The Hill We Climb

SUMMARY

The speaker says that at the beginning of a new morning, we as Americans ask ourselves: where can we find light in what seems to be an eternal darkness? The grief we carry with us is like a huge, deep sea that we have to slowly struggle through. We've endured some of the worst possible times. We've discovered that business as usual isn't always the same thing as real peace, and that conventional ideas of fairness aren't always the same thing as true and enduring justice.

But, the speaker continues, the sun rises before we even know it's happened. Somehow, we get through to a new day. We've seen some hard times through, and seen that our country isn't fundamentally unsalvageable; it's just not finished being built yet.

We're living in a time when the speaker—a scrawny Black girl whose ancestors were slaves, who was brought up by a single mom, and who dreamed of being president one day—can stand here reciting this very poem for the next president.

Sure, the U.S. isn't even close to perfect, but that doesn't mean that Americans have to aim for immediate perfection. Instead, we've got to see our efforts as a purposeful process to form a unified country. We want to make a country that is equally livable for all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds.

As such, we look up, not at everything that separates us from each other, but at the huge task that lies in front of us. We join with each other across boundaries because we know we need to look past our differences if we want to build a better future for everyone. We put down our weapons so that we can instead embrace each other. We want a country that doesn't hurt anyone, and that brings everyone together.

If the rest of the world only says one thing about the people of this country, let them say this: we learned through our sorrow. We kept hoping even when we were in pain. We kept trying even when we were exhausted. And that we'll create a better world by always working closely together.

That doesn't mean that we're always going to win—only that we won't try to separate ourselves from each other anymore.

The Bible tells us to imagine a future in which every person will be safe and happy in the "garden" of their own life, afraid of no one. If we want to rise to the promise of the era we live in, we'll have to learn from this, and not try to solve problems with violence, but with connection. That encouraging vision of the future is the "garden" we have to grow, the challenging "hill" we have to climb up, if we're brave enough to do so.

We'll do this because being American isn't just about being patriotic. It's about acknowledging our troubled past, addressing our problems rather than pretending they're not there, and doing something to fix them.

We've recently seen that some Americans would have preferred to rip the country apart rather than share it with people who aren't like them—would have ruined the country just to get in the way of the democratic process. And they almost got away with it! But while democracy can be slowed down, it can't be stopped forever.

We Americans put our faith in that belief. As we look to the future, we know that the future is looking back at us. And we're finally coming to the time in our history when justice can be served. We were all pretty frightened of this era when it began; we didn't feel ready for the kind of responsibility it demanded. But within this dark period, we've come to see ourselves as the writers of our own history, and we've managed to stay hopeful and keep laughing. We might once have asked, "How on earth can we survive this terrible time?" But now, we say, "How could a terrible time ever defeat us?"

We won't go back to the way things were, and instead will move forward towards something new. As a nation, we're battered but not broken, forgiving but strong, brave and free. We won't let violence and intimidation stop us: we know that the next generation will only inherit a legacy of stalled progress if we don't keep working now. Our mistakes will become our children's problems. One thing is sure, however: if we combine forgiveness with power, and power with moral goodness, then we'll leave our children an inheritance of love instead.

So let's leave this country better than we found it. With every breath I draw into my armored body, we'll transform this suffering, injured world into an astonishing one.

We'll rise from the golden hills of the western United States. We'll rise from the windy northeastern U.S., where the American Revolution began. We'll rise from the Great Lakes in the Midwest. We'll rise from the dry, sunny South. We'll rebuild, forgive each other, and get better.

In every little bit of the U.S., citizens from all different backgrounds will come out of hiding, beat up but lovely. When the sun rises, we come out of the darkness, glowing with passion and fearlessness.

The new sun rises when we allow it to rise. Because light never goes away, if we have the courage to look for it—if we have the courage to make it ourselves.

THEMES

HOPE AND PROGRESS AS AMERICAN VALUES

Written for Joe Biden's inauguration as the 46th President of the United States, Amanda Gorman's "The Hill We Climb" presents a country that isn't striving for perfection, but for steady, ongoing improvement. While the U.S. is still full of conflict and difficulty, the speaker suggests, it's worth celebrating the progress the country has made up the "hill" of justice, and working to make sure that it keeps on climbing. American problems can't be solved all in one fell swoop, this poem argues—but that's no reason to give up the hope that things can get a lot better over time.

In recent years, the speaker suggests, the U.S. has been going through a dark and difficult period, full of hatred and division. This doesn't mean the country is irrevocably broken, however. Rather, Americans should have hope that their "unpolished" country can get better—and should see themselves as playing an important part in that change.

While the U.S. has seen years of turmoil and suffering, the speaker says, this is also a day upon which a "skinny Black girl descended from slaves" can find herself "reciting" for a new president (and hoping to be president herself someday)! This autobiographical moment, in which Amanda Gorman clearly refers to her own life experience as a young Black poet speaking at Biden's inauguration, suggests that every individual American has a part to play in changing the country for the better. These lines also point out that the country has *already* gotten better, in spite of all its recent struggles.

Yet even as there's plenty of hope for better times, the speaker cautions readers that change comes slowly. What's important is not to "form a union that is perfect," but to "forge a union with purpose," seeing continuous effort as an American value that will continue generation after generation. The American task, the speaker suggests, is to say that "Even as we hurt, we hoped […] Even as we tired, we tried." That is, Americans shouldn't be discouraged by the difficulty and pain of trying to make lasting change for the better, but understand these as inevitable parts of progress—and of good citizenship. This kind of persistence also involves looking hopefully to the future. Americans must refuse to give up, because "our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation." Persistently struggling to improve an imperfect reality is part of handing on a better starting point to future Americans.

In the end, the speaker says, what's most important is not regretting that Americans can't fix all of their country's problems at once, but realizing that every American has a part to play in gradually making things better. If Americans can be "brave enough to be" the "light," change will always come—even if it comes slowly and painfully. The hope of a better future, the speaker concludes, can motivate Americans to commit to the hard work of change.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-61

RACIAL JUSTICE AND BLACK STRENGTH

In this poem about her vision for the future of the U.S., Amanda Gorman pays special attention to the hope that the country can dismantle its legacy of racism. Through examples of Black American history both distant and recent—from slavery to the 2020 George Floyd protests—the speaker holds up Black Americans as an example of exactly the kind of committed citizens the country needs in order to create real change. Black American history, in this poem, is a perfect example of slow, painful progress—and a beacon of hope and inspiration.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker, herself a young Black woman, observes that she's the descendant of slaves—and that now she's reciting her own poetry at a presidential inauguration! Her own story, then, makes it clear that Black Americans have come a long way. And the speaker refers to her Black forebears not only directly (mentioning her enslaved ancestors and her own mother) but also stylistically: at the end of the poem, she borrows sentence structure from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, and language from Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise." In doing so, she suggests that generations of Black Americans have worked together to bring her (and the country) to this moment in history.

Just because Black Americans have come a long way, however, doesn't mean that the work of racial justice is complete. To that end, the speaker notes that the "norms and notions of what 'just' is isn't always 'justice,'" and that "quiet isn't always peace." These lines gesture to the upsurge of recent racial justice movements like Black Lives Matter, which insist that the U.S. can't just carry on with business as usual while Black Americans suffer under persistent institutional racism. Every American, the speaker suggests, must confront the American legacy of racist injustice in the country is to move forward: being American means taking on "the past we step into and how we repair it."

