Poet Amanda Gorman On Using Her Art As A Tool For Activism

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*Journalist:* This Wednesday, 22 year old Amanda Gorman, the nation's first youth poet laureate, will become the youngest person to read her poetry at the presidential inauguration. She was chosen to share her work by incoming first lady Jill Biden, who's a big fan. Gorman follows in the footsteps of Maya Angelou and Robert Frost. Last year during the pandemic and calls for racial justice. Amanda Gorman joined us to talk about her poetry and how it can offer hope and understanding. Here's a bit of our conversation from this past October.

So your work focuses on issues of race and feminism and oppression, you're one of the rare few who knew your path very early in life. How has the last four years and specifically the last few months with this country's grappling with racism shaped your view of your purpose in this moment as a writer?

*Amanda Gorman:* As a writer, I'm also writing as an African-American. And so these issues are very much so intimate and personal. For me, I think we have our own kind of weapons that we can take into the arena to fight systemic racism. And for me, the greatest instrument that I have at my disposal is my pen. And so I try to create messages of both kind of critical thinking, but also of hope to be both thinking deeply and also constructively about what we can do with the racial tensions in our country.

*Speaker 1:* One example of that, I'm going to have you read one of your poems. You're a self-proclaimed history buff and you have a poem to share with us that takes a look at a portion of Thomas Jefferson's notes on the state of Virginia, where he claimed it was impossible for black people to write poetry, including Phillis Wheatley, the first black American to have a book of poetry published in 1773. Can you read that poem for us?

*Speaker 1:* Certainly. Notes on the state of Virginia, notes on the state, I find, uttered a thought. The level of plain, never painting or sculpture, music gifted. Whites have been found capable of imagining whether they will be the composition of a more extensive or complicated harmony is yet to be proved. Misery is often. Poetry is misery enough. God knows poetry. Love is peculiar of the poet. Ardent, but it kindles only the imagination. Religion indeed. A Phyllis could produce published under her name. The dignity of.

*Speaker 1:* Hmm, you know, you're a manifestation of everything Thomas Jefferson tried to deny as a possibility. How does it feel to reshape this assertion? In a way, you're really correcting history through poetry?

*Speaker 2:* I think that's a really interesting way of thinking about it. I try to kind of live history through my poetry. I should contextualize this poem and that when Thomas Jefferson was basically condemning Phillis Wheatley as poetry, she was around my age, if not younger than I was. And so for him to dedicate time in this historical document, to try to erase her from having any type of poetic claim, I think says a lot about what one skinny small, a young little black girl poet can do to disrupt humanity. I talk a lot about imagination in this poem when I'm kind of erasing Thomas Jefferson's words and creating this poem that is also in part inspired by Claudia Rankine *Citizen*, which very much so deals with police brutality. And she has an incredible line there that says “Because white men can't police their imagination, black people are dying”.

*Speaker 1:* You know, the arts have always been used as a way for us to make sense of the world, you teach young people about how to use poetry for transformative change. What's the response to the medium from the young people you work with?

*Speaker 2:* The response is always incredibly rewarding. You know, my role isn't to convert everyone to become a poet laureate, but I want every single young person to have the capacity to share their voice. And if poetry can help make that journey accessible, I'm here for it.

*Speaker 1:* You also consider yourself an activist, and I would imagine that you don't separate yourself like I'm a poet and I'm an activist. How do you see these working in concert with each other?

*Speaker 2:* I definitely see them working together. It's always so strange to me when someone says, Oh, I'd love for you to write this poem, but don't make it political. And I kind of freeze because it makes no sense to me. Everything is political, especially art. And I think often that's a word that is misappropriated to say, don't have this poem, ask difficult questions and begin complicated conversations. So for me, kind of a sociopolitical interest is already embedded in my poetry. And it's, you know, impossible, if not so counterpoint to who I am to eradicate. I should save that concern from that art.

*Speaker 1:* Ah, it's been important for you as a writer and activist to have something to guide you and you call it a mantra. So I wonder, what is your mantra?

*Speaker 2:* This literary talisman I came up with a few years ago and I recite it to myself in times of great fear and anxiety and it goes, I'm the daughter of black writers.We're descended from freedom fighters who broke their chains and changed the world.They call me and it's just something I recite to myself. And it helps give me strength, I think, as homework. For anyone listening to this, I would just challenge you to think of the history that you stand on in the future you stand for and to create something really explicit for yourself to repeat in times of darkness, just to remind yourself of the light that you bring just by living.

*Speaker 1:* How are you twenty two?

*Speaker 2:* I'm like eighty nine and like a twelve year old body.

*Speaker 1:* Do you have another poem you'd like to share with us, sir?

*Speaker 2:* I will read another poem that I wrote called What Words Began, and it was inspired when I was doing a bit of kind of historical research of one race really was used in the historical record.

What words begin? The word race first arose in the English language in 1508. Of course, it appeared were all Words are born, a poem, when a Scottish writer spoke of a long line of kings in the dancing deadly sin of envy. So what is a poem, if not a beginning? An announcement that heralds itself moments of err moulded like a melted wax. I always thought language was akin to the body padlocked. Oh so delicately to a pulse it tells you in the beginning was the word. This was before 1619, before Trayon, before Till, before Malcolm and Martin and Michael went still, before the echo that is breath pilgrimage to the start of the sound, before the inception of a new poem when I am bent and gasping, stripped skinny thatched, thin a wild note waiting to be sung.