

# AMANDA GORMAN POETRY STUDY

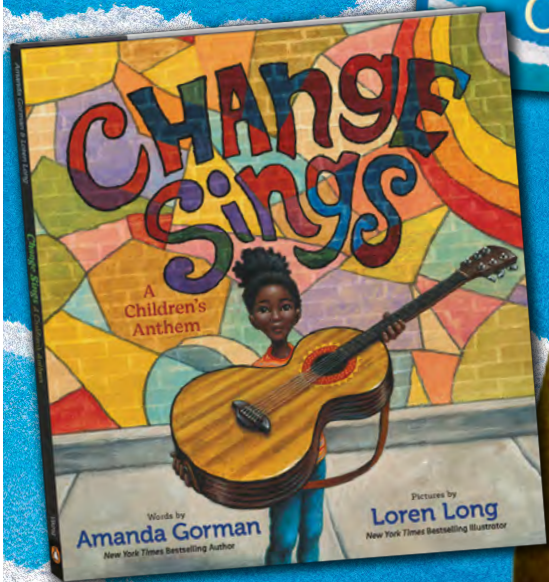
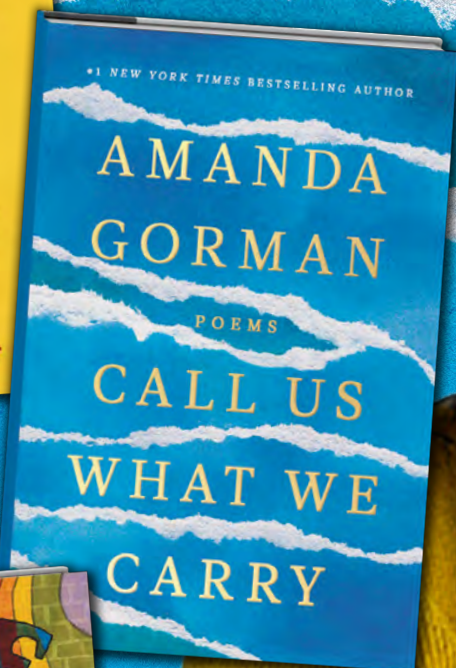
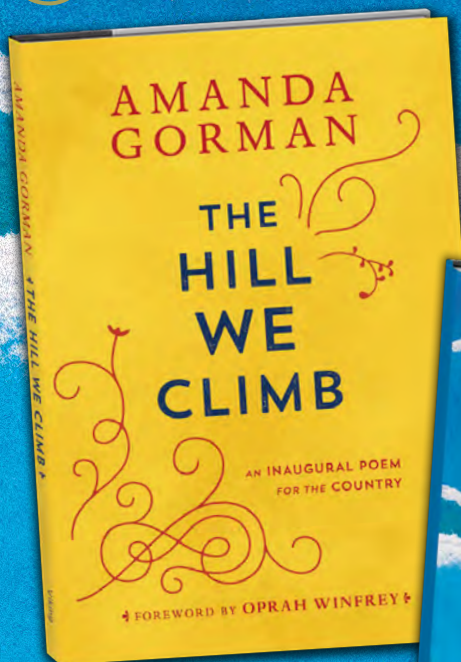


Photo © Danny Williams





## DEAR READER,

One of the most fascinating things about Amanda Gorman’s poetry is that she has the very unique ability to weave together piercing truths about America’s past, powerful critiques about its present, and poignant calls to action. Within each poem, you will find messages that are at once intimately personal and profoundly public. Amanda Gorman not only is the youngest-ever inaugural poet and but also was chosen to speak at the inauguration of the first female and first Black American vice president of the United States. In this way, she is both living proof of the change that has come and a reminder of all that we still must do to make this country one where change truly does sing. As educators, readers, and lovers of poetry, we owe it to ourselves to read these works and reconcile our troubled past with dreams of the future. The way that we do this is by learning and teaching one another that critical analysis of the present is not a condemnation of all that is good, but rather a call to be better.