Black American history provides myriad examples of this kind of brave, persistent reckoning. Through her references to Black persistence and pride—and to the deeply ingrained racism the U.S. is still working through—the speaker suggests that Black Americans provide a model for how America as a whole can learn to confront its failings. Black Americans, the speaker implies, are expert "hill-climbers," refusing to lose hope in spite

of how incrementally the U.S. changes its ways.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-5
- Line 10
- Line 14
- Lines 19-23
- Lines 49-54

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-7

When day comes, ...
... we do it.

"The Hill We Climb" begins with a sunrise in the dark. "When day comes," the speaker asks, "[...] where can we find light in this never-ending shade?" This symbolic sunrise is the dawn of a new era for the U.S.—a country, that, as the speaker says, has been going through a particularly painful period of its history. Right from the start, she speaks as one member of a "we," a collective that "carr[ies] loss" together.

"The Hill We Climb" is what's known as an "occasional poem," a poem composed to commemorate a specific event. In this case, that event was the 2021 inauguration of Joe Biden as the President of the United States. With that in mind, the reader can form some pretty specific ideas about what the "never-ending shade" the speaker laments might represent as she goes on:

> We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,
> and the norms and notions of what "just" is isn't
> always justice.

These lines gesture to the turbulent period of history leading up to Biden's inauguration. The year before, the U.S. went through not just the global trauma of the coronavirus pandemic, but a reckoning with its racist history: in the wake of George Floyd's murder at the hands of police, the country experienced a massive awakening, and the streets were full of people protesting police brutality against Black Americans. The speaker's pun—"the norms and notions of what 'just' is isn't always justice"—subtly alludes to these protests, and to many citizens' understanding that business as usual means oppression for the country's Black population.

While the speaker is working in free verse here, not using a regular meter or rhyme scheme, she still carefully shapes the sounds of her words. Listen to the rhythm and rhyme in these lines, for example:

> And yet, | the dawn | is ours | before | we knew it.
> Somehow we | do it.

Here, the speaker moves from a steady, lilting line of iambs (metrical feet that go da-DUM) into a short, sharp line that uses two front-loaded feet: a dactyl (DUM-da-da) and a trochee (DUM-da). The end-stops here mean that each of these lines gets its own little pocket of space. And the matching end rhymes on "knew it" and "do it" connect these rhythmically different lines together. All together, these changing patterns make the speaker's tone feel deliberate and masterful: she's using stress and sound to mirror her ideas.

And here, those ideas come down to one short, solid statement: in spite of all the pain and suffering Americans have endured in recent years, "Somehow [they] do it": they keep going anyway. This mood of grounded, gradual, persistent progress will shape the whole poem.

LINES 8-10

Somehow we've weathered ...
... reciting for one.

The speaker uses anaphora here, repeating the word "Somehow," to tie this line to the one before it. In doing so, the speaker expands her picture of the U.S. at the time of Biden's inauguration. What American citizens have done, in spite of all their struggles, is this:

> Somehow we've weathered and witnessed a nation
> that isn't broken,
> but simply unfinished.

Also notice the speaker's alliteration on "weathered and witnessed" here. That repeated /w/ sound links the idea of "weathering," or surviving, to the idea of "witnessing," or observing. To "witness," in these lines, seems like its own way of surviving: the alliterative connection between the two words makes them seem to go hand in hand.

The first lines of this poem have focused on the U.S.'s *survival* in the face of suffering. Now, the speaker begins to celebrate the country's *progress*. Here, she references both her own background and the very event this poem was written for, describing how "a skinny Black girl descended from slaves [...] can dream of becoming president, only to find herself reciting for one."

This highly specific moment ties this poem to a particular time and place (the day of Biden's inauguration in Washington, D.C.) and to a particular person—Amanda Gorman, the poet. Here, Gorman uses autobiographical detail to hold her own life up as an example of the progress the country has made, in spite of all its failings. As the second-wave feminist thinkers of the '60s and '70s liked to say, "the personal is political," and here, the speaker is using her own personal life to make a political point. Her honored role at this august ceremony would have been

unthinkable only a generation or two ago. In "weather[ing]" its failures, the country has also "witnessed" real progress.

But, as the speaker points out, that doesn't mean the country is perfect: its work is still "unfinished."

LINES 11-14

And yes, we ...
... conditions of man.

In these lines, the speaker lays out one of her poem's biggest ideas: the answer to the country's failings and struggles isn't to aspire to immediate perfection, but to commit to steady, purposeful progress.

Take a look at how she uses alliteration and diacope to drive this point home:

> 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 our union with purpose.
> To compose a country committed to all cultures,
> colors, characters, and conditions of man.

The repeated pop of the /p/ sound and the crispness of the hard /c/ sound make these lines feel emphatic and forceful. And the diacope of the words "striving to" and "union" draws attention to a contrast the speaker feels is deeply important: shared, continuous progress matters more than perfection. Assonance between the words "form a union that is perfect" and "forge our union with purpose" highlights that contrast even more clearly.

Here, the speaker is also making an allusion to one of the country's founding documents. Her reference to a "union that is perfect" calls to mind the Preamble of the Constitution, in which the framers famously hoped for "a more perfect union." Perhaps this allusion asks readers to think about the word "more" in that statement. Even at its foundation, the speaker seems to say, the U.S. has always been all about getting better, not being perfect from the outset.

LINES 15-24

And so we ...
... again sow division.

In these lines, the speaker lays out a hopeful vision for the future of the United States. As she's already clearly said, this future won't be about striving for perfection (and getting discouraged when efforts fall short), but about citizens coming together to make slow, steady progress.

Her use of antithesis in lines 15-16 shapes her argument: Americans have to turn away from their difficult past and toward a hopeful future:

> 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.

The antitheses built into these lines mirror the speaker's argument: her lines, like her ideas, turn away from old ways and look to new ones.

The speaker also turns back to witty wordplay in these lines:

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

In this moment of antanaclasis, the word "arms" first means "weapons," and then means, well, arms—the body part. Here, the speaker is advocating not just for change, but for transformation. Laying down "arms" to reach out "arms" suggests a literal and metaphorical movement from violence and hatred to peace and love.

But as the speaker is quick to note, that kind of movement isn't easy. Take a look at the way she shapes her language as she describes the difficulty of honorable progress:

> 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.

Here, the speaker uses emphatic parallelism to link her ideas together. The repetition of "That even as we" suggests that she sees each entry on this list as another part of the same big effort. And within those lines, her alliteration makes yet another kind of connection, linking grief to growth, hurt to hope, and being tired to trying all the same. The difficulty of change, this alliterative passage suggests, goes hand in hand with its rewards. In fact, just as the speaker says in line 23, they're "tied together"—just as intimately as American citizens are tied to each other.

When the speaker returns to antithesis in line 24 ("Not because [...] sow division"), she marries it with assonance and alliteration to make the development of her ideas even clearer: it's not that the U.S. will never again "know defeat," but that it will never again "sow division." That is, while the U.S. will certainly fail sometimes on its road to a better world, it can also commit to staying unified and persistent. The echoing sounds here suggest that the country needs to evolve and transform in pursuit of this goal.

LINES 25-29

Scripture tells us ...
... we repair it.

From her rousing call to keep trying to improve the country (even when progress is slow and painful), the speaker turns to the Bible, making the U.S.'s mission not just political, but prophetic. Alluding to the Book of Micah, she says, "everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid."

