

OPINION

Why Don't Republicans Ever Have Inaugural Poems?

The reading of poetry at presidential inaugurations could highlight and uplift traditional beliefs and values.

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Maya Angelou recites "On the Pulse of Morning" at Bill Clinton's first inauguration in 1993. Public Domain

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Commentary

In the [preface](#) to his novel, “The Picture of Dorian Gray,” Oscar Wilde quipped that, “There’s no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written, that is all.” Though Wilde’s idea has become common, it is blatantly false. While it is true that a work of art should stand on its aesthetic merits, art can never be entirely separated from morality.

Art is, on the contrary, the primary way that a culture expresses and spreads its moral ideas. A nation inundated with immoral art will produce bad citizens.

Poetry, as an art form, is one way that people have expressed their ideas on life. American presidents have even, at times, appointed poets to express the values they intend to represent in the Oval Office.

Inaugural Poets

To date, there have been six inaugural poets. John F. Kennedy was the first president to have a poet read at his 1961 inauguration. He chose wisely, selecting America’s most beloved living bard, Robert Frost. Bill Clinton revived this practice a generation later, outdoing Kennedy by having a poet read at each of his inaugurations: Maya Angelou (1993) and Miller Williams (1997). Barack Obama continued the trend with Elizabeth Alexander (2009) and Richard Blanco (2013). Most recently, Amanda Gorman recited her poem “The Hill We Climb” at Joe Biden’s inauguration in 2021.



Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman speaks during the inauguration of U.S. President-elect Joe Biden, left, on the West Front of the U.S. Capitol in Washington on Jan. 20, 2021. Rob Carr/Getty Images

Glancing at this list, one notices a glaring fact: Inaugural poets have only ever appeared for Democrat presidents, never Republican ones. Why is this?

Conservatives and Art

Republicans tend to be practical people who care less about highfalutin art and poetry than everyday issues like the economy or gun rights. In addition, much of the art and poetry in public spaces don't express traditional values. It's understandable that conservatives prefer to distance themselves from these spheres.

When I raised this question with a fellow poet, he had a more nuanced answer. "The more freedom of speech there is, the less people feel a need for poets to articulate their thoughts." There is a lot of truth to this.

While dictionaries of the past often cited great poets like Shakespeare or Milton as the primary sources for a word's first usage, of today's phrases found in sentences like "She's hard-wired to wake up at 6 a.m.," "My default setting is to procrastinate," or "He's great at multitasking" are taken from the jargon of modern technology.

Republicans may simply be reflecting the populist view that people don't look to poets as cultural authorities anymore. Apparently, they look to computer nerds instead.

Yet Democrat presidents still feel the need to use poets as mouthpieces. And the cultural effect they have is sometimes considerable. After reciting for the president, Gorman went on to recite a poem at the Super Bowl and became the brand ambassador for the cosmetics company Estée Lauder. Clearly, people are listening to her.

'The Gift Outright'

Of all the inaugural poets, Robert Frost was the only one writing in rhyme and meter. His most iconic poems deal with rural life and man's connection to nature—both its simple pleasures and hardships.



President John F. Kennedy (2nd L) presents the Congressional Gold Medal to Robert Frost (4th L). White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston. Public Domain

He never publicly read the poem titled “[For John F. Kennedy’s Inauguration](#).” During the event, the sun reflected off the paper so that

he could not read it. Instead, he recited an earlier patriotic poem from memory, “The Gift Outright.” It begins with the lines:

*The land was ours before we were the land's.
She was our land more than a hundred years
Before we were her people.*

Frost here is expressing a sense of “Manifest Destiny,” the idea that the founders of the United States were fated to spread their influence far and wide.

This is a very unfashionable notion in academia today. Almost all traditional ideas, though, are unfashionable among the Ivy League set: nationalism, the nuclear family, religion, capitalism, individual responsibility, and meritocracy.

For the past two generations, Republicans have neglected the arts, and the results have been disastrous. Hollywood, the publishing industry, and every mainstream cultural institution promote artists who, with few exceptions, do not endorse traditional values. Is it any wonder that so many people today are enthralled by the empty promises of socialism?

Traditional Poetry and Traditional Values

There are more excellent poets writing today who identify as having traditional, patriotic values than probably any time since the 19th century. Few are aware of this, however, because nobody has ever heard of these poets. They do not win major awards. Their recitations are not televised. They do not receive government appointments, like poet laureate, which would help them popularize their principles.

If Republicans don't promote the kind of art they want to see in the world, they will continue to see the the sort of art that has been prevalent in American culture since the 1960s: the avant-garde and iconoclastic. Many people feel abused by immoral art for far too long now. They are tired of the meaningless blotches of paint, the

depressing navel-gazing of free verse, and the noise that passes for music.

It is no accident that those who want to destabilize traditional social roles tend to express those beliefs through destabilizing art forms that throw off the influence of the past. Artists with traditional beliefs about a person's role in society, on the other hand, tend to express those beliefs through the classical forms that have been developed over millennia, from Greece and Rome to now.

Take, for example, the first two stanzas of this poem by Susan Jarvis Bryant, recently published on the Society of Classical Poets [website](#):

*I smell you in the fresh-mown lawn
As linen billows in the breeze.
I hear you in the chirp of dawn
And splash of seas.*

*I taste you in the velvet peach,
Plump and lush with summer's glow.
I feel your pledge at winter's edge
In wisps of snow.*

What is this poem about? One could offer several plausible answers: the memory of new love, mourning someone no longer in the world, or the sense of a divine presence. The title "Simplicity" may encompass any of these things beyond its stated subject. Conversely, we can say that the poem is definitely not about anxiety, alienation, or social justice—three favorite topics of modern free verse and all subjects that inaugural poets since Frost have dealt with.

It is likely that Democrat presidents will continue to elevate poets on platforms to express the core values of their voting blocs. Republicans can either compete with this trend in the ongoing effort to win over hearts and minds, or continue to ignore it as they have been doing for more than 60 years. We've already seen where this second strategy has led us. Why not give the first one a try?



Richard Blanco, reading his poem "One Today," at the 2013 inauguration of President Barack Obama. Farragutful/CC BY-SA 3.0

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