

Three Inaugural Poets and Their Poems, Three Decades Apart. Robert Frost (1961), Maya Angelou (1992), Amanda Gorman (2021)

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Abstract

National Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman recited her inaugural poem for President Biden in January 2021, referencing Maya Angelou, who had been the inaugural poet of President Clinton three decades before, and who referenced, in turn, the first person to recite a poem at a presidential inauguration, Robert Frost, six decades ago. There are clear intertextual connections, which lead to a wider socio-cultural and historical contextualization of the poems, as well as to a political interpretation of the position of the inaugural poet. This kind of reading and contextualization can be useful in the EFL classroom, as the Gen Z cohort, of which Gorman is part, seems more inclined to interact around topics of social issues and current world events, which they consider personally relevant.



Keywords: inaugural poem, Amanda Gorman, Maya Angelou, Robert Frost, contextualizing literature, literature in the EFL classroom

Nowadays, more than ever, students are aware and connected to what is happening in the world, especially when it is something they feel is relevant to them and the circumstances in which they live. It is no surprise then that my students were interested in the fact that a Gen Z representative fulfilled the role of “inaugural poet” to the inauguration of Joe Biden on January 20th, 2021, as the 46th President of the United States. The inauguration ceremony was star-studded, but none of the performers got more media coverage than the inaugural poet herself, 22-year-old Amanda Gorman, who delivered a soaring performance of her poem, which I later played in class to spark a discussion on the relation between art and politics. The event itself created a social media whirlwind that brought her and her ceremonial office to the forefront of cultural discussion.

The aim of this article is not necessarily pedagogical but aims to illustrate on one hand the intertextuality of poetry, and, on the other, how it can be contextualized socially. The pedagogical importance of such contextualization is derived from the increasing interest and awareness that students show of socio-cultural elements, possibly due to the impact of social media and globalization. Regardless of the reason, this is good news for us as language teachers, as a variety of authentic texts (and I include here audio-visual texts as well) on such

topics can be therefore successfully used as prompts for classroom tasks and activities. In this situation, poetry, which has been increasingly overlooked outside of primary EFL/ESL education, proves a great catalyst for learning, as well as a gateway for more literature to be brought to the attention of students. This article analyses how the concept of inaugural poets, as popularized (again) in 2021 by the young poet Amanda Gorman, can lead to discussions on other poets, as well as political, historical, and cultural topics.

As a speaker at the inauguration ceremony, her performance was broadcast live to millions of households, and reached many more via the internet. As such, every detail of her performance was scrutinized and discussed, including fashion choices. It was at this point that ties were revealed, which brought attention to previous inaugural poets. Massively covered by mainstream media, Oprah Winfrey, the famed Black feminist and activist, supported Gorman by gifting her accessories to wear on the inauguration day, among which a ring depicting a caged bird. This is an obvious reference to Maya Angelou's poem "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," but the reference is doubled by the fact that the gifting itself is a continuing tradition for Winfrey, who similarly gifted Angelou fashion items for the day in which she performed her own inaugural poem, at Bill Clinton's 1992 inauguration ceremony.

Gorman went on to reference Angelou in the inaugural poem as well, among other writers and personalities. As she says in an interview, "[...] I'm the daughter of Black writers. We're descended from freedom fighters who broke through chains and changed the world. They call me" (Nicolaou).

First, what exactly are inaugural poems and poets? When a new President of the United States takes up the mantle, an inauguration ceremony is held. It functions as a celebration of the beginning of the new presidential term, and it is the occasion in which the new President and Vice-President recite their respective oaths and give speeches. The ceremony is also attended, at the President's request, by significant American personalities and entertainers who perform in honor of the new President. Throughout the years, six inauguration ceremonies were attended by poets who wrote poems dedicated to the day. The Literary Hub specifies that only four presidents, all four democrats, commissioned an inaugural poem (Temple).

The trend was started in 1961 by John F. Kennedy who invited Robert Frost, but specifically requested his 1923 poem, "The Gift Outright". Frost chose to expand the poem for the occasion, but due to weather circumstances, he ended up reciting the original poem. Subsequent presidents did not commission inaugural poems until 1993 when Bill Clinton requested Maya Angelou to perform a poem at his inauguration ceremony; she wrote "The Pulse of Morning" for the occasion. He was elected for a second term, and Miller Williams

performed “Of History and Hope” in 1997. The next inaugural poem was not commissioned until 2009, at President Obama’s request, when Elizabeth Alexander wrote “Praise Song for the Day”. Similar to Clinton, Obama was elected for a second term, and this time Richard Blanco was commissioned to write “One Today” in 2013. President Trump did not invite a poet to recite at his inauguration ceremony, and the latest inaugural poet is Amanda Gorman, who wrote “The Hills We Climb” in honor of President Biden in 2021.

