JFY*Net* Podcast – *FEBRUARY 2021,* English Professor Steven Dooner with Quincy College

***GREG**: In celebration of Black History Month, today's podcast features an analysis of the poem The Hill We Climb as presented by Amanda Gorman during the inauguration of President Joe Biden on January 20th. It features Quincy College English Professor Steven Dooner presenting his analysis of the rich allusions, references and wordplay delivered during this historic moment.*

***The Hill We Climb* by Amanda Gorman**

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

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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

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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,

aflame 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

***GREG**: This podcast was created by JFYNetWorks, a Boston based nonprofit provider of online learning programs to schools, students, and parents. JFY's individualized, self-paced curricula help raise individual and school performance measures by maintaining grade level skills and combating learning loss. JFY provides online ELA and math curricula aligned to state and college standards from grade 5 through high school, with personal support online and via telephone from friendly learning specialists like yours truly. For JFYNetWorks, I'm GREG Cunningham.*

Steve Dooner has been teaching and performing literature for over 30 years. A favorite professor among Quincy College students, his classes are filled with the energy and passion Professor Dooner harbors for literature. His professional experiences demonstrate he is not just an instructor of literature but is also a student constantly learning.

PROFESSOR DOONER: I am a teacher and started teaching back in 1987 and I hope I don't look that old. But I have been teaching for 30 something years now, right…33 years, and I started teaching in graduate school as a grad student, and I've been trying to get this gig right all these years. I love teaching literature. My field was originally Shakespeare and also romantic literature and Shelley. But I also loved theater; I was always a theater kid. Growing up, I performed on stage and musicals, and then I started doing Shakespeare at an early age, and I really loved directing Shakespeare over the years, directing plays like *Macbeth, As You Like It. Twelfth Night, Romeo and Juliet*. Those are all things that I've done *Midsummer Night's Dream* three or four times. So, I love directing in the theater. I've written a few plays. *Lizzie of Fall River* was the play I wrote that about 4000 people came to see it in 1999 and we revised that a few years ago and another 4000 people came to see it. So, there was an enormous amount of interest in Lizzie as a subject, and it really does just bring in the people. People have now been performing that play, outside of my original productions, and I'm selling the play, so that's great. Another thing is, I've acted on stage. What else? I've worked as a journalist. I've edited dissertations for books on whaling and books on the Boston mob. I've been a literary student my whole life. I'm devoted to try to crack the nut of teaching difficult subjects, to students who are being exposed to this stuff for the first time.

***GREG:** An inauguration is by definition a historical moment, but Amanda Gorman's performance may have done more to define the moment, this historical moment, than any other event of that day.*

PROFESSOR DOONER: I think so, because for me, the poem really calls on so much of American history and American literature. It's sort of a mini course in American literature. If you actually look at all the allusions that are present in the poem, it evokes very powerful voices in the African American experience, but also, I have a list of all the kind of influences right here. There's obviously a connection she feels to Phyllis Wheatley, she proposes a new muse and in The New York Times, it was printed that she wants a new muse to inspire the poetry of democracy, and you immediately think of Phillis Wheatley's to his excellently George Washington.

But then, also, she has connections to Abraham Lincoln to the Gettysburg Address and the second inaugural address to the African American preaching tradition. The church tradition of great preachers like Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou's poetry, *Still I Rise* is evoked in this poem as well as, Paul Laurence Dunbar bars poem *Sympathy*, from which the phrase I've heard the cage birds sing comes from. She's obviously connected to Def Jam poetry or spoken word poetry as it's called today and Saul Williams, and also very prominently, printed and spoken about in the media is her connection to *Hamilton* and Lin Manuel Miranda. So, if you look at that, that's quite an amazing tradition on. And by the way, Phyllis Wheatley, I mentioned before, is the first poet of the United States, and she was a black woman who was a slave here in Boston who wrote some of the most profound poetry of her time. So, I just wanted to clarify that.