We know that one of the first African American female poets, [Phyllis Wheatley](#), was born an enslaved person. We know that many during her time believed that her works and life proved that people of African descent were as capable of intellectual thought and creative artistic expression as anyone else. We know that many African American poets have followed her since and that Amanda Gorman’s works and life are a testament to the fact that indeed, “change sings.”

As you read through these works, reflect on the writers that have influenced Amanda Gorman and contributed their voices to the story of America. Discuss the themes and ideas that run through Gorman’s poetry and connect stories, ideas, people, events, and places. Question your responsibility to be the change you want to see in the world. Most importantly, create your own works of art and social projects that inspire those around you to work together to make this country a place where we “merge mercy with might, and might with right / [so that] love becomes our legacy, / and change, our children’s birthright.”

Yours in solidarity,

The DisruptTexts Team and Penguin Young Readers School and Library Marketing

**#DISRUPTTEXTS**

THIS GUIDE WAS WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED BY #DISRUPTTEXTS TEAM MEMBERS: TRICIA EBARVIA, LORENA GERMÁN, DR. KIMBERLY N. PARKER, AND JULIA TORRES. FIND OUT MORE ABOUT #DISRUPTTEXTS [HERE](#) OR AT [DISRUPTTEXTS.ORG](#).

## WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN THIS GUIDE:

[Common Themes](#)

[Discussion Questions](#)

[Activities](#)

[Notes on Poetry](#)

[What is #DisruptTexts?](#)

## COMMON THEMES:

**GORMAN'S POETRY** is rich with symbolism and echoes with the voices of her ancestors. Throughout her work, there is an intentional focus on calling us all to a higher humanity by reconciling America's troubled and often violent past (and present). The poems also imagine the type of change that can bring us to a more peaceful future, rooted in love and a never-ending pursuit of justice. Many poems speak to the African American experience and the role that trauma can play in forcing us to confront loss as well as learn what is necessary for survival.

Gorman also offers a unique window into the young Black female experience, as she reveals lessons she has learned about the importance of using her voice in a society that regularly silences and erases Black female experiences. Through observations about patterns and relationships, and by making concise connections to nature, Gorman clearly stakes her claim in humanity's collective memory and plots a course for the rest of us, reminding us all that the choices we make today shape the destinies of future generations.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Photo by Danny Williams

## AMANDA GORMAN

is a poet, activist, and bestselling author. She is a committed advocate for the environment, racial equity, and gender justice. Amanda's activism and poetry have been featured on *The Today Show*, PBS Kids, and *CBS This Morning*, and in *The*

*New York Times*, *Vogue*, and *Essence*. After graduating cum laude from Harvard University, she now lives in her hometown of Los Angeles. In 2017, Amanda Gorman was appointed the first-ever national youth poet laureate by Urban Word—a program that supports youth poet laureates in more than sixty cities, regions, and states nationally. Gorman's performance of her poem "The Hill We Climb" at the 2021 presidential inauguration received critical acclaim and international attention. The special edition of her inaugural poem, "The Hill We Climb," was published in March 2021 and debuted at No.1 on the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* bestsellers list. Amanda appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine in February 2021 and was the first poet to grace the cover of *Vogue* in their May 2021 issue. She was *Porter Magazine's* July 2021 cover star and received the Artist Impact Award at the 2021 Backstage at the Geffen fundraiser. Her debut picture book, *Change Sings*, was published in September 2021 and debuted at #1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list and her poetry collection *Call Us What We Carry* will release in December 2021.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## ANCESTRY

- How are Gorman's words and work connected to those of her ancestors? Which ancestors appear throughout each work?
- How are you a manifestation of the dreams of those who have come before you? What parts of your life are due to their commitment, efforts, or sacrifices?
- What are some ways we can acknowledge the struggles and successes of those who came before us?

## BLACKNESS/AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

- What parts of the Black/African American experience or which specific individuals are referenced in each work?
- What connections can you make between the contributions of Black people/African Americans to present-day society and the struggles that have had to be overcome?
- What parts of Amanda Gorman's unique experience as a Black woman/African American female are present in her poetry?

