BIBLE AND THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD
VOLUME 4: 4-52
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15664/bcw.v4i1.2771

PROPHETIC IMAGINATION IN AMANDA GORMAN'S "THE HILL WE CLIMB"*

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Abstract: The media reaction to Amanda Gorman's performance of the Spoken Word poem "The Hill We Climb" at the Inauguration Day ceremony for President Biden in January 2021 demonstraed the power of this genre to impact public consciousness. While The Washinton Post described Gorman as a "prophet of democracy" the GetReligion forum suggested that biblical references and theological themes had been overlooked. Other platforms suggested that the poem was a work of prophetic imagination. Poetic works throughout history have shared function and form with works of prophetic imagination but, as Abraham Heschel states, while all prophecy is poetry not all poetry is prophecy. This article therefore examines "The Hill We Climb" as a work of prohetic imagination. Referencing the work of Heschel and Walter Brueggeman it will outline the hallmarks of prophetic imagination in poetry and consider how these resonate with the Spoken Word genre. A framework for the analysis of prophetic imagination in poetry will be proposed and applied to Gorman's performance of "The Hill We Climb."

Introduction

> "Reasonable speech, logos, regenerates the soul and orientates it towards the noble and beautiful act…Blessed is he who is adept in both word and work…The word prepares the way for action and disposes the hearers to the practice of virtue. There is a saving word just as there is a saving work. And justice does not take shape without logos."
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> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* I.[1]

† MLitt University of St Andrews 2022. With thanks to Dr. Rebekah Lamb for giving timely advice and encouragement throughout the supervision of this thesis.
[1] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1965), 93.

Amanda Gorman performs The Hill We Climb [2]

Following the Inauguration Day ceremony for President Joe Biden in January 2021, media commentary highlighted a number of phenomena: Lady Gaga's social distancing – enforcing dress, the socio-political significance of the various shades of purple worn by female Democrats, and Bernie Saunders mittens.[3] However, according to Terry Mattingly, the star of the show, in a canary yellow coat, was the young poet Amanda Gorman.[4] In performing her poem *The Hill We Climb* she made history as America's youngest ever inaugural poet.[5] Gorman's choice of spoken word genre was also an inaugural first.[6] The New York Times declared that Gorman had captured the moment in verse, successfully facing the challenge to write a poem which inspired hope and unity, at a time when America was reeling from political division, violence and the impact of a pandemic.[7] The poem has been described as "a powerful call to action focusing on themes of hope, unity, healing and resilience."[8] The performance of the poem may be viewed on YouTube.[9]

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[2] Amanda Gorman, photograph, accessed February 26, 2022, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/.
[3] Terry Mattingly, "Hamilton, the prophets and liberal Catholicism: Poet Amanda Gorman took her shot," GetReligion, accessed April 228, 2024.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Alexandra Alter, "Amanda Gorman Capture the Moment in Verse," *The New York Times*, January 19, 2021.
[6] Stephen Dooner, "Professor Stephen Dooner's analysis of Amanda Gorman's The Hill We Climb-Video, "JFYNetworks, ppt, 10.43,,February 25, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tP2MwFdxpA.
[7] Alter, "Capture the Moment."
[8] **"**Reflecting on Amanda Gorman's "The Hill We Climb" ." Facing history and Ourselves, accessed April 28, 2021.
[9] Amanda Gorman, "Watch: Amanda Gorman read her inauguration poem, 'The Hill We climb' ," You tube video, 0:15-0:18, posted by PBS News Hour, January 20, 2021,

Gorman is a poet and an activist. She became National Youth Poet Laureate while a student at Harvard.[10] As an activist she has been advocating for racial equality, gender justice and the environment from her teenage years. Poetry for Gorman is a medium for social action. She has declared:

> The fight for social justice not only inspires my writing but my life's work. Through poetry I can speak to both the world's problems and its solutions, as well as the microcosms of conflict inside myself. I love writing poetry because it is innately cutting-edge; as a black female poet, every time I take the stage I have a new opportunity to defy limitations placed on the art, contributions and leadership of creative women of color.[11]