GREG: *Gorman was able to incorporate many great moments, great orators, and literary allusions throughout the poem.*

PROFESSOR DOONER: Jill Biden first heard Amanda Gorman speak at the Library of Congress and she wrote a poem about the Charleston riot, and it was called *Unite the Right*, and it was when she was a youth poet laureate, So Jill Biden, the wife of President Joe Biden and the first lady, is the reason she's become the poet laureate of the United States. This is a position that was held by Robert Frost in the past and more recently, Billy Collins and a few others. But, you know, this is quite an extraordinary distinction. So, it's fun to have our first def jam spoken word poet who's connecting poetry to a whole new audience. And when you hear a great writer like Saul Williams read a poem like *Coded*, you can actually hear some of the style you know, writers, musicians like Gil Scott Heron and Saul Williams are sort of the basis of the style she's using.

So, it begins by her saying, And here's the start of the poem:

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

Now there's so much here right in the beginning that she's just throwing at us. Something that everybody should be listening for is the sound shade, you know, the darkness that we're coming out of and that we've waded in. She will use words all the way through. Afraid. Glade. She's going to use this "aid" sound like a thread. It's going to be one of the dominant…if it were a piece of music, it would be the dominant tone of the poem. And you can actually hear this aid

sound shade. Wade. Glade. Afraid. Listen to it as you go through the poem. That's just one thing.

And whenever I read poetry, I always tell my class, Stop trying to read with your head. It doesn't work. Read with your gut. Read with your heart. Let words jump out at you. You know, too many people try to solve problems like their Sherlock Holmes mystery. Or like they try to solve poems like their Sherlock Holmes mystery or a riddle to be solved. That's not the way poetry works. I like in poetry to go into a museum like you're walking through an art exhibition and you're drawn to the painting with a lot of red in it, or you're drawn to the painting with a lot of blue in it and you don't know why, and the poems speaks to you. And I think you should think of yourself is walking through pictures at an exhibition or a gallery. You know, when you know that's the way I feel like when I go through a long poem like this.

So, I'm listening to the dominant sounds right away. And then I noticed some really fun language like, you know, "we brave the belly of the beast." That's from the famous mythologist Joseph Campbell, right? That's the dark part of a fairy tale when Little Red Riding Hood has been eaten up by the wolf and it looks like it's darkness. That's when the Avengers have collapsed and failed, and they've all fallen apart before they rally in the third act of the movie and come together and defeat Loki. You know, that's this dark moment in a story and she's speaking specifically about all the beasts we brave, like the Civil War, but specifically the recent riots. You know that that we saw the face of the beast coming into the capital. And so that's a very interesting and profound moment. We brave the belly of the beast, and we've learned that quiet isn't always peace. It's not always good to back down. When I read…when I heard that line of the poem, I thought of Jonathan Larson from *Rent,* The opposite of war isn't peace, it's creation. You know that sometimes there could be an unease e piece or a dishonest piece, like in the 1930's, when everybody tried to appease Hitler and tried to keep the peace. But it only created more violence in the end. And so, a quiet peace is what she's referring to here is, it could be a lie.

And then she says, she's gone. We you know that we have to look not for what is. We can't be satisfied for what is, but we have to look for what should be. That's the romantic call. That's the call to idealism like you find in Don Quixote, not what just is, but what but always justice. And that's the first time in the poem that she's going to evoke the famous line from Martin Luther King Jr, his letter from a Birmingham jail that justice too long delayed is justice denied. And that's a really big idea.

GREG: *Wordplay is paramount for great poets, and Gorman's playful nature of words added both amusement and meaning for the audience.*

PROFESSOR DOONER: And the term for that is a pun. That's the literary term is a pun, where you, you know, a hardboiled egg in the morning is hard to beat. You know, that's a pun and or what is it? Oh. The police were called to a day care center where a toddler was resisting a rest. They usually make people grown. You're the cousin of Dad, jokes, but it's a wonderful thing. Her pun here is very beautiful. It's not, "…and the norms and notions of what just is, isn't always justice," not what is but what should be. So, we have to start building the world that should be.

And so, she starts with that, and then you know what she's talking about. A lot of the language, which America always uses the dawn, the dawn's early light, things like that:

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

Well, this is really awesome. She uses these things called double rhymes, which is the sound "knew it" and "do it," you know, so you have two rhymes going in two words at the end of the line.

