

Black History Month Profiles:

Great African American Poets from Across the Generations



Photo credit: iStock

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Common Generational Themes in Poetry

African American Poet Biographies

1. Amanda Gorman

Born in Los Angeles, California in 1998, she was raised by a single mother along with her two siblings. As a child, Gorman was diagnosed with an auditory processing delay which caused her to have a speech impediment. However, Gorman never viewed her speech impediment as a crutch, but rather as a sign of her strength because it was in the solace in reading and writing that would later inspire her to become the poet she is today. Gorman attended Harvard University and studied sociology. She was named the Los Angeles Poet Laureate in 2014 and in 2021 was invited to recite an original poem, "The Hills We Climb", at the inauguration of President Joseph Biden.

Lesson Activity:

- Listen to "The Hill We Climb" by Amanda Gorman - it can be viewed on YouTube [here](#).
- As students listen, have them write down themes evident in the poem.
- Fill in the 'AG' circle on the Venn diagram as a class through classroom discussion.

Student Directions:

While you listen to the inaugural recitation of Amanda Gorman's poem "The Hill We Climb", write down key words or phrases you hear that demonstrate the theme of the poem, or the message she is sharing. Choose at least five (5) words or phrases.

1. _____

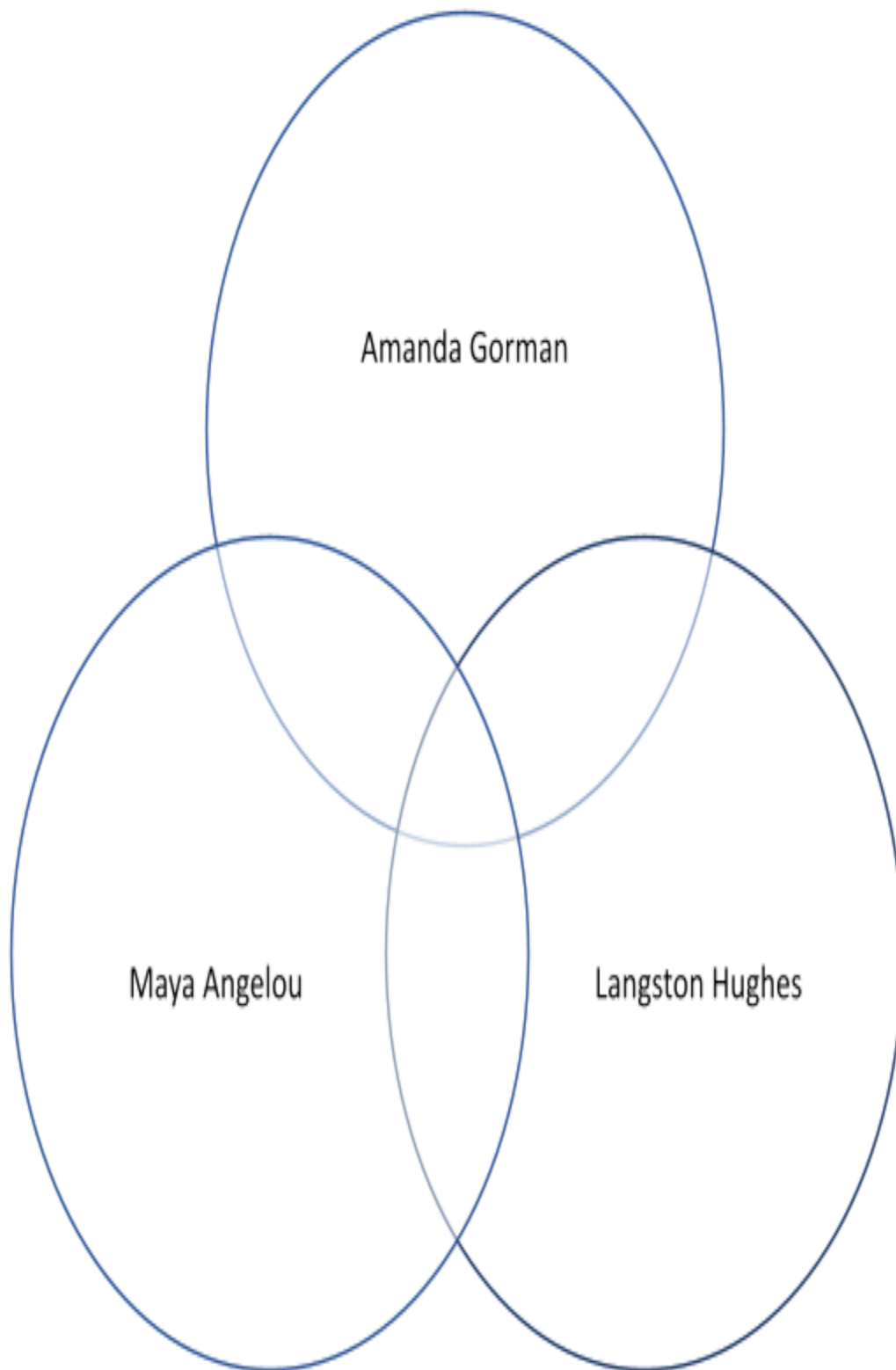
2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Then, add *theme* words to the 'Amanda Gorman' portion of the Venn Diagram below:



