliteration here with the letter C. There are many other examples of alliteration in the poem. An example is: “Our blunders become their burdens.”

5. What double meaning is utilized in the following lines? What does it mean?

"We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another."

Gorman uses the word "arms" twice; one, meaning guns, and one, meaning our limbs. She is saying we need to put down our weapons that we are pointing at each other and lift our arms out to hug, embrace, and celebrate one another.

6. What poetic device is used in the following lines? What effect does it have?

*"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 sun-baked South.
We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover."*

Gorman uses anaphora, repeating the phrase "we will rise..." The repetition creates a sonic effect; it evokes feelings of power, and emphasizes that Americans *will* recover and persevere from all parts of the country.

7. How do the ending lines of the poem circle back to the opening lines? What does Gorman mean when she says we should "be" the light?

*"For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it."*

Gorman mentions in the first line of the poem that Americans are probably wondering how can anyone find light in the shade; in the final lines of the poem, she is saying that, there is always light if you look for it. She further explains that there is always light inside you if you are brave enough to *be the light*. To be the light means instead of waiting and hoping for change to happen, we should be the driving force that changes the nation for the greater good with our actions.

8. What is one theme of the poem? What message does Gorman deliver?

If we do nothing to stop injustices from happening, the next generation will suffer. We must come together as a nation. If we want a better future, we must lean into diversity.

9. What is the tone of the poem? What words or lines let you know?

The tone of the poem is confident, spirited, courageous, promising, and optimistic. Words like "victorious," "certain," "beautiful," and "new dawn" show a positive, hopeful tone.

10. What is the purpose of this speech? Who is the audience?

Amanda Gorman's purpose for this speech was to inspire Americans to stand as one and be hopeful for the future. She expresses her vision of unity. As a new president is inaugurated, Americans are given another chance to come together and put their differences aside. She acknowledges that our nation isn't perfect, but we are still heading in the right direction. The audience is all American citizens.

11. What feelings and emotions did you feel after reading this poem?

Answers will vary.

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Part C: Read the following excerpt from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech. MLK was an African-American clergyman, Nobel Peace Prize winner, and civil rights leader. This speech was delivered April 3, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, the evening before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was fatally shot at the Lorraine Motel on April 4, 1968. Answer the questions that follow.

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Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

1. What anecdote does MLK use in his speech?

MLK shares the time when he was stabbed by a woman in New York City and nearly died. While in the hospital, a white teenager wrote him a letter that said she was happy he did not die and it gave him hope.

2. Why does MLK mention he has forgotten what the President, Vice President, and New York governor wrote to him while he was in the hospital? What message does it send to audience members?

MLK wants to emphasize that the letter of greatest impact came from a young girl, not any one of superiority or "titled" importance. This highlights to other Americans hearing his speech that they are all important as well. The letter this young girl wrote him was a small act of kindness that King will never forget. Americans all over the nation could also make huge impacts in society; they don't have to be President to change the world.

Additionally, it sends the message to Americans that while there are white citizens who are racist and have hate in their heart, there are also white Americans who believe in change and wish for equal rights.

3. What anaphora does Dr. King use in his speech? What impact does it have?

"If I had sneezed" is the phrase that Dr. King repeats over and over again. The impact it has is that he is glad he is still alive because he was able to continue the difficult fight. He was alive to fight in 1961, 1962, 1963, and so on. He was able to travel across the United States to help others peacefully protest racial inequality and give his famous speech "I Have a Dream." Dr. King could have become distraught over the fact that someone tried to kill him that day, but instead, he chose to rise above the hate. His message is never give up hope.

4. What is the overall tone of this excerpt of Dr. King's speech?

Grateful, promising, bittersweet, somber, serious—MLK is grateful he has been able to lead Americans in their peaceful protests and that he was not killed the day he was stabbed. He is confident that Black Americans will reach the promised land, and that our nation will be united. It is somber because he's not sure he will be around to see it. He accepts this fate that people are eager to stop him and kill him.

5. Why did the pilots have to keep the plane protected all night?

MLK was a prominent figure in the Civil Rights Movement and he was often a target to those opposed to civil rights. People wanted to assassinate him and the pilots had to make sure no one tampered with the plane or with anyone's luggage in order to do so.

6. Why isn't MLK concerned about longevity?

MLK has made great strides in the Civil Rights Movement. Now, he knows no matter what happens to his body, the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement will live on and eventually succeed. Like anyone, he'd prefer to live a long life, but he knows there's something more important than living a long life, and that is doing what is right.

7. What is the metaphorical Promised Land?

The Promised Land is an allusion to the Bible, but generally it means a place where someone expects to find great happiness and liberation. In the context MLK uses the Promised Land, he is saying that the Promised Land is a version of America where everyone is completely free and that everyone has the same rights: no more discrimination, no more hatefulness, and no more injustice.

8. Why do you believe MLK is so confident that Americans will reach the Promised Land? Would he be proud of America today? Explain.

Answers will vary. MLK was a man of God and believed God would protect him and others like him. He had faith in people. He had seen the progress that the Civil Rights Movement already achieved.

Part D: Connect the two speeches you've read today. Answer the following questions.

1. What metaphors does each author use to express their individual messages? Do you think both metaphors complement each other? Why or why not? (Hint: think of both titles.)

Gorman uses a hill to represent the struggle Americans face. MLK uses the top of the mountain to represent freedom for all. Both authors use "the climb" as a metaphor for working toward and struggling to achieve freedom and dignity for oppressed people. Both metaphors complement another because they are both about working toward a common goal. Both represent a goal that is worthy, but not easy to achieve without effort. Additionally, a mountain is taller and more difficult to climb than a hill, and though the issues Americans face today (2021) are complicated and burdening, in the 1960's, MLK was still at one of the most complicated times for racial injustice in America. They both show that there is a way to reach unity and liberty for all, but Americans must climb and work toward that goal.

2. How are the themes in both speeches similar to another?

Both speakers express that we have an opportunity to make America a better nation, and so we should all seize the opportunity.

3. Both speakers ask Americans to rise up. Consider the historical contexts of both speeches. What is each speaker asking Americans to rise up to do?

MLK needs people to rise up and fight peacefully as they are in the early stages of Civil Rights. At the time of his speech, The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was recently passed, but the Civil Rights Act of 1968 had not been passed. Many Black Americans were the victims of hate crimes, they faced housing discrimination, and discrimination in the workplace. MLK wants Americans to fight for Black Americans to be considered full citizens and given the same rights and privileges as any free white man in America.

Amanda Gorman's speech comes after the death of George Floyd, the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Capitol Riots. Gorman acknowledges that Americans have fought through the toughest times already—slavery, Jim Crow Era, etc. People like MLK have already paved the way for equality in America, so now we need to keep moving forward and continue to accept each other for our differences. She asks Americans to rise up, stop political violence and to find a collective purpose.

4. What lines stand out to you the most from both poems? Explain.

Answers will vary.

5. What does it mean to be American? What does it mean to live the American dream?

Answers will vary.