## CHANGE/PROGRESS

- What are the first steps that have to happen for change to occur in society?
- Who are some "tried and true dreamers" you have heard about or can remember?
- What change do you personally want to see in the world? Be as specific as you can.
- What talents or gifts do you feel you have that are unique to you? How could you use them to make change?
- In your life, have you found it to be true that "often we cannot change / without someone in us dying"? Explain how this has manifested in your life.

## INDIVIDUALS IN COMMUNITIES

- In your opinion, is it true that "grief, healing / hope are not dependent on the first person & more often / than not are recalled through many persons"? What are some experiences you've had that have shaped your beliefs?
- What happened to individuals and communities when the world experienced a global pandemic? What is happening still?
- How do individuals shape communities and how are communities a reflection of the individuals that live within them? Consider the social and interpersonal rules we create to dictate interactions.

## JUSTICE

- In your opinion, what can individuals do to "merge mercy with might, and might with right / [so that] love becomes our legacy / and change, our children's birthright"?
- Do you agree that "the point of protest isn't winning; / it's holding fast to the promise of freedom, / even when fast victory is not promised"? If so, what protests have you witnessed or heard about that exemplify the quest for the "promise of freedom"? What are the implications of protesting for freedoms that you yourself enjoy, but which are denied to others?
- When, in history or the present, have certain groups of people been denied justice? What steps were or could be taken to repair the injustice?

## MEMORY

- Choose a few poems in which you can detect a juxtaposition of the personal or collective past with the present. What lines specifically clue you in to the connection between the two? What is the significance of recalling the past while imagining a better future?
- Which has a greater impact on individuals—personal or collective memory of past events?
- Which poems preserve memories of the past by alluding to writers, stories, or events from long ago? Are you still able to decode their messages? What additional work might readers need to do in order to understand them?

## NATURE

- How is “The Hill We Climb” both literal and symbolic? What “hills” have you had to climb?
- What nature symbols do you see in *Change Sings*? How are these tied to the story’s central message?
- What is the significance of the ocean or water symbolism in *Call Us What We Carry*? (\*See the collection’s end-notes for a hint.)

## PAST VS. FUTURE

- Think of some ways that your nation “isn’t broken, but simply unfinished.” What work needs to be done to repair wounds from the past?
- What events or people from the past are woven into Gorman’s poetry? Does the act of including them give them more permanence for the future?
- What actions can you make as an individual today that have the potential to change the future?

## SERVICE

- What actions can young people take that demonstrate their commitment to making “change sing”?
- How is poetry or the art of telling a story an act of service to fellow humans?
- What are some small acts of service that can carry big implications for shaping the present and the future?

## SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

- What would it look like to have a country “committed / to all cultures, colors, characters, / and conditions of man”? (You might use the phrasing “In a country committed to all cultures, we would see . . . We would feel . . .”)
- What does it mean to you to “forge our union with purpose”? Reflect on the difference between the words “form” and “forge.”
- In several poems, writing and learning to use language are offered as solutions to pent-up emotions and the difficulty of living in a world undergoing regular destruction, transformation, and rebirth. Which poems stand out to you as writing that expressly addresses these stages?

## TRAUMA/HEALING

- Which poems speak to individual or collective trauma or grief? What suggestions does Gorman give for finding healing?
- Do you believe that “our scars are the brightest / parts of us”? Why or why not?
- When a nation or group of people experiences trauma, there are steps they must take to heal and overcome. What clues does Gorman give about actions we can take to heal from collective trauma?

## ACTIVITIES

### ANCESTRY

- Consider the differences between your generation and generations that have come before you. ([This BuzzFeed video](#), “Generations Throughout History,” might be helpful.) Then, identify specific lines from “The Hill We Climb” that you would connect to each of the seven generations mentioned. How is your generation different from others that have come before? What unique challenges or gifts do you have that you might use to unify and heal your community and country? Create a short presentation connecting typical traits or characteristics of your generation to lines from “The Hill We Climb,” then share it with members of your community.