This line, quoting a biblical prophet, might also take the reader back to the "belly of the beast" in line 3—an allusion to Jonah, who was swallowed by a whale after he refused his prophetic calling. (A good long stint in a whale-belly persuaded him in the end.) These allusions make the speaker's point about the country's role feel even broader, suggesting that the country, too, might not be living up to a prophetic mission—perhaps to speak of "liberty and justice for all," as the Pledge of Allegiance puts it.

But the lines from Micah in particular also evoke an idyllic future, a time when everyone is at home in their own metaphorical "garden," safe and unafraid. That vision, the speaker says, is the country's ultimate goal: "the hill we climb, if only we dare."

That symbolic hill (which becomes the poem's title) suggests a national project of steady toil: the rest of this poem makes it seem like climbing the "hill" of justice and peace is pretty hard work! But that, the speaker insists, is what "being American" means: not just embracing a "pride we inherit" with smug, patriotic complacency, but working hard to "repair" the "past we step into." To embrace a glorious prophetic future, in this poem's view, demands that Americans reckon with their country's troubled history.

In these lines, again, the speaker uses sound to shape her meaning. Take a look at the way she uses internal rhyme in lines 26 and 27:

> 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 promise to **glade**, the hill we climb, if only
> we dare.

The "blade"/"made"/"glade" rhyme follows the emotional progress of these lines, from the violence of the "blade" to the connective bridges that get "made" to the eventual "glade," the blissful biblical garden. These rhymes also draw attention to the speaker's inventive, non-standard language here. The word "glade," meaning a peaceful open space in a forest, isn't usually a verb! By using it as one, the speaker insists that a better future isn't a destination, but an action.

LINES 30-36

We've seen a ...
... eyes on us.

In this passage, the poem becomes pointedly topical. In early January 2021, in the very week that Gorman was writing "The Hill We Climb" in preparation for Biden's inauguration, supporters of the outgoing Donald Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol Building in an effort to stop the official certification of Biden's electoral win. This violent-but-disorganized attack didn't have the effect its perpetrators intended, but it was a sobering and unprecedented moment that showed just how fragile U.S. democracy had become. Gorman has said that she added this section of the poem in response to these events; already thinking about how the country had persisted through dark times, she found that this passage fit right in.

Democracy, this section of the poem argues, is a stronger force than those who would seek to destroy it. Take a look at the way the speaker uses slant rhyme and alliteration to bring these points home:

> We've seen a force that would **sh**atter our nation
> rather than **sh**are it.
> Would **de**stroy our country if it meant **de**laying
> **de**mocracy.
> This effort very nearly succeeded.
> But while **d**emocracy can be **p**eriodically **d**elayed,
> it can never be **p**ermanently **d**efeated.

The speaker again uses linked sounds to set up contrasting ideas: "**sh**atter[ing]" versus "**sh**aring," "**de**str[uction]" versus "**de**mocracy." And her slant rhyme between "succeeded" and "defeated" evokes both the terror and the ultimate failure of the attempted coup: the rhyme, like the coup, doesn't quite "succeed"! In other words, the country's democratic processes have survived: the inauguration this poem celebrates is going forward in spite of all the turmoil that threatened to "delay[]" it, and democracy itself will persist, too.

The speaker also uses a subtle, witty allusion in these lines: not to the Bible or the Constitution, but to the popular musical *Hamilton*. The words "history has its eyes on us" in line 36 might well be a reference to a song of the same name from that show—one in which George Washington argues for the peaceful transition of power from one president to the next!

LINES 37-41

This is the ...
... prevail over us?'

In spite of everything the country went through over the week before the poem was performed, let alone over the last few years, the speaker has faith that Americans have learned from their pain and grown stronger from it. They can make this troubled time into an era of "just redemption," in which *true* justice—a justice that's more than what "'just is,'" as the speaker puts it back in line 5—can come to life.

But it hasn't been easy, and it won't get easier! The speaker's internal rhyme and assonance in lines 39-40 evokes both the power and the pain of the historical moment contemporary

Americans have had to face:

> 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.

Here, the internal rhyme of "prepared" and "heirs" links up to the word "terrifying" through /ay/ assonance, suggesting that Americans had to rise to a truly frightening moment even if they didn't feel ready to deal with all the trauma and trouble that had been handed down to them.

But the internal rhymes between the "terrifying hour" of reckoning and the "power" that Americans found in themselves reflects the way that citizens rose to the occasion in spite of their fear. And the internal slant rhyme between "chapter" and "laughter" makes it clear that there have even been good times in the midst of recent American turmoil—and that those good times reflect American citizens' ability to keep going even when times are tough.

At last, in a moment of antimetabole, the speaker rearranges fear into courage:

> So while once we asked, 'How could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?' now we assert, 'How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?'

Here, the speaker makes a powerful proclamation: enduring the despair and fear of "catastrophes" like attempted coups and global pandemics has made Americans stronger. She also seems to be making a (admittedly) subtle allusion to another important moment of American oratory. Former President John F. Kennedy gave a speech on his own inauguration day that included the famous line, "Ask not what your country can do for you: ask what you can do for your country." In borrowing his antimetabole here, the speaker also connects her ideas to his and to a long history of rousing oratory. For the U.S. to grow even stronger, she suggests, individual American citizens need to see themselves as part of the solution.

LINES 42-47

We will not ...
... our children's birthright.

Having looked back to the alarming events of the week before the inauguration, the speaker looks forward to "what shall be," imagining a better future for the United States. Here, she personifies the country as a person who is "bruised but whole, benevolent but bold, fierce and free." This moment touches on the notion of the "body politic": the idea that countries can be imagined as one person made of many people, a collective entity with a shared character. If that's the case, then every citizen plays a part in shaping the country's "personality."

That's a big responsibility, the speaker suggests, and one that asks Americans to see themselves as part of history, looking forward to the people who will come after them. It also asks them to refuse to be "interrupted by intimidation," because "inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation." In these lines—which refer again to the failure of the attempted coup—the speaker uses alliteration on /in/ sounds to make it clear that Americans are going to have to stand together against anti-democratic forces. If citizens are "inacti[ve]" or "inert[]" (that is, passive or unreactive) in the face of assaults on U.S. democracy, the country's next generation will only have to deal with the same problems over again.

And it's the next generation that the speaker turns to as she moves toward the end of her poem. Take a look at how the speaker uses sound to make her powerful point here:

> 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.

By now, readers will recognize some of the speaker's favorite techniques: internal rhyme, alliteration, and slant rhyme densely pack these lines with matching sounds. All these musical pairings make it clear that the poem is coming to its emotional climax: the chimes between big, powerful words like "might" and "right," "legacy" and "love," and "change" and "children" make it clear that the speaker is talking about ideas that will shape the country for generations to come. More than that, she's talking about ideas that are at the very foundation of her vision for a better United States.

LINES 48-54

So let us ...
... reconcile, and recover.

As the speaker enters the last section of the poem, she offers not just a vision of steady progress, but a rallying cry:

> With every breath from my bronze-pounded chest,
> we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.

Here, the imagery of the "bronze-pounded chest" makes the speaker seem like a Joan of Arc figure, a holy warrior; the reader can almost hear the speaker's "armor" ringing as she alliteratively imagines "rais[ing] this wounded world into a wondrous one."