And then she uses this thing called alliteration which, if you remember, is, Silly Sally sells seashells by the seashore or Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers, Something like that. And she uses this to go from negative to positive. "We've weathered and witnessed," you know, "we've born and suffered, and then we have witnessed" so we are testifying now and we're coming out of that darkness. And every time she uses alliteration, there's almost a climactic feeling as you get to the end of the alliterative line and you want to listen for that. That's a really big thing. She, you know, listen for those sounds.

And then everybody, all the pundits and all the commentators said that the great line of the poem, which was a very considered a very healing line for a country that's gone through a lot of division recently, is that this, "…is a nation that isn't broken but simply unfinished." The unfinished nation. All right, and that recalls, you know, book titles of recent histories that were that we are a work in progress and that's a wonderful idea.

Now we move on again, and this is where she shows what's very traditional in poetry, something called apology or humility. You're not supposed to come on all swagger and arrogance. You're supposed to show that you're just a little person to and that makes the audience more receptive to you. If you come out and say I've written the best poem ever, people go. It's not that great. But if you say Hey, I've written a poem, it's terrible. Will you read it, but please don't kill it people. You usually say, Hey, this is pretty good. So, poets long ago realized that it's good to be humble when you start a poem. And so, she says,

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

That she's gone from being just a skinny black girl to this woman who is now the poet laureate who could recite at the inauguration. And that is a profound transition that we can all see ourselves in. And that's that humility I was speaking about.

And then she starts to get really into it. There are some nice things called allusions. Allusions are like sly references to the past. You got to be hip. You got to be hip to get them. You know, if I say there were that you had as much fun as for lovable mop tops from Liverpool. Well, that would be an allusion to the Beatles, right? And so, for me, you make these references without quite coming out and saying what you meant. So, you want to start listening for these allusions.

And the first one is

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

Now the allusion here it's from Madison, it's from the preamble of the Constitution, and even Madison spoke with humility that we can't expect perfection can try to form we and so she says with humility, again, the beginning of beginning of poem with humility. We should not expect to form a union that is perfect. America will make mistakes and we have to be grownups about it. You know, we do have mistakes and we try to fix them. But it's wrong to try to hide from them and run away from them and not to address them. If people are being accidentally shot in the street because police work needs some reform, that's a question that we should raise and talk about. It is not something that we should run away from or hide from, and so she is saying, No, we will never really be perfect because that's only in heaven, but we can strive to forge a union with purpose. We can let that purpose inform all of our whole journey, that purpose, that sense of purpose. And in a lot of religious books, like recently, they talk about the purpose driven life you know, and people look for look for a sense of purpose in their lives.

So, yes, perfection is too far away. But we can try to make a better nation on we can. We can seek to know our purpose because it's celebrating what America can do and also acknowledging honestly, America's flaws.

Then I was talking about the alliteration that Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers thing, here she uses alliteration in a climactic way, and you want to listen to that again. So, it builds up what she had just said, she says: "We're striving to forge our union with purpose, to compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters, and conditions of man." And I really think of the sentences that Lincoln had in the Gettysburg Address when I hear things like that, you know, the very the way he would use triads. "A nation of the people, for the people and by the people shall not perish from this earth." And there's a sense of climax in that line, and you can hear the same climax in the in this. In these kinds of lines.

GREG: *Rhetoric is defined as the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the use of figures of speech. The weaving of efficacious language by Gorman conjures images for the audience.*

PROFESSOR DOONER: …and now she gets to something which is a really fancy thing from the old school of rhetoric. Rhetoric is the art of speechmaking in oratory. You know all about that, GREG. You are a premiere teacher of speech and rhetoric. And so, this is chiasmus or the crisscross, and the crisscross is like an X in Greek is a chi, the letter Kai and these air famous in JFK speeches, John F. Kennedy is always cited. "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." or "Never negotiating out of fear but never fearing to negotiate." Right? And so, he makes these crisscross sounds of the words. And just like JFK, in those beautiful speeches, Amanda Gorman says, listens to it:

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

So, she rhymes divide in a side. But she goes from a d sound divide to first and then she goes the word first, to a D word. Differences aside and listen to that again, "We close the divide because we know to put our future first. We must first put our differences aside." And that's, "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country." But it's got a rhyme in it too, which is really cool. So, she had a little trifecta there.