2. Maya Angelou:

Born Marguerite Annie Johnson in 1928, Maya Angelou became one of the most renowned authors in American literary history. After her parents divorced when she was three, her and her brother went to live with their grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas. However, when visiting her mother, she was sexually assaulted by her mother's boyfriend. After telling her uncles what he had done to her, they found the boyfriend and killed him, causing Angelou to question the power of her own words and choosing to remain silent for the next five years, living as a selective mute. After a budding acting and dancing career in California, Angelou moved to NY in 1950 and became involved in civil rights and friends with many Harlem writers. In 1961, she began her journey through Africa, beginning first in Egypt and then Ghana, where her evolution into a writer took place. Upon return to the United States, she published the first of a multivolume autobiography, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, followed by four more volumes and several poems over the next decade. She was nominated for several awards and read her poetry at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton. Angelou died on May 28, 2014, at 86 years old in North Carolina.

Lesson Activity:

- Read "Still I Rise" to the class.
- While you read, have students underline places where her theme and/or message is evident.
- Complete 'MA' circle on the Venn diagram with students leading the discussion & recording.
- Have students identify/highlight five (5) lines from "Still I Rise" demonstrating the theme.

"Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?
Does my haughtiness offend you?

Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.
You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Source credit: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise>

Student Directions:

Read along as your teacher or a peer recites “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou.

Underline specific words or phrases that demonstrate the theme of the poem, and copy them in the space provided below.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Then, add the identified *themes* to the Venn diagram on p. 4. Remember, if they are repeated with Gorman’s poem, place it in the intersection of the two circles!

3. Langston Hughes:

Known as the father of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes, wrote 16 books of poetry, twenty plays, numerous collections of short stories, and two novels. Born as James Mercer Langston Hughes on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri; Hughes spent much of his childhood moving around the Midwest with his mother who raised him by herself. Initially, he enrolled at Columbia University in New York City, but after a year left to work as a sailor, traveling the world and honing his writing skills. His first poem, *The Weary Blues*, launched him into the spotlight, and the follow-up book, a collection of poetry by the same name, set him as a celebrity at just 24 years old. After moving to Harlem, he used his new home as inspiration for his work, writing “Harlem Night Club” and “Theme for English B”, and a collection of stories, *The Ways of White Folks*. He soon became known unofficially as the ‘Poet Laureate of Harlem’ until his death on May 22, 1967.

Lesson Activity:

- Read “I, Too” **with** the class.
- Then have students reread it silently and underline places where the theme is evident.
- Have students complete the ‘LH’ circle on the Venn diagram in partners.
- The teacher adds to the class copy after partner work.
- Have students identify/highlight five (5) lines from “I’ Too” that demonstrate the theme.

“I, Too” by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I’ll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody’ll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.

Besides,
They’ll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—
I, too, am America.

Source credit: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47558/i-too>

Student Directions:

Read along as your teacher or a peer recites “I, Too” by Langston Hughes.

Underline specific words or phrases that demonstrate the theme of the poem, and copy them in the space provided below.

Then, add the identified *themes* to the Venn diagram on p. 4. Remember, if there are repeated themes, place them in the intersection of the corresponding circles!

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Independent Research:

Choose one poet from the list below. Identify one poem that poet wrote that connects with the themes from Gorman, Angelou, and Hughes. Choose five words or phrases from your chosen poem, and copy them below.

Poet:

Title of Poem:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Found Poem

Using words, phrases, or quotes from the poems, rearrange them to create a FOUND POEM that demonstrates the overarching theme or message of Amanda Gorman's poem "The Hill We Climb".

| | |
|-----|-------|
| 1. | _____ |
| 2. | _____ |
| 3. | _____ |
| 4. | _____ |
| 5. | _____ |
| 6. | _____ |
| 7. | _____ |
| 8. | _____ |
| 9. | _____ |
| 10. | _____ |
| 11. | _____ |
| 12. | _____ |
| 13. | _____ |
| 14. | _____ |
| 15. | _____ |
| 16. | _____ |
| 17. | _____ |
| 18. | _____ |
| 19. | _____ |
| 20. | _____ |