With that, the speaker takes off into an extended passage in which she passionately imagines the country rising up as one:

> We will rise from the golden hills of the west.

> **We will rise** from the wind-swept north-east 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.

Here, the speaker is using layers of powerful allusion. Her parallelism, her anaphora, and her images of scenes across the country are borrowed from another famous moment of American oration: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, in which he, too, looks all the way across the country using repeated phrasings: "Let freedom ring from the snow capped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California!"

In alluding to this famous speech, the speaker both honors King's courageous vision and asks the whole country to unite. Her mention of individual parts of the country brings them all together. From the "wind-swept north-east where our forefathers" (that is, the "founding fathers," the writers of the Constitution) revolted against British rule, to the "sun-baked south" that once tried to leave the Union altogether: everyone has to come together and play a part in the future the speaker envisions.

Her repeated "We will rise" also echoes Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise," an ode to Black women's enduring joy. With these references to great Black thinkers of the past, the speaker suggests that the "ris[ing]" country she imagines has a lot to learn from the history of Black struggle. To "rebuild, reconcile, and recover," the whole U.S. needs to understand what its Black citizens have known for a long time: change is hard, and slow, and painful—but urgent and joyful, too.

LINES 55-61

> *In every known ...*
> *... to be it.*

In the closing lines of her poem, the speaker returns to the dawn symbolism she raised at the very beginning. When the "new dawn" comes, she says, Americans will "step out of the shade, aflame and unafraid"—metaphorically on fire with fearless passion and commitment.

They might be "battered," but they're "beautiful," too. The blunt /b/ alliteration here suggests that American citizens have really been through the wringer, but that they're still standing. In fact, when the speaker uses the word "beautiful" twice in line 56 ("our people [...] and beautiful"), her diacope makes it clear that American beauty persists undiminished through all kinds of trouble.

One last time, she uses anaphora, parallelism, and rhyme to evoke a transformation:

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

The repeating words, sounds, and sentence structure here make the speaker's point crystal clear. Being a good citizen—a part of the collective, hopeful American experiment—is more than a complacent "pride we inherit." It's an active commitment to seek out the symbolic "light" of hope and justice. More than that, it's an understanding that *seeking* that light also means *making* that light: using one's own life to "illuminate" the collective life of the country.

The "new dawn" can only "bloom as we free it," the speaker concludes; change doesn't come without effort. But—and this is the poem's big point—Americans have it in them to make that effort. Drawing from the Constitution, from the Civil Rights movement, from poetry and art, and from religion, this speaker argues that in spite of all her country's pain and darkness, her fellow citizens can commit to "climb" the "hill" of progress as a "we"—a truly United States.

SYMBOLS

THE HILL

The hill of the poem's title symbolizes the challenge of building a fairer, freer, better America. To "climb" this hill, the poem suggests, Americans have to accept the fact that it's steep! In other words, progress doesn't come easily, and the symbolic climb up this hill will likely involve as much defeat, weariness, and grief as triumph. But while climbing is difficult, it's not impossible, and the speaker imagines an eventual "victory" that doesn't "lie in the blade, but in all the bridges we've made." In other words, success can be found on the symbolic hilltop where all Americans can live together in harmony.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 27:** "That is the promise to glade, the hill we climb, if only we dare."

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

In the poem, light and darkness take on their traditional symbolism: light represents new beginnings, hope, and rebirth, while darkness represents suffering and confusion.

In particular, the poem uses images of fresh sunlight to suggest a new beginning for the country (and, more specifically, the start of Joe Biden's presidency, the occasion this poem celebrates). This kind of "dawn" comes "before we knew it," the speaker says: relief from suffering arrives as reliably as sunrise.

That "dawn" also does away with "never-ending shade": the

feeling that the country might always suffer the "darkness" of hatred and division. The speaker's use of the word "shade" hints that this kind of darkness only comes because something (such as racism, political division, and/or hopelessness) is getting in the way of the sunlight!

At the end of the poem, the speaker brings all these symbols together:

> 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.

Here, the "light" of hope doesn't just *appear* to Americans: it *is* Americans, working together to make the U.S. a better place for all.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "where can we find light in this never-ending shade"
- **Line 6:** "And yet, the dawn is ours before we knew it."
- **Lines 57-61:** "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."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"The Hill We Climb" is overflowing with alliteration, which helps to develop its themes of unity and struggle (and also simply makes the poem sound all the more striking and memorable!). Through its music and meaning, the alliteration in this poem suggests that the speaker dreams of a more harmonious country—one that's worth fighting for.

For instance, take a look at the woven alliterative sounds in this passage from the middle of the poem:

> We seek harm to none and harmony for all.
> [...]
> 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.

Here, alliteration draws striking connections between contrasting ideas: harm and harmony, grief and growth, hurt and hope, being tired and trying all the same. The repeated initial sounds here underline the speaker's big point: the difficulties and the triumphs of progress go hand in hand. (Also note that these lines are clear examples of parallelism and antithesis!)

Towards the end of the poem, meanwhile, the speaker uses alliteration to make her hopeful vision of the future in lines 47-49 sound rapturously musical:

> 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.

The gentle but insistent alliterative /m/, /l/, /ch/, and /w/ sounds here mirror the speaker's hope for a "legacy" of tender "love." But that legacy won't come without work, and the bold /b/ sounds in "behind" and "better" ring with the armored strength of the speaker's "bronze-pounded" chest.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "braved," "belly," "beast"
- **Line 5:** "norms," "notions," "just," "justice"
- **Line 8:** "weathered," "witnessed"
- **Line 11:** "polished," "pristine"
- **Line 14:** "compose," "country," "committed," "cultures," "colors," "characters," "conditions"
- **Line 16:** "future," "first"
- **Line 18:** "harm," "harmony"
- **Line 20:** "grieved," "grew"
- **Line 21:** "hurt," "hoped"
- **Line 22:** "tired," "tried"
- **Line 23:** "tied," "together"
- **Line 26:** "blade," "bridges"
- **Line 31:** "destroy," "delaying," "democracy"
- **Line 33:** "democracy," "delayed"
- **Line 34:** "defeated"
- **Line 35:** "truth," "trust"
- **Line 41:** "possibly," "prevail," "possibly," "prevail"
- **Line 42:** "march," "move"
- **Line 43:** "bruised," "benevolent," "but," "bold," "fierce," "free"
- **Line 44:** "interrupted," "intimidation," "inaction," "inertia," "inheritance"
- **Line 45:** "blunders," "become," "burdens"
- **Line 47:** "merge," "mercy," "might," "might," "love," "legacy," "change," "children's"
- **Line 48:** "behind," "better"
- **Line 49:** "breath," "bronze," "wounded," "world,"

"wondrous"
- **Line 51:** "forefathers," "first," "realized," "revolution"
- **Line 53:** "sun," "south"
- **Line 54:** "rebuild," "reconcile," "recover"
- **Line 55:** "known," "nook," "nation," "corner," "country"
- **Line 56:** "battered," "beautiful"
- **Line 57:** "step," "shade"

ASSONANCE

The dense patterns of assonance in "The Hill We Climb" work a lot like alliteration, giving the poem its rich musicality and helping its sounds to mirror its meaning.

For just one example among many, take a look at the way assonance works in lines 39-40:

> 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.