Then you're going to hear this Kennedy chiasmus coming back again later on with lots of other echoes not only to Kennedy, but also Lincoln, who love to use antithesis, which is saying one thing and then saying the opposite on you're going to hear a lot of that. So now, my pick for the most beautiful line in the speech is the very next line and it's because she uses internal rhyme and assonance. Assonance is repeating a vowel sound in a line like it's not quite internal rhyme. It's something like, that strange lady made us play great games all through May. You know what I mean? And you hear the A. It's not all rhyming, but you can hear that sound. And so, here's beautiful use of the arm sound like in the word, harm, or arm:

We lay down our arms

so we can reach out our arms

to one another

We seek harm to none and harmony for all

And so, there's the internal rhyming going on of arms and arms and harm and harmony, and you can actually hear it forming in this beautiful way. And of course, that second line recalls Lincoln's famous second inaugural speech, which a lot of people thought would be called on quite a bit in this inauguration because it almost felt like we had come through a great civil war with that storm on the Capitol. And so, people were looking for Biden, who did actually quote

Lincoln's second inaugural in his address. People were listening for that because they thought it was a good speech for the occasion and the line. We seek harm to none and harmony for all, recalls Lincoln's famous lot words, "…with malice Toward None and charity for all."

GREG: *The wit of wordplay continues as Gorman evokes the use of phonetics to continue her powerful message.*

PROFESSOR DOONER: Now there's also some brilliant wordplay in the poem, and you can listen to this. Here she becomes a bit like Shakespeare, and it's fun that she uses the word globe because Shakespeare would refer to the whole globe in the same way. You know, the Globe Theater. And there's almost a very Shakespearean quality. Shakespeare love to pawn and to play on words and even flip letters around to create anagrammatical kind of patterns. And you're going to actually see this as you listen to these words:

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

And you could hear the grieved-grew hurt-hoped, and those are beautiful alliterations. But it's the next line where she plays with the letters, "…that even as we tired, we tried," and she just moves the 'R' in tired just one spot to make it the word tried and that gives you go from you go from darkness to hope you go from death to resurrection and that one and that one switch of a letter. And they really are all the same letters, "that even as we tired, we tried."

And then she bounces off the sound of the rhyme, and the word tried into the next line, "that even as we tired, we tried that will forever be tied together victorious." And of course, this reminds us of a great allusion to Martin Luther King's wonderful letter from a Birmingham jail, where he said that, "…we're all bound together in one network of mutuality tied together in a single garment of destiny." And so, we're all tied together is a great MLK allusion, or reference to MLK.

Now she goes on a little bit further here, and you're going to start to hear the "aid" sound coming back from the beginning. And there's a great reference to the Bible here to the Book of Micah, Chapter four, Verse four. This is an allusion to the Bible, but it's also an allusion to a hit Broadway show called *Hamilton*. And this Broadway show, of course, has George Washington and say, "I want to sit on my under my own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid." Listen to this:

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

Calling on Scripture, recalls Lincoln saying, "Four score and seven years ago," in his famous Gettysburg Address. But the line from Hamilton, which I think you could sing GREG, right If you wanted to,"…everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid we'll be safe in the nation we've made."

"I want to sit under my own vine and fig tree, a moment alone in the shade." Now that's her "aid" sound, but that's happening off the page and she read this and she's, you know, the great story about Amanda Gorman is that she had a terrible speech impediment for her whole life and couldn't pronounce the word 'R'. And she said that reciting and learning Hamilton helped her practice her R's and made her such a beautiful speaker. And I think it gives all of us hope. I remember I had a sibilant 'S' when I was in first grade. I said my S's through my teeth, and I had to have speech therapy for the whole year. And she taught me to keep close my teeth, close my teeth when I said, 'S' and so I really feel that. Joe Biden, the president has had a stammer. And for people who are overcoming something, overcoming an accent, or overcoming a stammer or overcoming a speech impediment, Amanda Gorman is something of a hero.

And I think also here that that she's this reference to *Hamilton* just to shift gears a little bit. You know everyone. The line from Miranda's play is, "…Everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid will be safe in the nation we've made." That's the line that Miranda adds in and after the anxiety and fear of a great, great, and terrible event, an event that is so terrible that it shocked the whole nation. People are afraid, and so for people to say Be unafraid, be not afraid, right? Which is that beautiful, beautiful phrase from the Bible. Be not afraid. It's just a wonderful thing to hear. And we looked at poets to give us light and direction at times like this.

