

As Your Writing and Reading Teacher

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AS YOUR WRITING & READING TEACHER,

and as a poetry enthusiast (fangirl), I was thinking about you yesterday as I watched Amanda Gorman perform her poem at Biden's inauguration, and then I was really thinking about you, students, as I watched Anderson Cooper interview her last night. I hope so much that you heard the poem, and I would truly love for you to watch the interview: she talks about the task to write a poem, the feel of words over images, the research she did from history and culture to pull this poem together. It is a feat that seems impossible. And she's 22 years old. She said Yes let's do this, she said This is a job for poetry.

I will admit—and I *bate* to admit this—that after I watched political pundits talk about her poem I chuckled at them a bit. I thought "um, okay, stay in your lane, folks, you don't know how to talk about poetry," and I am so embarrassed at the knee-jerk response. Students, I was a snob, and I wish I could click the Undo Arrow about it. It was the exact opposite person than I want to be, and I share this with you in case you've once been the same. We're human, it's okay, now we fix it: luckily, I pulled myself out of that negativity right and quick. I think the last year or so, and especially the last three weeks, has trained us in negativity, and it is our responsibility to identify it and then smash it down. If you can't turn negativity into action, then what's the point? Positive is possible without toxic-positive.

I also thought about how Dr. Jill Biden, an English professor, recognized the talent in Gorman and felt the impulse to put her on stage for the entire world to see. Make no mistake in glossing over the fact that Amanda Gorman is a Black woman, and that Black voices have been marginalized since the founding of—let me catch myself, *before* the founding of—this nation. This is a step into a moment. I feel Dr. Biden's choice, the desire to say "everyone, you need to feel this, this young person has something to say." No matter your political beliefs, believe in poetry.

It's a little funny how English teachers' phones and Twitter feeds blew up after Gorman delivered the poem. We were dying to share it with you. Immediately, lesson plans flooded the internet as though we'd been pregnant with apathy for too long and finally our waters collectively broke. (I won't develop that metaphor any further, because I don't know how to do so without mentioning placenta.)

Instead of a lesson plan, though, I simply want to share it with you and invite you to sit with it, because teachers have this habit of turning everything into a lesson—I could not be more guilty of this, folks, and no shade to any teacher who is going to process this with you at all—but I honestly don't have the energy to turn this into an academic learning experience. Instead, I want you to celebrate this poem as that moment I mentioned above. It's a moment for our country and it's a moment for you. It's a moment I remembered that poetry is for everyone (literally millions and

millions of Americans), not just your teachers and not just in the classroom. Poetry is academic but mostly not academic; when we analyze it, we do so because we want to feel an experience again and again to make sure we got this “being a human” right. Poetry is a flashbulb of humanity. Last night, I paused, put my phone down for once, and watched news channels talk about *literature*. On the news! And for, collectively, hours! And still this morning, even. The entire tone of the industrial news complex changed in a wind gust moment: like that cliché back-to-life enchanted rose in *Beauty and the Beast*.

In the interview, Anderson Cooper admits he doesn’t know much about poetry, but his eyes tear up as he talks to Gorman. Van Jones, another CNN anchor, said yesterday that “literature is an empathy machine.” The English teachers at home said “my dudes, my dudes! We have been telling you this since the beginning.” Jones said the poem made him wonder how many other young people were out there with such powerful things to say. And all of the teachers in all of the disciplines in all of the land said, “my [clap emoji] dudes [clap emoji] they [clap emoji] are [clap emoji] in [clap emoji] my [clap emoji] classroom [clap emoji].” They’re right here.