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### Rhetorical Situation Analysis: “The Hill We Climb”

Amanda Gorman made history on January 20, 2021 when she became the youngest inaugural poet in United States history. “The Hill We Climb” was written and performed by Gorman to celebrate the inauguration of Joe Biden as the 46th President of the United States. In



Amanda Gorman on the cover of Time Magazine. Credits: TIME

this inspiring poem about her vision for the future of the United States, Amanda Gorman pays exceptional attention to the hope that the country can dismantle its vast history of racism. Gorman utilizes black American history as an example of slow, anguishing progress—and therefore a beacon of hope and inspiration for the country. Gorman notes that the “norms and notions of what ‘just’ is isn’t always ‘justice,’” and that “quiet isn’t always peace” (Gorman). Every American, the poet advocates, must confront the vast history of racial

injustice in the country in order to move forward. “The Hill We Climb” recognizes the United States not as a country that is perfect, but as a country that has the courage to contest its many problems. Amanda Gorman’s inaugural poem provided Americans with a sense of hope and grit in a divisive and grim time, specifically following the murder of George Floyd and the

subsequent Black Lives Matter protests, and the Capitol Riot on January 6, 2021. In recognizing the racial justice within the United States and advocating for unity and hope following difficult times, “The Hill We Climb” by Amanda Gorman is, as Lloyd F. Bitzer designates it, responding to a “rhetorical situation.”

A rhetorical situation, according to Bitzer, is a “natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance” (4). The rhetorical situation prompts observation and response from a particular audience. It operates to produce some form of change in the world (3). Bitzer states that a rhetorical situation is made up of three individual components: exigence, audience, and constraints. Exigence is an imperfection in reality that can be changed through any form of discussion or rhetoric. Bitzer defines exigence as “a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (6).

Furthermore, to be considered rhetorical, exigence must be adjustable by discourse. The audience is all of the individuals who receive the specific rhetoric. According to Bitzer, the audience “consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change” (7). Lastly, rhetorical constraints are described as any situation, person, or object that limits the way in which the rhetoric is conveyed. Bitzer notes that constraints “have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (8).

Amanda Gorman’s presentation of her poem “The Hill We Climb” at Joe Biden’s Presidential Inauguration is a rhetorical situation that is comprised of exigence, audience, and constraints.

In the presentation of “The Hill We Climb”, there are several different forms of exigence that exist. The first, and arguably the most obvious, is the Presidential Inauguration of Joe Biden on January 20, 2021. The inauguration celebrated the formal completion of the Presidential transition of Joe Biden, who defeated Donald Trump on November 3, 2020. Amanda Gorman

came to the Inaugural Committee’s attention following her poetry reading at the Library of Congress, which Dr. Jill Biden attended. More specifically, she is well known in the world of literacy as a *cum laude* graduate of Harvard University, and as a writer for the *New York Times* and the youngest board member of 826 National. All of Gorman’s credentials made her equipped with the knowledge and the skill to deliver the inaugural poem. Gorman was chosen to speak at the inauguration in early December, giving her a limited amount of time to write such a lengthy and inspiring poem. As Gorman was writing “The Hill We Climb”, the United States Capitol was viciously attacked by a mob of supporters of former President Donald Trump on January 6, 2021. Massive waves of rioters surged police barricades, waved Confederate flags, smashed several windows, and entered the United States Capitol through brute force before the National Guard was dispatched. Her reaction to this attack became a part of the poem, as “a scene she found ‘jarring and violating’ but not surprising” (Barajas). The attack on the Capitol made its way into Gorman’s poem—not as a way to further divide the country, but as a way to convey the harsh reality of our racist and unjust history. This is evidenced through several lines in “The Hill We Climb”, most specifically in lines 43-46, where she states, “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” (Gorman). Amanda Gorman was driven by the events that



Trump supporters climbing the wall to the United States Capitol. Credits: USA Today

occurred two weeks prior to the Presidential Inauguration in order to create a poem that recognizes the injustice and racial violence that occurs in the United States.