And then Gorman spins this line a little bit more her own poem, and she adds the sound that we're familiar with.

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.

And so now the "aid" sound keeps coming through this and it's connecting to Miranda and a lot is going on, and I'm getting my head full of ideas from this poem. And then we get the title of the poem coming up:

That is the promised glade

The hill we climb

If only we dare

To glade is an unusual verb, I looked it up in the OED [Oxford English Dictionary] and it goes back to 1621. It means to cut an opening in the forest. And so, we're going to cut an opening

with this promise and the hill we climb, I think may recall the Book of Matthew, Jesus says that Jerusalem on Mount Zion is a city on a hill. But I think it most refers to the mountain top that Martin Luther King Jr refers to when, when he says, "I may not get to the mountaintop with you…" in his last speech and he somehow knew that he might be assassinated and die. The mountaintop is always a reference to Moses, who spoke from the mountain top and for to Jesus, who spoke from Sermon on the Mount. But Moses knew that he wouldn't be able to get to the promised land with his people. He could only lead them to the to the river Jordan, and he couldn't cross over. And so, there's something about that. The hill we climb. Think of all the generations that have been climbing and you could even think of Langston Hughes' wonderful poem, *Mother To Son*, a poem where she says, "But I keep climbing and I keep climbing and the stairs are hard, and they have nails sticking out of them." I'm paraphrasing, but I keep climbing on.

And so, the hill we climb is a constant metaphor for African Americans, for immigrants, for people in America climbing up. You know, we struggle to get up the mountain top, and not all of our ancestors will make it there with us. Some of them will work their whole lives so that we can have better lives. And that's the sort of Moses sort of role. And that's the Martin Luther King Jr. sort of role. And so, that is the promise to glade the hill we climb if only we dare.

GREG: *Gorman then addresses the progress still to be made in American society, and even as far as we have come, we still have far to go,*

PROFESSOR DOONER: …and then she gets into some, I think, the complex problems of our time. And the poem starts to call out these serious issues, she says:

It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit,

it's the past we step into

and how we repair it

When I read this line. I really thought of Colin Kaepernick. You know, I think of him in conscience, thinking about the national anthem, thinking about how America was still a slave owning state when we sang about the rocket's, red glare, thinking about their sound. There are some uncomfortable later verses in that Star Spangled Banner. I think it and you think about his position, and he and he specifically addressed, black lives matter with his kneeling and he was specifically saying in his kneeling that it was an act of conscience and it was strange that anybody took exception to it because he actually asked the veteran. He said, I'm thinking of sitting in the locker room during the anthem, Colin Kaepernick said, and the veteran told him, I mean, I think it was a Vietnam veteran said, or might have been a Gulf War veteran. He said, don't do that, you know, that's disrespectful. Instead, kneel, we kneel in church, show people that you have a difference. You're not disrespecting the flag or the or the song, *The Star-Spangled Banner*. If you kneel, you're just saying, let's have a conscience about it. Let's look at the past we've inherited and let's take the steps so that we can repair it Azaz Amanda Gorman suggests. And so that's you know, I mean, maybe she did not have that in her mind, and I might be reading that into it. But that's the sort of association that I make that point in the poem.

I think it's important when you read a poem that you make associations. Then she says, and this is about the capital violence called, You Know the Storm, the so-called Storm. "We've seen a force that would shatter our nation rather than share it." It actually comes to the previous line, so let me read them all together:

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

She does a half rhyme between succeeded and defeated. She has that sound inherit, repair it, and share it. And she's being talking specifically and very clearly about white supremacy and how some people are white supremacists, and they don't want to share America with anybody who isn't white. And for me and for you and for a lot of people that's antithetical to the idea of America, that that's the opposite of what America is about. Diversity and welcoming the many nations of the world into this melting pot called America, that old idea.