Looking at the role of the inaugural poet and why it exists, John F. Kennedy was considered to have chosen to paint himself in an Augustan mantle, as even Frost mentions at the end of his extended poem: “It makes the prophet in us all presage / The glory of a next Augustan age [...] A golden age of poetry and power”. This seems reminiscing of the old Roman emperors or maybe even the middle age monarchs who commissioned poets to write odes to them – an early-history PR ploy, no doubt. It is true that Kennedy came in at a disadvantage and needed to employ all the tricks in the book, with one of the narrowest wins in US history, massive backlash due to his Catholic faith, unreliable youth, and, above all, his support of the black community, who was at the height of the equal rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King in the 60s. He succeeded President Eisenhower, who was still massively popular and represented a time of stability and relative prosperity, despite the heightened tensions of the Cold War, while Kennedy represented social unrest and challenged the status quo (“Campaign of 1960”).

As such, his choice of asking an elderly Robert Frost to read a poem at his inauguration ceremony was deeply political. On one hand, it painted him as a patron of the arts, which was sparse in the rather austere and down-to-earth conservative regime he succeeded, as well as a cultured and empathic man, despite his perceived youth and inexperience. But he could have achieved that with any poet or artist, so why is it that he chose Robert Frost specifically? Fortunately, he gave us the answer to this question himself, at the dedication of the Amherst Robert Frost Library, in 1963:

In honoring Robert Frost, [...] we, therefore, can pay honor to the deepest source of our national strength. That strength takes many forms and the most obvious forms are not always the most significant. ... Our national strength matters; but the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much. This was the special significance of Robert Frost. (Kennedy)

This in itself can be the reason why there is a need for inaugural poets, or maybe the reason behind poet laureates. Poets have what Kennedy calls *spirit which informs*. Jason Schneiderman proposes that the difference between political discourse and poems is that

politics is about what is possible, while poetry is about what is (11) Poets often are the keenest observers of society, and through the meanders of their metaphorical language, their poems *inform* just as much as they *delight*. Frost himself famously stated that “poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom” (qtd. in Faggen, 47).

However, the choice of Frost as the inaugural poet didn't hinge only on this fact. Frost had a hard-gained public persona: he was the genial grandfather of America, which Kennedy profited off by associating himself with it. Many still imagine him as a white-haired storyteller, despite recent criticism showing a more nihilistic dimension of his poems. In fact, to nurture his public persona, “he refused, for example, to read his darker, more skeptical poems in public, preferring instead to reveal his more congenial, folksy side” (Little 48).

This duality is a highly debated and discussed aspect of Frost's work, but this may be what makes it beautiful. The initial impression after a first reading, the perceived optimism and congeniality that makes his poems so quotable, are complemented by the darker understanding of a more thorough analysis. This duality is at play in his inaugural poem as well.

At first read, the poem has a moderately patriotic feel to it – “we” have escaped British colonialism and are now a free nation, a story writing itself. The extended poem is further possessed by such sentiments, as Frost lists American heroes and heroic deeds, and proclaims a bright future.

The patriotic mood is put into question when we analyze some of the elements of Frost's poem. “And forthwith found salvation in surrender” initially sounds like the biblical salvation, perhaps surrendering to the land, to the freedom, to the identity of *American*. However, the text continues by saying “Such as we were we gave ourselves outright / (The deed of gift was many deeds of war) / To the land vaguely realizing westward.” This, in combination with the title of the poem, “The Gift Outright”, brings attention to a new dimension of the poem: violence; “the deed of gift was many deeds of war”. Be that the revolutionary war, the civil war, the acts of violence against the Native and the Black communities, the Mexican War, the Vietnam War, all of these are an integral part of American History, tainting it. “Vaguely realizing westward” shows the lack of direction and purpose in all of this. Americans are still “unstoried” (Schneiderman 12) – not storyless, but unstoried: intentionally stripped of their stories, sublimating realities, and history. Possibly, bleakest of all, Frost writes forebodingly “Such as she was, such as she would become”. This land which Americans owned, and then to whom they belonged, despite their wars and strife and struggle to find an identity, will remain unchanged, unmoved, while they, the people, are simply transitory. The land was there long

before Americans came to possess it, and it will remain long after they have passed, however they define it, or themselves by it.

While at first glance the inaugural poems of Frost and Angelou could not be more unrelated and different, this interpretation of Frost's "The Gift Outright" is inspired and informed by Angelou's "On the Pulse of Morning".

Maya Angelou's inaugural poem comes in very similar circumstances to Frost's. Following ten years of austere leadership, whose management of the economic recession led to the impoverishment of the already disadvantaged social groups – specifically the black community, the immigrants, the Native Americans, and the LGBTQ community (following the worst of the AIDS epidemic), Bill Clinton won the presidency by an absolute landslide. His inauguration was a sign of social change, and it brought hope to the hearts of many Americans. Angelou's presence on the podium was yet another sign of betterment and of Clinton's support to the black and marginalized communities, for whom Angelou had been a champion.

Throughout her career, Angelou has had more success as a personality than as a poet. Her prolific poetry brought very little in matters of critical acclaim, having been deemed even by her stauncher supporters more of an inspirational writer than *a serious poet*, "of the self-help variety [...]. She is a passionately sincere poet, whose purpose is to inspire her audience to keep going" (Bloom 2011, viii).