### BLACKNESS/AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

- Gorman refers to herself as “a skinny Black girl, / descended from slaves and raised by a single mother,” and who first “dream[s] of becoming president, / only to find herself reciting for one.” Do you identify with Gorman’s experience? Do you share any of her identity markers or sense of pride? If not, what was the reaction in your community to the history-making inauguration of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris? Watch the inauguration ceremony on YouTube, then write your own response to what you hear. What specific words and images resonated with you? How does your reaction compare to or contrast with those in your community? If you and your parents feel comfortable, publish your response on medium.com or any other online publishing platform.

### CHANGE/PROGRESS

- In *Change Sings*, as the girl looks into the City Market window, she sees herself and states, “I’m the change I want to see.” Create a social media post or classroom poster with a picture of yourself looking into the mirror. What is the change you plan to make in the world? Write a letter to your future self. What will you do? How will the world change as a result of contributions you will make that are unique to you?

### INDIVIDUALS IN COMMUNITIES

- *Call Us What We Carry* very much details Gorman’s personal experience living through this pandemic while remaining in conversation with and critical of the collective experience. Create a collection of poetry speaking to your individual experience within a larger collective one. What symbols or outside works will you reference that would be recognizable to others who have lived through this time? What emotions or feelings do you hope to convey? What conversations are happening about the global pandemic that you would like to contribute to? See the [Notes to Poetry](#) within this guide for more tips and suggestions to include.

### JUSTICE

- Many of the poems in *Call Us What We Carry* are inspired by [Blackout Poetry](#). Choose your favorite speech or essay related to the fight for justice (e.g., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”). Black out all but the words you would like to use to craft a new poem. Keep in mind the notes about poetry found in this guide and the use of poetic forms throughout Gorman’s collections that may help inspire you to play with form in new ways.

## MEMORY

- Think of a time when you grieved but grew, hurt but still hoped, were tired but still tried; what was that experience like for you? Record a video for a classroom Flipgrid describing the experience. How has your community or nation experienced something similar? Discuss with peers, and if you feel comfortable, in your Flipgrid video, the attributes or character traits you developed as a result of these experiences.
- The poem “Pre-Memory” states that “storytelling is the way that unarticulated memory / becomes art, becomes artifact, becomes fact, becomes felt / again, becomes free.” Write a story or connect a series of images that are from your memory or are of a collective memory (e.g., The 2020 United States presidential election.) Then, write a poem to go with each part of your story, or to go with each image. Remember to pay attention to all aspects of [Freytag’s plot pyramid](#), though you may sequence events out of chronological order to make your retelling more interesting if you would like.

## NATURE

- Make a list of the characteristics of any item found in nature (e.g., plants, elements, animals etc.) Use this list as the basis for a new poem or series of poems that make connections between nature and an aspect of society you would like to change. See the following list for examples:

| NATURAL ITEM    | ASPEN TREES   | LAKES  | FIRE  |
|-----------------|---|--|---|
| Characteristics | Many small leaves   | Ripple when stones hit the surface                               | Can begin with a single flame that turns into a bonfire   |
| Connections     | Many people move individually but can make greater change when moving collectively. | One person’s actions can have a ripple effect that impacts many. | Our ideas travel like sparks from a fire and can ignite flames within the hearts of those near. |

## PAST VS. FUTURE

- Look for patterns Gorman identifies between the past and the present (which is actually the future of the past). Create a TED-style talk modeled after Gorman’s talk [“Using Your Voice Is a Political Choice.”](#) Record your answer to the question “How can we use lessons from the past to influence the future?” Share with those in your community.