She then says that she specifically talking about how the intention of the mob was to delay the Electoral College vote and, she says, would destroy a country if it meant delaying democracy. And this effort very nearly succeeded. They might have delayed the vote, but they would not have, "but democracy would not have been defeated," she says. Now that again recalls the idea that that wonderful MLK Martin Luther King line from the letter from the Birmingham jail that, "justice too long delayed is justice denied," you know, and you can hear it. While democracy could be periodically delayed, it could never be permanently defeated. It also recalls a wonderful other line from Martin Luther King Jr that the arc of history…the arc of the moral arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice, or I may have paraphrased that a little bit, but that's a wonderful line, and she's talking about that. You can't stop the beat. You know you can't stop the beat to quote *Hairspray*.

GREG: *In the Langston Hughes poem, I, too, Hughes made clear his time may be delayed, but his time was coming when he wrote the lines:*

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I'll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody'll dare

Say to me,

"Eat in the kitchen,"

Then.

PROFESSOR DOONER: "But tomorrow I will sit at the table," so, right you can put it off today, but tomorrow will happen. And so, you can hear this in length of Hughes. You can hear it in Martin Luther King Jr., when he says that their people told us to wait with the hardest obstacle of all its we've waited long enough. 300 years is long enough, and so that's the key. And then we come back to *Hamilton* again, she says:

In this truth

in this faith we trust

For while we have our eyes on the future

history has its eyes on us

It is a faith in our own commitment to democracy that could never be defeated. And she repeats that concept of defeated again and that's that came from the word succeeded, defeated, defeated. You hear the rhyme. But this line is so wonderful in this truth. In this faith, we trust instead of in God we trust that we the slogan on our menu…on our on our money, in the in this truth in this faith we trust, for while we have our eyes on the future, history has its eyes on us. It is a faith in our own commitment to democracy that can never be defeated. So, you might say, unlike the slogan on our money, she's saying that the faith in democracy is a profound faith that guided our founding fathers. And it's going to keep guiding us and, certainly in God we trust is a nice idea to, but you want to keep that faith that democracy will be spread to everybody equally, that no one will be disenfranchised. That's the faith that she wants to keep. And you know the line, "history has its eyes on us." You know, really, it comes from Miranda is wonderful Hamilton, where he says, "History has its eyes on you," which is a song that's sung in *Hamilton*.

GREG: *The climax of the poem then brings together all of these moments providing full historical context to the inauguration stage.*

PROFESSOR DOONER: And now we're coming to the end of the poem, and it's getting to be very climactic at this point. We get another chiasmus. This is probably the best chiasmus, the

best “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you could do for your country.” Listen to this:

So while once we asked,

how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe

Now we assert

How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?

Let me read that again:

So while once we asked,

how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe

Now we assert

How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?

And so, you can see we, catastrophe, catastrophe, us, and it goes A to B, B to A. That's called a chiasmus. And that's wonderful. And here is probably the most musical line in the whole poem. This next line:

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

Become the future. Now this is like Emily Dickinson. She does something called a half-rhyme, Inertia and future. It's the way you say the word inertia that it could sound like future, and she also rhymes intimidation and generation. Now this is the sort of end of the speech, and, you know, like the end of a great speech, it's almost a peroration, which is you sort of bring all your points together just before the end of the speech. And then there's a final conclusion now for her peroration. She is going to do one of the most wonderful mash ups, you know, you know, this this tradition of mash ups that we have in music today, where you are hear one part of one song mixed in with another. You know that kind of thing. She's going to do this incredible mash up between Martin Luther King, Jr’s *I Have a Dream* Speech and Maya Angelou *Still, I rise* her famous poem, and it's these two sections in particular the very end of MLK's I Have a Dream speech. I'll read just a little bit of this:

“*And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. And so, let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let Freedom Ring from the mighty Mountains of New York. Let Freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let Freedom Ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado. Let Freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that. Let Freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let Freedom*

ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi from every mountainside. Let Freedom ring."

The Stone Mountain in Georgia was the home of the Ku Klux Klan, and Lookout Mountain was part of the part of the Southern racist movement as well as the clan movement and Mississippi was where a lot of the great civil rights leaders were murdered: Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman and also people like Medgar Evers. So, you've got all of these extraordinary things going on. And Martin Luther King Jr is saying we're going to from the Noble hills and from the not so Noble Hills. We're going to let freedom ring. He has these beautiful descriptions. Then Maya Angelou writes in her poem, *Still, I rise*. This is the end of her poem:

Out of the huts of history's shame

I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain

I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.