Here, long /ay/ sounds link "prepared," "heirs," and "terrifying," strengthening the idea that Americans were caught off guard by the terrors of recent political history. But the /ow/ sounds of "hour" and "power" (which also make an internal rhyme) suggest that the country rose to the challenge. They even marked this "chapter" in history with "laughter," an assonant /ah/ hints. These many matching vowel sounds connect related ideas and weave these lines harmoniously together.

The poem is filled with moments of assonance like this one, which also simply add to the poem's rousing rhythm. Given that the poem was written to be performed aloud, it makes sense that it relies on such intense plays of sound to make its evocative phrasings and ideas stand out all the more clearly and memorably for listeners.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "day," "find," "light," "never," "ending," "shade"
- **Line 10:** "slaves," "raised"
- **Line 11:** "pristine"
- **Line 12:** "mean," "form," "perfect"
- **Line 13:** "forge," "purpose"
- **Line 14:** "country," "committed," "cultures," "colors," "conditions"
- **Line 16:** "divide," "aside"
- **Line 18:** "harm," "harmony"
- **Line 20:** "even," "grieved"
- **Line 22:** "tired," "tried"
- **Line 23:** "forever," "tied," "together"
- **Line 24:** "know," "sow," "division"
- **Line 25:** "envision"
- **Line 26:** "victory," "blade," "bridges," "made"
- **Line 27:** "glade"
- **Line 28:** "American," "inherit"
- **Line 31:** "destroy," "country," "delaying," "democracy"
- **Line 32:** "very," "nearly"
- **Line 33:** "democracy," "periodically," "delayed"
- **Line 34:** "permanently," "defeated"
- **Line 39:** "prepared," "heirs," "terrifying," "hour"
- **Line 40:** "power," "chapter," "laughter"
- **Line 43:** "whole," "bold"
- **Line 44:** "interrupted," "intimidation," "generation"
- **Line 45:** "blunders," "become"
- **Line 47:** "merge," "mercy," "might," "might," "right," "love," "becomes," "birthright"
- **Line 48:** "better," "left"
- **Line 49:** "every," "breath," "chest," "wondrous," "one"
- **Line 51:** "north," "forefathers"
- **Line 54:** "rebuild," "recover"
- **Line 55:** "nation," "country"
- **Line 56:** "diverse," "emerge"
- **Line 57:** "day," "shade," "aflame," "unafraid"

ALLUSION

The speaker's many allusions connect the poem to grand historical, biblical, and literary traditions.

The most obvious allusions here touch on (and even quote) passages from the Bible. In line 3, for instance, the speaker refers to the "belly of the beast"—a common turn of phrase, but also a specific reference to the belly of the whale that God sent to swallow the prophet Jonah when he refused his calling. This subtle allusion suggests that the recent dark period of American history can in part be blamed on the U.S. refusing to do its rightful work—to seek "liberty and justice for all," as the Pledge of Allegiance would have it.

Later, the speaker directly quotes "Scripture":

> Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid.

This line quotes a passage from the prophetic Book of Micah, which lays out a vision of an idyllic future. Readers might notice that both of these biblical allusions refer to prophets: people marked out to see (and speak) the truth. Perhaps the speaker is suggesting that the U.S. itself has a prophetic role to play in world history—if only it will live up to its calling and play it. And perhaps she's making a subtle prophetic claim for her own poem!

Broadway lovers may also notice that the musical *Hamilton* alludes to the same passage in a song delivered by George Washington. That song is in fact titled "History Has Its Eyes on

You"—something this poem echoes in line 36:

> for while we have our eyes on the future, history has its eyes on us.

It's entirely possible that Gorman isn't just alluding to the Bible, then, but also to this musical—which was extremely famous at the time of Gorman's writing. Not incidentally, this song is about Washington arguing for the peaceful transfer of power to the next president—and it thus makes sense that Gorman might reference it during a moment when the peaceful transition of power was far from certain (for more on this, check out the Context section of this guide).

The speaker doesn't just allude to the Bible, but to the U.S. Constitution. In lines 11-12, she says:

> 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.

The Preamble to the Constitution famously refers to the "more perfect union" that the framers hoped to create in drawing up this fundamental American document. When the speaker cautions that Americans aren't "striving to form a union that is perfect," she has that "more perfect union" in mind: not a paradise, but a place that can get better through clear communication and hard work.

Last but not least, the speaker—a young Black woman, as she tells readers early in the poem—refers to her forebears in Black literature and activism. In a sweeping, powerful passage toward the end of the poem, she says:

> We will rise from the golden hills of the west.
> We will rise from the wind-swept north-east 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.

Here, she's alluding to not one but two great Black thinkers and speakers. Her repeated "We will rise" echoes Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise," a paean to Black women and their liberation. And her evocation of landscapes across the country echoes Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Summoning Black brilliance, revolutionary commitment, and biblical gravitas, the speaker suggests that the American moment she commemorates in this poem is a time for liberated, hopeful, and earthshaking action.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "We've braved the belly of the beast."
- **Line 12:** "that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect."
- **Line 25:** "Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid."
- **Line 36:** "history has its eyes on us."
- **Lines 49-54:** "With every breath from my bronze-pounded chest, we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one. / We will rise from the golden hills of the west. / We will rise from the wind-swept north-east 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."

ANAPHORA

"The Hill We Climb" uses striking anaphora (a specific kind of parallelism) throughout. This anaphora feels emphatic and insistent, and helps the poem to make its powerful rhetorical case for progress and hope. For instance, take a look at the anaphora in lines 7-9:

> Somehow we do it.
> Somehow we've weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken,
> but simply unfinished.

The anaphora here develops an initial idea, explaining exactly what it is that the American people "somehow" do in spite of all the country's troubles. That repeated "somehow" emphasizes the difficulty of that effort: sometimes, this reader suggests, it's hard to say exactly how the U.S. keeps going in spite of it all!

There's a related effect in lines 28-29:

> It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit.
> It's the past we step into and how we repair it.

In these lines, the movement from the first "it's" to the second sets up both a contrast and a relationship between plain old patriotic "pride" and the real work of "step[ping] into" the past. Anaphora makes it clear that these two acts go together, but they're not exactly the *same*; "being American" is not just about blindly celebrating the country's past, but also about recognizing the faults of, and "repair[ing]" that past. By beginning successive lines with the same words, the speaker adds force to her overall argument: American citizenship is about *effort*, not just complacent pride (or complacent despair!).

That effort is also *communal*, the speaker insists, again by using anaphora:

> 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 [...]

The speaker returns again and again to "We" here to emphasize that good citizenship is something that people must work toward together. The anaphora of "We will" towards the end of the poem reinforces this idea, bringing the poem to a close on a note of unity and collective progress.

The speaker's anaphora also sometimes borrows from the tradition of great Black rhetoricians. For instance, consider the sweeping view of the U.S. in lines 50-54:

> We will rise from the golden hills of the west.
> We will rise from the wind-swept north-east 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.