## SERVICE

- Choose your favorite action depicted on the pages of *Change Sings*, whether it be building a bridge, helping the elderly, or beautifying a neighborhood. Work with those in your school community to identify a local organization that does the same work. Volunteer some time with that organization, either as an individual or with a few friends. Then, talk about your experience on social media or with a visual display in your school building or classroom. If you feel inspired, share information about how others could volunteer their time as well. Don’t forget to include a reflection about how you were changed by the experience and the change you feel you made.

## SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

- Take the words from the page with the first mural in *Change Sings* and put each one into [Visuwords](#) to create a visual thesaurus. What are the adjacent words that pop up? Create a classroom or individual definition for each word, using the literal definition and an example from real life. Then, work to write a personal manifesto or write a letter to a leader in your community explaining what the word means to you, and what it means to you to take an action for social change centered around that word.

## TRAUMA/HEALING

- In your experience, is language or poetry a “life craft” and “life raft”? If so, how? If not, what medium do you use to find comfort and safety in self-expression? Choose the medium that you like best and create a work that could be healing for another individual experiencing any of the following emotions: loneliness, rejection, fear, despair, or any other emotion from [this tone wheel](#). The goal of your piece should be to help move them toward community, acceptance, courage, hope, or any other emotion from the opposite side of the tone wheel.

## NOTES ON POETRY

### SOME COMMONLY USED ELEMENTS OF POETRY YOU WILL FIND THROUGHOUT GORMAN’S WORKS INCLUDE:

- Alliteration
- Simile
- Homonym
- Allusion
- Symbolism
- Metaphor
- Anaphora
- Enjambment

This is not an exhaustive list, but as you read, note some specific examples of these craft tools. When you write your own poetry, try to use a few of these elements throughout, remembering that it is better to use one tool very well than all of them without clear intention.

### THESE RESOURCES MAY BE HELPFUL:

- [“Writing 101: What Is Repetition? 7 Types of Repetition in Writing With Examples” - 2021](#)
- [“Giving voice: Jacqueline Woodson, the new young people’s poet laureate, on why poetry is a party everyone is invited to.”](#)
- [Poetry Writing Tips from Amanda](#)
- [“Amanda Gorman on Poetry” video](#)
- [Poetryfoundation.org/teens](#)
- [Poets.org/poem-a-day](#)

In *Call Us What We Carry*, many of the poems play with form in unconventional ways. When writing your own poetry and reading poems written by others, take note of the way that form can be connected to function. If, for example, one wishes to write about America, what might be the emotional impact of writing that poem in the shape of an American flag?

Some of the most historically recognized poets use deliberate form not only for the measurement of lines and stanzas but also inside those lines, as they craft rhyme and meter. Learn more about the details of poetic rhyme and meter from Mary Oliver in [“Flare Form and Meter.”](#)



## WHAT IS #DISRUPTTEXTS?

DisruptTexts is a crowdsourced, grassroots effort *by* teachers and *for* teachers to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve. Cofounded by Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Dr. Kimberly N. Parker, and Julia Torres, #DisruptTexts's mission is to aid and develop teachers committed to antiracist/anti-bias teaching pedagogy and practices.

There are four core principles to #DisruptTexts:

### 1. **Continuously interrogate our own biases and how they inform our thinking.**

As teachers, we have been socialized in certain values, attitudes, and beliefs that inform the way we read, interpret, and teach texts, and the way we interact with our students. Ask: How are my own biases affecting the way I'm teaching this text and engaging with my students?

### 2. **Center Black, Indigenous, and other voices of color in literature.**

Literature study in US classrooms has largely focused on the experiences of White - (and male)-dominated society, as perpetuated through a traditional, Eurocentric canon. Ask: What voices—authors or characters—are marginalized or missing in our study? How are these perspectives authentic to the lived experiences of communities of color?