In addition to the Capitol Riot, Amanda Gorman was highly influenced by the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement in the writing and presentation of “The Hill We Climb”. She utilizes the Black Lives Matter protests as an example of the strength, hope, and unity of black Americans following the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and several other innocent black individuals who were killed because of



A woman holding a Black Lives Matter sign at a peaceful protest. Credits: Vox

the color of their skin. Within “The Hill We Climb”, Gorman draws inspiration from the power of the Black Lives Matter protests, saying, “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” (Gorman, 54-56). The combination of the election process and Presidential Inauguration of Joe Biden, the January 6 Capitol Riot, and the

Black Lives Matter movement significantly affected the content of Amanda Gorman’s rhetoric and the impact it had on the American people at a time of great divisiveness and hatred.

Amanda Gorman’s rhetorical audience is the millions of people who watched the Inauguration of Joe Biden as the 46th President of the United States, both in person and on television. About 34 million people from around the world viewed the Inauguration, which influenced the content and presentation of Gorman’s “The Hill We Climb”. Individuals of all political affiliations and parties watched this occur, but it is noteworthy to mention that voters



and supporters of Joe Biden, as well as more left-leaning individuals, viewed the Inauguration with a more positive attitude than supporters of Donald Trump did. The difference in political beliefs created varying opinions regarding Gorman's inaugural poem. This particular audience is rhetorical because they were, in some way, influenced by Amanda Gorman's words and able to develop their own thoughts and opinions about her rhetoric. Most Americans who viewed the Inauguration and Gorman's presentation, however, felt a sense of unity. The variety in Gorman's audience leads into Bitzer's discussion of constraints within rhetorical situations.

There are several constraints within Amanda Gorman's presentation of her poem "The Hill We Climb". As a young black woman, Gorman faces intersectionality and is not taken as seriously as an older white man. This has resulted in her having to work twice as hard to get to where she is now, and despite her many credentials and her general intelligence and creativity, Gorman faces obstacles that white individuals do not experience. Her identity as a black woman played a central role in the writing and content of her poem. She describes her origins and her dreams through the lines, "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" (Gorman, 11-14). In addition to Gorman's identity, she is constrained by the expectations of the public. The public expects Gorman to present herself in a professional yet powerful way, through both the delivery of her poem and the way she looks, due to the official setting of the occasion and the impressive history of inaugural poets. This is a constraint because it results in more focus on Amanda Gorman's appearance and professionalism rather than on the value of her inspirational words. Gorman admitted that the task was daunting, a hill she had to climb herself, especially as a 22-year-old black woman following in the footsteps of poets such as Maya Angelou and Robert Frost. Expectations of the public can be

somewhat formidable, but Gorman powered through them and left a lasting message of hope and unity, as well as a call for racial justice. Lastly, a central constraint is the clichés that surround poetry, specifically spoken word poetry. Gorman, however, overcame these clichés through developing a complex metaphor of light and darkness within the country and fostering a collective purpose and sense of hope at a time when Americans most needed it.

When examining the exigence, audience, and constraints of Amanda Gorman's presentation of "The Hill We Climb", a viewer can conclude that the rhetorical text is effective. Gorman's poem is a response to several



Gorman reading "The Hill We Climb" at Joe Biden's Inauguration. Credits: The New York Times

instances of racial injustice and violence within the country, including the racism of the Capitol Riot and the murder of innocent black individuals. Her text was effective in that it united an audience of varied beliefs and political views under a common sense of hope for our country's future, despite difficult moments in the past. Lian Parsons, a correspondent for *The Harvard Gazette*, documented how Amanda Gorman's words united the American people under a common feeling of hope. Within this article, Parsons notes that Gorman's poem "called for unity and justice, through both reckoning with the nation's past and looking toward its future" (Parsons, 1). The power of voice and presence within her performance, and the words she used to convey a message of unity, created a rhetorically successful text. Gorman's decision to include a variety of rhetorical devices, including alliteration, emphasized her inspiring message. For example, she states, "...To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man" (18-19); the repetition of sounds created a more powerful, and therefore more

effective, presentation. In addition, Gorman's usage of a metaphor, as I mentioned earlier, promoted a collective desire for positive change. She begins the poem by asking the question, "When day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade?" (1-2). Gorman created an effective rhetorical text by directly addressing her audience and challenging them to find positivity and hope within divisive and cruel situations. The challenges that Gorman experienced only strengthened her delivery, as she was able to persuade Americans to look towards the light in these dark times.

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