Here, the speaker is alluding to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech: towards the end, he uses a similar flavor of parallelism, exhorting his listeners to "Let freedom ring" from a whole series of beautiful American landscapes. (The speaker is also drawing on Maya Angelou here—see the Allusion entry for more on that.) This anaphora unites all these different parts of the country in the same task: "rising" to a dark moment and working together to make the U.S. a better, juster place.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "We've braved"
- **Line 4:** "We've learned"
- **Line 7:** "Somehow we"
- **Line 8:** "Somehow we've"
- **Line 11:** "far from," "far from"
- **Line 16:** "We close"
- **Line 17:** "We lay"
- **Line 18:** "We seek"
- **Line 20:** "That even"
- **Line 21:** "That even"
- **Line 22:** "That even"
- **Line 23:** "That we'll"
- **Line 28:** "It's because"
- **Line 29:** "It's the past"
- **Line 35:** "In this truth, in this faith"
- **Line 38:** "We feared"
- **Line 39:** "We did not feel "
- **Line 50:** "We will rise"
- **Line 51:** "We will rise"
- **Line 52:** "We will rise"
- **Line 53:** "We will rise"
- **Line 54:** "We will rebuild"
- **Line 55:** "In every," "in every"
- **Line 60:** "if only"
- **Line 61:** "If only"

REPETITION

The poem's frequent repetitions, in all their different flavors, give the poem its emphatic-but-playful tone, and often draw attention to the speaker's ideas of change and transformation. (Some of these repetitions happen so often that they have their own dedicated entries: see this guide's discussions of Parallelism and Anaphora for deeper dives on those important devices.)

For instance, in line 17, the speaker uses antanaclasis:

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

Here, the poem's hopes for change in the U.S. are reflected in the way the same word might mean two things: "arms" first means "weapons," and then means, well, arms—the body part one uses to reach out and embrace people. And that movement from violence to fellowship is exactly the transformation the speaker hopes her country can make.

The polyptoton in line 48 has a similar effect:

> So let us **leave** behind a country better than the one we were **left**.

Here, the connection between "leave" and "left" asks American citizens to turn their thoughts to the future, working for their "children's birthright" rather than looking back despairingly at the "terrifying hour" that they've been the "heirs" to. Of course, this is hard work! And in line 47, the speaker uses anadiplosis to suggest that looking forward and making change is a step-by-step process that brings different things together:

> If we merge mercy with **might**, and **might** with right, then love becomes our legacy and change, our children's birthright.

Here, the repetition of "might" makes a link between "mercy" and "right," showing how strength might bring kindness and virtue together. This feeling of connection also echoes the speaker's idea that American citizens have to look past their differences to reach the better future she envisions.

There's a lot of reason for hope, the speaker feels. In line 41, her antimetabole suggests that some stirring transformations

have already taken place in the U.S.:

> [...] while once we asked, 'How could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?' now we assert, 'How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?'

This rearrangement of language suggests how citizens might become better and braver in spite of—or perhaps because of!—"catastrophe." The speaker's use of this device here might also subtly allude to former President John F. Kennedy's inauguration speech, in which he famously urged his fellow Americans, "Ask not what your country can do for you: ask what you can do for your country." Both of these moments ask citizens to step up and see themselves as part of the solution to the U.S.'s problems.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside."
- **Line 17:** "We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another."
- **Line 36:** "for while we have our eyes on the future, history has its eyes on us."
- **Line 41:** "So while once we asked, 'How could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?' now we assert, 'How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?'"
- **Line 47:** "If we merge mercy with might, and might with right"
- **Line 48:** "So let us leave behind a country better than the one we were left."

END-STOPPED LINE

The vast majority of the lines in "The Hill We Climb" are end-stopped. The many clear pauses that these end-stopped lines create give the poem a stately, elegant, confident pace, leaving readers (and listeners—remember, this poem was written to be performed at an inauguration) plenty of time to absorb its images and ideas.

For instance, take a look at the way end-stops shape this introduction to one of the speaker's major thoughts:

> but that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect.
> We are striving to forge our union with purpose.

Here, firm periods bring two powerful lines to a close, giving readers room to consider new ideas. First, the speaker insists that the U.S.'s imperfection doesn't mean that citizens should *strive* for perfection—and alludes to the Preamble of the Constitution, strikingly rephrasing its ambitions for "a more perfect union."

Then, she says what American citizens *should* strive for: a "union with purpose." This idea of progress over perfection and persistence over impatience will shape the rest of the poem—and the two end-stops give this argument space to develop.

Something similar happens at the very end of the poem:

> if only we're brave enough to see it.
> If only we're brave enough to be it.

Here, parallel end-stops make the relationship between "seeing" and "being" the light clear. Americans can't just wait around hoping for the "light" of hope to dawn: they have to both seek it out and make it themselves.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "shade?"
- **Line 2:** "wade."
- **Line 3:** "beast."
- **Line 5:** "justice."
- **Line 6:** "knew it."
- **Line 7:** "do it."
- **Line 9:** "unfinished."
- **Line 10:** "one."
- **Line 12:** "perfect."
- **Line 13:** "purpose."
- **Line 14:** "man."
- **Line 15:** "us."
- **Line 16:** "aside."
- **Line 17:** "another."
- **Line 18:** "all."
- **Line 19:** "true:"
- **Line 20:** "grew."
- **Line 21:** "hoped."
- **Line 22:** "tried."
- **Line 23:** "victorious."
- **Line 24:** "division."
- **Line 25:** "afraid."
- **Line 26:** "made."
- **Line 27:** "dare."
- **Line 28:** "inherit."
- **Line 29:** "repair it."
- **Line 30:** "share it."
- **Line 31:** "democracy."
- **Line 32:** "succeeded."
- **Line 34:** "defeated."
- **Line 36:** "us."
- **Line 37:** "redemption."
- **Line 38:** "inception."
- **Line 40:** "ourselves."
- **Line 41:** "us?'"
- **Line 42:** "be:"
- **Line 43:** "free."

- **Line 44:** "generation."
- **Line 45:** "burdens."
- **Line 46:** "certain:"
- **Line 47:** "birthright."
- **Line 48:** "left."
- **Line 49:** "one."
- **Line 50:** "west."
- **Line 51:** "revolution."
- **Line 52:** "states."
- **Line 53:** "south."
- **Line 54:** "recover."
- **Line 56:** "beautiful."
- **Line 57:** "unafraid."
- **Line 58:** "free it."
- **Line 60:** "see it."
- **Line 61:** "be it."

PARALLELISM

"The Hill We Climb" uses a lot of emphatic parallelism. In shaping consecutive sentences the same way (and often using anaphora and alliterative sounds to match lines even more closely), the speaker develops her ideas, emphasizes American unity, and makes powerful rhetorical points.

Parallelism turns up in this poem right from the start. Take a look at lines 2-4:

> 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,

Here, the parallelism (in terms of grammatical structure and thematic meaning) between "the loss we carry" and "a sea we must wade" underlines the speaker's metaphor: the nation's grief is a mighty and hard-to-navigate ocean. And with two lines in a row that begin with "We've," the speaker sets up a pattern that she'll return to through the rest of the poem: many of her parallel constructions here start with the word "We." Take a look at lines 16-18, for example:

> 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.

Here, that repeated "We" enfolds every U.S. citizen, and lays out a verb-driven action plan for everyone: Americans must "close the divide," "lay down [their] arms," and "seek harm to none." Each of these actions is a variation on the theme of reconciliation, and the "we" that begins each of these sentences makes the speaker's point even clearer. None of this peace-making succeeds, the parallelism here suggests, unless everyone actively participates. (See the Anaphora entry for more examples of parallelism that uses the same initial words at the start of clauses.)

