

No Place for Hate[®] Activity Library

Poems for Justice

Lesson Plan and Overview

Throughout history and across identity groups, people have used song and poetry to express their thoughts about injustice and put forth their vision for how to achieve equity and social justice. There are many examples, both contemporary and historical, of artists using song and poetry to change hearts, minds, and ignite action. Amanda Gorman, who delivered the 2021 inaugural poem at Joe Biden and Kamala Harris' Presidential inauguration, was the youngest ever inaugural poet, delivering a powerful and impactful poem.

Grade Level

Grades 6-8

Learning Objectives

- Students will understand what injustice and social justice mean and identify how they manifest in their world.
- Students will analyze a social justice poem.
- Students will reflect on issues of social justice that are important to them and then write a poem that expresses their thoughts.

Materials Needed

- [Inaugural poet Amanda Gorman delivers a poem at Joe Biden's inauguration](#) (video)
- "The Hill We Climb" by Amanda Gorman ([video and transcript](#))
- [The New Colossus - Emma Lazarus](#) (1 min., 26 sec.) or "[New Colossus](#)" by Emma Lazarus (1 min., 24 sec., includes captions)
- [The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus](#) (one copy for each student or project on board/smart board)
- [Forms of Poetry](#)

Words You Might Use

Activist: Someone who gets involved in activities that are meant to achieve political or social change; this also includes being a member of an organization which is working on change.

Social Justice: A set of conditions and principles that ensure every person has equitable economic, political and social rights, access and opportunities.

Core Activity

Ask students what it means when something is unjust or unfair. Define **injustice** as a situation in which the rights of a person or a group of people are ignored, disrespected or discriminated against.

Ask students: *What are some examples of injustice that you see in your school, community or society?* Have them share examples and record their responses. If you need examples, share the following:

- School—school dress codes unfairly target girls
- Community—our streets and public transportation are not accessible for people with disabilities
- Society—police/law enforcement unfairly targets Black people with racial profiling and excessive force.

Elicit and explain the definition of **social justice** as a set of conditions and principles that ensure every person has equitable economic, political and social rights, access and opportunities.

Explain that throughout history, poets (and other artists) have used poems and song to explore and convey their thoughts about social justice in order to have an impact on people who listen to them. Ask students if they have any examples of songs and poems that are about social justice; keep this brief.

Next, ask students if they have heard of Amanda Gorman. Explain that in January 2021, Amanda Gorman wrote and recited her poem, "[The Hill We Climb](#)," which she wrote for the Presidential inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Explain that when Amanda Gorman was sixteen years-old, she was named the Youth Poet Laureate of Los Angeles and years later while in college, she became the National Youth Poet Laureate, becoming the first person to hold the position.

Play the [Inaugural poet Amanda Gorman delivers a poem at Joe Biden's inauguration](#) and have students follow along with the text version. While listening, have students circle words or phrases they find memorable and meaningful, underline words or phrases they don't understand/have questions about and jot down any other notes.

(Note: You can play the video two times: the first time have students just listen and the second time have them circle, underline and take notes as described above).

Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:

- What thoughts and feelings came to mind as you listened to the poem?
- What images and metaphors Amanda Gorman use in the poem? What do they mean to you?

- What words, lines phrases or stanzas stand out for you, and why?
- What historical or current events are referenced or inferred in the poem? Why do you think Amanda Gorman chose them?
- What is Amanda Gorman’s overall message?
- Is this a social justice poem? How so?
- What questions do you have or what parts didn’t you understand?
- Why do you think the poem is called “The Hill We Climb?”

(Alternative: Instead of or in addition to “The Hill We Climb,” use the same process to read and discuss:

- [The New Colossus - Emma Lazarus \(1 min., 26 sec.\)](#) or [“New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus \(1 min., 24 sec., includes captions\)](#)
- [The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus \(one copy for each student or project on board/smart board\)](#)

Finally, have students identify social justice issues that are important to them. These can be social justice issues that take place in school, their community or society. Have them first identify the issue and give them five minutes to do free writing about the topic or issue. (Free writing is a prewriting technique which gives you a set time in which to write continuously without paying attention to spelling, grammar or topic.) The free writing will help get their thoughts, feelings and ideas out before writing. Then have students decide which form of poetry they want to use (see [“Forms of Poetry”](#)), inviting them to then write own social justice poem. You can have them conference with each other to get feedback and revise their poems. When poems are completed, share the poems with the school community. Some ideas for doing this include: a schoolwide poetry slam including all members of the school community including families, the creation of video with all the students reading aloud their poems, or a written version of all the poems to be made available in print and digital versions.

Optional Follow-Up/ Going Further

Note: These additional activities can be done as follow-ups to the core activity and they can also serve as an additional NPFH activity if the core activity is completed first.

- Engage students in reflecting on songs that convey messages of social justice. Use a similar process as above by listening to and reading song lyrics, including “Imagine” by John Lennon and Yoko Ono, “A Change is Gonna Come” by Sam Cooke, and “Glory” by John Legend. Have students then research and identify other songs about social justice, sharing them with the class/school and explaining what each means in the context of social justice.
- Have students identify poets who have written about social justice such as Amanda Gorman and Emma Lazarus and then conduct research to learn more about them. They can find out more information about their lives, read their social media posts (for contemporary poets), read and listen to more of their poems, and then create a final project to share what they learned with the school: a timeline, a collection of their poems read aloud, or an essay or speech about them.

- Have students continue to study different poets and songwriters who write about social justice. Create a digital poetry book for the school that includes poems the students have written and poems written by famous poets. You can also make a compilation video or audio recording of students reading aloud their own poems and those of prominent or less well-known poets.

Home Connection

Share ADL's Table Talk "[The Purpose and Power of Protest](#)" with families.

How Activity Meets NPFH Requirements

All students will engage in discussions about injustice in their schools, communities or society. They will then reflect on issues of injustice and social justice by listening to poems by Amanda Gorman and/or Langston Huges. They will also reflect on social justice issues that are important to them and will create their own poems that reflect on those issues. The activity will help students and the school community understand how injustice and justice operate in their school and world.

***The New Colossus* by Emma Lazarus**

(source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46550/the-new-colossus>)

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. **“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”**

Forms of Poetry

Acrostic Poem

Poetry where certain letters, usually the first in each line form a word or message when read in a sequence.

Free Verse

A poem that has no rhyme, meter or other traditional poetry technique.

Haiku

A form of Japanese poetry that always has three lines in length. The lines always have 5, 7, and 5 syllables and often focus on highly evocative allusions and comparisons.

I Wish Poems

Each line of the poem begins with the words “I Wish” and the poem should be 8–10 lines long.

It’s Not Fair Poems

Similar to “I Wish” poems, each line of the poem begins with “It’s Not Fair” and the poem should be 8–10 lines long.

List

A poem that is made up of a list of items or events. It can be any length and rhymed or unrhymed.