Maya Angelou's style is an open one. She blends intimacy and detachment, and her strength lies in the powerful emotions she can arouse in the reader. Her poetry is rooted in the African-American tradition, brimming in its orality, spirituality, musicality, and rhythm. Her performances are concomitantly reminiscent of the great black orators, Dr. King and Malcolm X (both of whom were close acquaintances of Angelou's), and of the black preachers, with their "powerful, emotional sermons" (Bloom 2009, 29).

It was to no one's surprise, then, when her performance of the inaugural poem was a powerful and resounding one, shaping generations. Many consider it her greatest poem, in the classical sense, while her other more popular ones, while not easily dismissed, lack poetic artistry where they succeed as motivational pieces.

Where Frost left off, Angelou picked up. "A Rock, A River, A Tree," but eight lines later she writes "But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully". The land to whom Frost had given agency in the last line, "She", continues her agency by *crying out* in Angelou's poem. Angelou takes the metaphor of the pre-existing land even further than Frost and brings it to the pre-historic – "host to species long since departed", who simply "sojourn[ed] here". And this Rock, the land, *cries out* to Americans to "stand upon my/back and face your distant

destiny.” It’s as if the Rock tells them it will support them, it will give them the grounds on which they can stay strong, “but seek no haven in shadow, I will give you no hiding place down here.” The rocks ask them not to use it as an excuse, dare not be cowardly, but to face their destiny and fix their past, because they “have crouched too long in/ The bruising darkness”. The dark past is bruising, the ignorance is intentional, and the words of the Americans are “armed for slaughter”.

This is the violence Frost was speaking of, but in his poem, the Land stays ignorant, whereas the Rock cries out in Angelou’s. Moreover, it makes promises, as “A River sings”: “Yet today I call you to my riverside, / if you will study war no more. Come / Clad in peace...”. While Frost’s Land is immovable and removed, the claiming being just an illusion in the mind of the American, Angelou’s landscape offers itself, calls to the American, but conditionally. The Rock and the River will not tolerate violence, but they will gladly give identity (“plant yourself beside the river”), both despite, and perhaps because of diversity:

The River sang and sings on.

There is a true yearning to respond to

The singing River and the wise Rock.

So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew

The African, the Native American, the Sioux,

The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek

The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik, The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,

The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.

They hear. They all hear

(Angelou)

The writer discusses many more things in her poem, championing the rights of the black people first, as well as of the marginalized, the *Other*, while also uplifting America. However, it is this call to unity that resounds over the decades and we hear it again in other inaugural poems. The Land (personified in the Rock, the River, and the Tree, who once were one) calls out to the many nations who are treading it, all these groups who are each “a bordered country, / delicate and strangely made proud, / yet thrusting perpetually under siege,” “praying for a dream,” are all called by “I, the Rock, I, the River, I the Tree” who “am yours” for rest, to “root yourselves besides me”. And while the buildup is impressive, the metaphor, the enumeration, the incentives rising in tension, the ending is anti-climactic, but like a cold shower it opens the eyes to the simple truth (and solution): “Look into your sister’s eyes/and into your brother’s face, your country” and say, “Good morning.” And so, the poem ends with the eponymous

metaphor of the morning, the hopeful beginning of a new era, as well as the condition to its welfare.

Gorman's poem is written in much the same tone, coming in after a period of extreme division and unrest, and she symbolically bridges time and echoes Angelou in a more confessional, straightforward, intimate, and sincere tone. Her metaphors are not veiled, and she outright lays out the basis of the nation's trauma, "the loss we carry," "we've braved the belly of the beast, we've learned that quiet isn't always peace," but keeping in tone with Angelou and Frost's sentiments, "the dawn is ours." Optimistically, she adds, in contradiction to her predecessors, "We've weathered and witnessed/a nation that isn't broken / but simply unfinished." Her approach is based on her experience as a member of Gen Z, the generation that came after the turn of the millennium, a generation that stands on the shoulders of their predecessors whom she references throughout the poem, whose efforts have enabled her and her generation, her a "Black girl, descended from slaves and raised by a single mother / can dream of becoming president / only to find herself reciting for one." Her optimism is refreshing in combination with the earnestness with which she accepts that "we are far from polished," but "we are striving to forge a union with purpose / to compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters/ and conditions of man." Gorman loudly announces that "History has its eyes on us [...] this is the era of just redemption." She echoes Angelou's concept of shadow: "When the day comes we step out of the shade [...] The new dawn blooms as we free it."

And this is "the hill" Americans must "climb," acknowledging past mistakes and making them right, with optimism and faith in the character and fate of the country. Gorman is realistic about the issues of the country, it is exactly why she calls America an "unfinished" nation but refuses to capitulate. As an inaugural poem, it is more a way to keep the new president accountable: the American people have put their faith in him, expecting change, charging him with advancing the "finishing" of the nation.

Across three decades each, in eerie symmetry, three poets remind of the past and beckon in the future of America with hope, all three spirits which inform, each in their style. As the voice of a generation, Gorman pays her dues to her predecessors but announces loudly that young people, the future of the nation, are watching, involved, and active. From a teacher's perspective, she is emblematic of Gen Z sensibilities and her poetry can represent authentic and motivating texts for producing dynamic and effective learning in the classroom.

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Biodata

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