Elsewhere, the speaker uses parallelism to paint a picture of a country built on differences—and on persistence. For instance, when she imagines a country that is "bruised but whole, benevolent but bold," she sets up a pattern of contrasting ideas, emphasizing that America's strength is in its ability to contain difference, to be "bruised" and "whole" at exactly the same time.

The poem's memorable closing lines also draw a lot of their power from parallelism:

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

These two lines are identical apart from one word: "see" transforms into "be." And that's exactly the speaker's closing point. In order for Americans to "see" the "light" of hope and justice, they have to *become* that light themselves.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "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,"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Somehow we do it. / Somehow we've weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken,"
- **Line 11:** "far from polished, far from pristine,"
- **Lines 12-13:** "but that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect. / We are striving to forge our union with purpose."
- **Lines 15-18:** "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."
- **Lines 20-24:** "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."
- **Lines 28-29:** "It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit. / It's the past we step into and how we repair it."
- **Line 35:** "In this truth, in this faith"
- **Lines 38-39:** "We feared it at its inception. / We did not feel prepared to be the heirs of such a terrifying hour,"
- **Line 43:** "bruised but whole, benevolent but bold"
- **Line 45:** "Our blunders become their burdens."

- **Lines 50-54:** "We will rise from the golden hills of the west. / We will rise from the wind-swept north-east 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."
- **Line 55:** "In every known nook of our nation, in every corner called our country,"
- **Line 56:** "diverse and beautiful," "battered and beautiful"
- **Lines 60-61:** "if only we're brave enough to see it. / If only we're brave enough to be it."

ANTITHESIS

The antithesis in "The Hill We Climb" illustrates the poem's emphatic ideas about the difficulty of change—and supports its visions of a better, fairer future. (A whole lot of this poem's parallelism is antithesis, but not all; see the separate entry on Parallelism for more about this important device.)

For instance, take a look at the way the speaker uses antithesis as she describes her hopes for the United States's future:

> 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.**

Here, the oppositions between these sets of words actually suggest that they go hand in hand. Grief and growth aren't really opposites, the antithesis here suggests, but counterintuitive parts of the same process. Grief might feel more like being stuck in a painful feeling than growing, but it's really an inevitable part of change: after all, change doesn't happen without loss!

Elsewhere, the speaker uses antithesis to imagine how things might look in the country when real change has come. For instance, when she says "We seek **harm to none and harmony for all**," the antithesis between "harm" and "harmony" suggests a transformation from harm *to* harmony, from war *to* peace.

And when she declares that "We **will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be**," she raises the thought of what Americans *won't* do (that is, try to go back to some earlier version of the U.S.) in order to make her vision of what Americans *will* do (that is, wholeheartedly embrace a new vision of the future) feel even more powerful.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "a nation that isn't broken, / but simply unfinished."
- **Lines 12-13:** "but that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect. / We are striving to forge our union with purpose."
- **Line 15:** "not to what stands between us, but what stands before us."
- **Line 16:** "to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside."
- **Lines 20-22:** "That even as we grieved, we grew. / That even as we hurt, we hoped. / That even as we tired, we tried."
- **Line 24:** "Not because we will never again know defeat, but because we will never again sow division."
- **Lines 33-34:** "But while democracy can be periodically delayed, / it can never be permanently defeated."
- **Line 36:** "for while we have our eyes on the future, history has its eyes on us."
- **Line 42:** "We will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be:"

PUN

A meaningful pun appears right at the beginning of "The Hill We Climb," when the speaker says:

> the norms and notions of what **"just" is** isn't always justice.

This moment is simultaneously playful and pointed. Here, the speaker is making a subtle allusion to a long history of American injustice—particularly its injustice to its Black citizens, whose continued oppression sparked worldwide protests the year before this poem was written. What "'just is'" (the accepted status quo, the way things have been) is far from "justice," the speaker suggests—even if the two might *seem* the same on the surface.

There's a lot of force behind that pun. But there's also a lively, energetic wit. This poem will go on to play with language in all sorts of ways; readers can find many examples in the rest of this Poetic Devices section! This moment establishes the speaker's confident, enthusiastic mastery of language as well as her clear political point.

Puns, which open a listener's ears to a surprise hidden in plain sight, often have a jokey quality. Here, however, the speaker's joke is a meaningful one. This pun reflects both the poem's joyful, celebratory context (a presidential inauguration) and its big and serious point: the U.S. has a long way to go before it's near anything like "justice."

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "the norms and notions of what "just" is isn't always justice"

METAPHOR

"The Hill We Climb" uses bold metaphors to make its ideas about hope and progress feel vivid and tangible. Some of the metaphors here also overlap with broader symbolism; for a deeper examination of the poem's use of the "hill" and of light and dark, see the Symbols section.

One of the poem's most striking metaphors is also an instance of personification:

> 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.

Here, the U.S. itself becomes a person—one who has suffered a lot, getting "bruised," but who's still "benevolent" and "bold." This touches on the old idea of the "body politic": the sense that a country can be thought of as a sort of "person" made out of many people. As such, it can have a character of its own! This metaphor ties back into the speaker's insistence that the people of the U.S. are a "We" who need to work together to help the country live up to its potential. History gets personified in a similar way when the speaker says that "while we have our eyes on the future, history has its eyes on us."

Elsewhere, the speaker imagines the U.S.'s collective grief as "a sea we must wade." This metaphor suggests that navigating all the sadness and disaster in the country's past is an almost fairy-talish impossible task: to "wade" the depths of the "sea" would be a lot like trying to take a gentle ten-thousand-mile stroll. And yet, the speaker insists, American citizens have it in them to do just that: "Somehow we do it," she says a few lines later.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "where can we find light in this never-ending shade"
- **Line 2:** "The loss we carry, a sea we must wade"
- **Line 3:** "We've braved the belly of the beast"
- **Line 6:** "the dawn is ours before we knew it"
- **Line 15:** "we lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but what stands before us"
- **Line 26:** "victory won't lie in the blade, but in all the bridges we've made"
- **Line 27:** "That is the promise to glade, the hill we climb, if only we dare"
- **Line 29:** "the past we step into"
- **Line 36:** "history has its eyes on us"
- **Line 42:** "We will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be"
- **Line 43:** "A country that is bruised but whole, benevolent but bold, fierce and free"
- **Line 45:** "Our blunders become their burdens."
- **Lines 57-61:** "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."

VOCABULARY

Pristine (Line 11) - Perfect, spotless.

Arms (Line 17) - Weapons.

Sow (Line 24) - Plant seeds.

Scripture (Line 25) - The writings in the Bible.

Periodically (Line 33) - Intermittently, once in a while.

Inception (Line 38) - Starting point, beginning.

Prevail (Line 41) - Win, triumph.

Benevolent (Line 43) - Kindly.

Inertia (Line 44) - Motionlessness, unchangingness.

Blunders (Line 45) - Mistakes, missteps.

Bronze-pounded (Line 49) - This image suggests that the speaker feels like her own chest is a suit of shining armor.

Reconcile (Line 54) - To find friendly terms between two different positions.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Hill We Climb" is a free verse poem: it doesn't use a regular rhyme scheme or meter, and it's presented as one long stanza. Gorman's use of free verse, her personal tone, and her rhythmic, playful language connects "The Hill We Climb" to contemporary forms of performance poetry, like slam poetry. But as a speaker at a major public event, Gorman is also working in the tradition of occasional poetry, poetry written to celebrate a milestone. Elizabeth Alexander's "Praise Song for Day," written for Barack Obama's inauguration, is one comparable occasional poem.