That's Maya Angelou. So now this is how Gorman fuses the two of their voices together into one beautiful, poetic fugue. And here it is. This is wonderful. Listen to this:

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,

aflame 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

And my association for the end of that line. It's so beautiful to make your dreams real, not to just leave them dreams. Well, I always think of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*: "Don't dream it, be it!" and that is that is the splendid poem that is Amanda Gorman's *The Hill We Climb*.

GREG: *Professor Dooner also addressed If this poem may help to provide healing to a nation which is still desperately politically divided.*

PROFESSOR DOONER: I think so. I think it could help. You know, no one poem can heal a nation. I mean, many, many people, many, many more people saw her, perhaps, at the Super Bowl when she talked about the three symbolic captains of the Super Bowl that day a nurse, a teacher and a veteran who works with kids in a rough part of the city. And she spoke about these three captains of the Super Bowl, and she has this incredible confidence, and yet you have to remember her own history on how much she has conquered to come to that point. I think she is connecting with people. She's connecting those people. There's a whole vast tradition in churches across America, and in Def Jam poetry, poetry slams that our academic professors don't know anything about, which is this live spoken word tradition. She is immediately hooking into all of that she's connecting with as a powerful, powerful symbol as a powerful role model. And for me, reviving the spirit of poetry, which is too long been sort of thought, is a dusty old object that you know that you trot out and you know students groan when they hear it.

GREG: *Much in the way the Broadway hit Hamilton invited many who had never listened to or seen a Broadway show before. Amanda Gorman's poetry may open the door for a new poetic spirit for new audiences in the United States.*

PROFESSOR DOONER: There's a whole lot of hip people with hip playlists out there, and they're listening to Gil Scott Heron's *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. I met 18-year-olds who are doing this, and they're listening to Saul Williams, recite Def Jam poetry and, they're listening to *Hamilton* and they're listening, to, you know, you know everything, Tupac and KRS-One and all of these things. And there are voices out there that have been connected and connected together by people like Eminem and by all sorts of speakers. And Amanda Gorman is going to add to that. And I think she is on the poet side, not so much the musician or hip-hop side, and she's going to talk about the value of words themselves, and people are going to listen to that in particular.

And so maybe you maybe you're not a music major. Or maybe you don't know how to, you know, work a keyboard. But you could listen to the sound of her language. And maybe you could master language in the same way I think it is. I think it's you know it is the beginning of something, but it's also part of a movement that started way back in 1970. But it's also the beginning of something new that we can actually hope that will continue.

I think we're going to need more voices like Lin Manuel Miranda and Amanda Gorman to join together to create a more poetic nation. But I think about countries like Ireland, where their poets are part of the part of the culture where everybody knows who William Butler Yates and Patrick Kavanagh are. You know who they are, and they and they can quote them. And that's like regular people at a bar can quote a poem in Ireland, and will America gain this poetic spirit? Well, America used to have this love of rhetoric and love of words. Everybody memorized the Gettysburg Address. At one point in history, we used to love learning things like the “Friends, Romans, countrymen” speech from Julius Caesar. And I think we can restore that because it's an age where people are playing with words all the time in ephemeral and shallow ways in social media. But poetry is being created on TikTok all the time, and poetry is being, I mean, even two second poetry, right? In blurbs and in YouTube and content on YouTube, the poetry is being created in in spoken word. And I think what we need is people like us in academia to validate a little bit more. I think we need more people pointing the finger that this is the way to go.

But I think I think something might be happening. I hope that more people listen to her. I want her career to be long. I can't wait to see what she does next. I want to see people, across America, all races connected to Amanda Gorman and I want her to be the new Robert Frost. Absolutely. I want more Amanda Gormans, and I want more voices to come out that may not have been heard yet, and I want this living tradition to bloom completely.

GREG: *We would like to sincerely think Professor Steve Dooner of Quincy College for his brilliant and insightful analysis of Amanda Gorman's poem, The Hill We Climb, as JFY continues to celebrate Black History Month. If you have any questions or comments, please navigate to our website jfynet.org, which features a wealth of commentary, dialogue, and free scholastic resources, including this monthly podcast, to support all educational communities. Thank you for joining us. For JFYNetWorks, I'm GREG Cunningham.*