### 3. **Apply a critical-literacy lens to our teaching practices.**

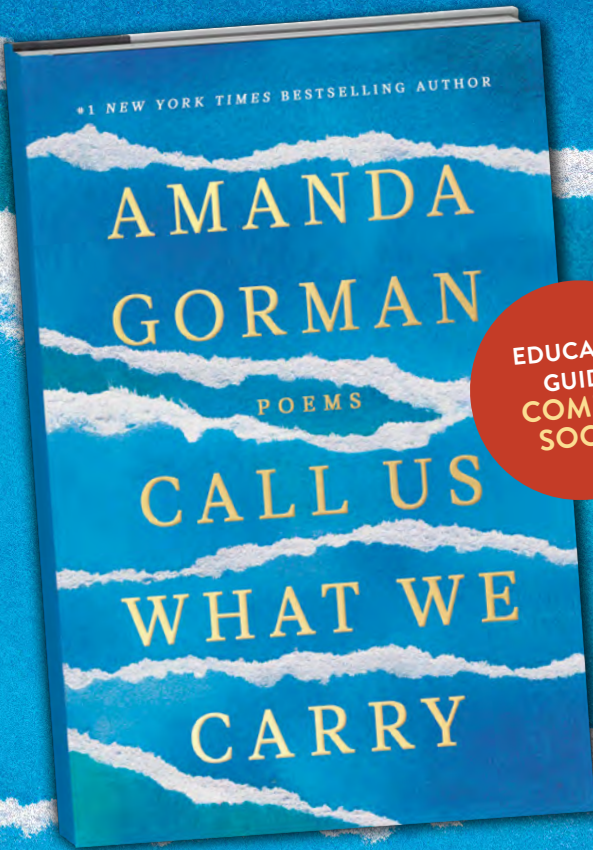
While text-dependent analysis and close reading are important skills for students to develop, teachers should also support students in asking questions about the way that such texts are constructed. Ask: How does this text support or challenge issues of representation, fairness, or justice? How does this text perpetuate or subvert dominant power dynamics and ideologies? And how can we ask students to wrestle with these tensions?

### 4. **Work in community with other antiracist educators, especially Black, Indigenous, and other educators of color.**

To disrupt and transform curriculum and instruction requires working with other educators who can challenge us as antiracist educators. Ask: How can we collaborate to identify, revise, or create instructional resources (like this guide) that can center and do justice to the experiences of historically marginalized communities?

Each principle stands for actions that are culturally sustaining and antiracist. Through each principle, teachers aim to offer a curriculum that is restorative and inclusive, and which therefore works toward healing identities and communities. As you use this guide, you'll see how each of these principles informs the approach recommended to teaching the collected works of Amanda Gorman.

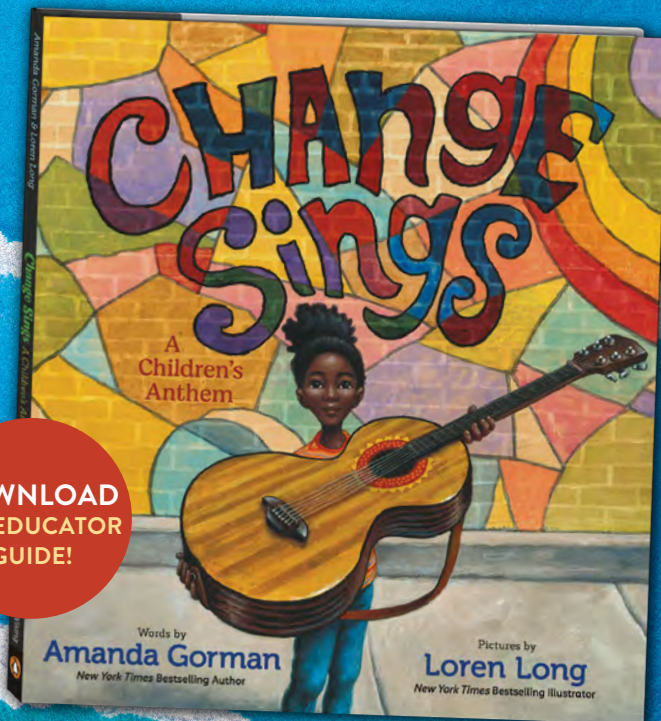
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