The reader should note that at the time this guide is being written, there are a lot of different versions of "The Hill We Climb" floating around! Because the poem hasn't officially been published yet, we can't be sure exactly how Gorman wants it to look on the page. For now, we're using *The Guardian*'s transcript.

METER

"The Hill We Climb" is written in free verse, which means it doesn't use a regular meter. But while there's no standard pattern here, the poem does use plenty of rhythm and stress

for effect.

For instance, look at these punchy, powerful lines:

> 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.

Here, the poem uses strong stresses to draw attention to meaningfully matched pairs of words. Placing emphasis on "grieved" and "grew," "hurt" and "hoped," "tired" and "tried," the speaker asks readers and listeners to reflect on the way these concepts might be related. The stress pattern here points out that grief and growth can go hand in hand.

Overall, the poem's lack of a regular meter keeps it feeling fresh, interesting, and musical from beginning to end. The speaker can stress words as she sees fit, imbuing the lines with natural emotion from start to finish.

RHYME SCHEME

While "The Hill We Climb" doesn't use any steady rhyme scheme, it does use a lot of rhyme!

Take a look at the rhymes in the first seven lines:

> 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 justice.
> And yet, the dawn is ours before we knew it.
> Somehow we do it.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker uses rhyming pairs or couplets, but often shapes them in innovative ways. After an initial perfect rhyme between "shade" and "wade," she uses a slant rhyme between "beast" and "peace," and then an internal rhyme between "'just' is" and "justice." These playful variations make the speaker sound masterfully in control of her language right from the start, drawing the reader's attention to the way she's using sound to make meaning—for instance, in that pun on "'just' is" and "justice."

The speaker often uses internal rhyme to make the poem feel connected and coherent. Take a look at the internal rhyme in lines 24 and 25, for instance:

> 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.

The internal rhymes here set up a contrast between "know defeat" and "sow division," and smooth the transition into a new idea by linking "division" in line 24 with "envision" in line 25.

The speaker often returns to sequences of end rhymes when she wants to make a strong point. The poem's closing lines are a good example:

> 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.

Here, the connection between "free it," "see it," and "be it" shapes the speaker's final idea: the "light" of hope can be something external, something that needs to be freed and seen—but it's also something internal, something that all Americans can challenge themselves to "be."

SPEAKER

The speaker in this poem is Amanda Gorman herself. She refers to her own background directly, celebrating the fact that "a skinny Black girl descended from slaves" is reciting a poem at the inauguration of a U.S. president. But she reveals her character indirectly, too, through her language and her attitudes. Readers get the sense that the speaker is a grounded, realistic optimist, who believes that change is both possible and difficult. She takes inspiration from the Bible and from great Black thinkers like Maya Angelou and Martin Luther King, Jr. And she feels huge pride and hope in American possibility.

Gorman's choice to refer directly to her own life story fits right in with some of the poem's biggest ideas. To really change the U.S. for the better, Gorman suggests, all Americans have to see their own choices and their own lives as part of a gradual collective effort. In talking about her own life, Gorman provides an example of how far the country has come already: there's a time in living memory when it would have been totally unthinkable for a young black woman to perform at a presidential inauguration.

SETTING

This poem has a literal, real-life setting: the inauguration ceremony at which Joe Biden became the 46th President of the United States. The speaker alludes to this setting directly when she mentions that, having dreamed of being president herself, she now "find[s] herself reciting for one"! This was a poem written to be performed on a particular day in a particular place, and that day and place are significant: they show that, as the speaker says, enough has changed in America since its inception that a young Black woman can find herself

performing on a national stage.

But the poem also has a broader setting: the United States itself. Here, the speaker draws both on the work of writers like Walt Whitman (who chronicled the sweep of the American landscape in poems like "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd") and activists like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (who evoked scenes from across the country at the end of his great "I Have a Dream" speech). When, at the end of the poem, the speaker imagines citizens "ris[ing]" from landscapes all across the nation, her images of distinct American scenery underline one of her major points: America's power and beauty lies in its differences, and its potential to bring those differences together in harmony.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Amanda Gorman (1998-present) is the first National Youth Poet Laureate of the United States. Born in Los Angeles, Gorman learned to love poetry as a child when she found writing and reading poems helped her overcome a sound sensitivity and a speech impediment. She went on to study sociology at Harvard, and published a first volume of poetry, *The One For Whom Food is Not Enough*, in 2015. As of this writing, "The Hill We Climb" hasn't yet been officially published—but it's due out in 2021 in a collection called, appropriately enough, *The Hill We Climb*.

Gorman has said that she thinks of the poet Maya Angelou (whose "Still I Rise" she alludes to at the end of "The Hill We Climb") as a "spirit grandmother," a presiding figure of inspiration and comfort. She also admires the poet Tracy K. Smith, the 52nd U.S. Poet Laureate, and the writer and activist Marianne Deborah Williamson. Her poetry's bold images and clear language reflect these influences, but she also draws stylistically on contemporary forms of performance poetry, like slam poetry.

As an occasional poem, "The Hill We Climb" follows in the footsteps of poems like Elizabeth Alexander's "Praise Song for the Day" (written for Obama's inauguration), and even belongs to a longer tradition of commemorative poems like Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade." In sometimes very different ways, occasional poems celebrate a moment that needs to be remembered, pausing to look back at what's happened and forward at what's to come.

"The Hill We Climb" certainly seems to have risen to the occasion: the poem earned rapturous worldwide praise from the moment Gorman performed it.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Amanda Gorman performed this poem at Joe Biden's 2021 inauguration as the 46th President of the United States. Only a week before, the U.S. had undergone a serious shock: supporters of the outgoing Donald Trump had stormed the Capitol Building in a bid to stop the official certification of Biden's electoral win.

This crisis in American democracy was the capstone on a year of traumas—and on an era that exposed deep divisions in the American population. In 2020 alone, the world was ravaged by the coronavirus pandemic, and the police murder of George Floyd sparked massive worldwide protests demanding justice for Black Americans. Questions of how (and whether!) American citizens care for each other became contentious political issues.

Gorman's poem speaks to the despair, sadness, and fear that many Americans felt in the wake of these upheavals. But it also speaks to the hope of better and stabler times to come. The poem's realism about how slowly progress comes is tempered with a persistent belief that it *does* come, in the end.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Gorman's Website — Visit Gorman's own website and learn more about her life and work. (https://www.theamandagorman.com/)
- A Brief Biography — Read a short biography of Gorman from the Academy of American Poets. (https://poets.org/poet/amanda-gorman)
- Gorman in The Guardian — Read a newspaper article about Amanda Gorman's performance of this poem at Joe Biden's inauguration. The poem earned rapturous praise not just in the U.S., but all around the world. (https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/20/amanda-gorman-poem-biden-inauguration)
- Gorman Performs the Poem — Watch Gorman's powerful performance of the poem at Joe Biden's inauguration. (https://www.cnn.com/videos/style/2021/01/20/amanda-gorman-youth-poet-laureate-full-poem-biden-capitol-inauguration-vpx.cnn)
- An Interview with Gorman — Read an interview Gorman gave to National Public Radio about this poem. (https://www.npr.org/sections/biden-transition-updates/2021/01/19/958077401/history-has-its-eyes-on-us-poet-amanda-gorman-seeks-right-words-for-inauguration)

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