Gorman's approach to poetry has led some commentators to declare her a prophet, suggesting a theological purpose to her work. Shannen Dee Williams, writing in the Washington Post after Gorman's performance, described the poem as "a sermon on equality and hope in the face of lethal resistance."[12] Williams asserts Gorman is following in a revolutionary womanist tradition of Black Catholicism and the message of the poem indicates she is a "prophet of democracy."[13] Jon Kuhrt, whose blog Grace+Truth posts content relating to faith, transformation and social justice, asserted that, "in the heart of the inauguration ceremony, we witnessed a truly prophetic message broadcast to the whole world."[14] I will argue that Gorman's spoken word performance of *The Hill We Climb,* in the context of the 2021 inauguration ceremony, signifies the hallmarks of prophetic imagination. As a study of poetry as a mode of theology in popular culture, I will reference sources from contemporary media platforms alongside scholarly research and classical theological texts.

Poetry as a Mode of Theology

Michael Hurley in his book *Faith in Poetry* states that poets have faith in the medium of poetry to say and accomplish things which could not be said or done by an alternative medium.[15] For Christian poets this extends to a faith in poetry to convey the transcendent truths of God.[16] William Franke traces a history of poetry, prophecy and theological revelation from

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[10] Alter, " Capture the Moment."
[11] Facing history, "Reflecting."
[12] Shannen Dee Williams, "Black Catholic women like Amanda Gorman are forgotten prophets of American democracy," *Washington Post,* February 10, 2021.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Jon Kuhrt, " 'The Hill We Climb': a new expression of an ancient message," Grace+Truth, accessed September 7, 2021.
[15] Michael D. Hurley, *Faith in Poetry* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 1.
[16] Ibid.

Homer to Ginsburg and states that throughout history the function and forms chosen by poets and prophets have been "virtually indistinguishable."[17] Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel emphatically states that the prophet is a poet.[18] He acknowledges that both prophecy and poetry employ poetic imagination but asserts that not all poetry is prophecy.[19] Theologian Walter Brueggemann, influenced by Heschel's work, bases his understanding of prophecy on the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, beginning with Moses, who broke with the oppression of Pharaoh's Egypt and created an alternative community.[20] According to Brueggemann, prophecy utilises poetic imagination to critique the present social order and to energise the community with the promise of a new reality.[21] Heschel's work outlines how the biblical prophets confronted injustice, urging for political change through the medium of poetry.[22]

"Artivism":The Tradition of Spoken Word and Activism

Heschel asserts that the prophet is one who "feels fiercely" about the plight of man and has a burden for the oppressed.[23] The spoken word genre chosen by Gorman is rooted in the African-American oral tradition, which from the time of slavery has been associated with raising social consciousness and envisioning alternative social realities.[24] Committed to the pursuit of liberation the oral tradition has pursued social justice through the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and the Black Arts movement of the 1960's and 1970's.[25] The tradition continued through the hip-hop music culture of the 1980's which birthed the innovation of slam or spoken word poetry. [26] [27] In the contemporary world, spoken word performance poets engage in "creative politics" using their art form as a social critique to advocate for change.[28] Contemporary spoken word poet Christina Jackson views her work as "artivism," a blend of

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[17] William Franke, "Poetry, Prophecy, and Theological Revelation," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion, accessed October 21, 2021, Summary,
[18] Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets,* First Perennial Classics edition (New York: Perennial, 2001), 468.
[19] Heschel, *Prophets,* 469, 496-497.
[20] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination,* 40th Anniversary Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 6.
[21] Ibid,14.
[22] Heschel, *Prophets,* 3-4
[23] Ibid, 5-6.
[24] Valerie Chepp, "Art as Public Knowledge and Everyday Politics: The Case of African American Spoken Word," *Humanity and Society* 36, no.3 (2012): 222-223.
[25] Joanne V. Gabin, "Furious Flower: African American Poetry, An Overview," *Furious Flower*, California Newsreel website, accessed December 12, 2021.
[26] Shawnkeisha Stoudamire, "From the African American Oral Tradition to Salm Poetry: Rhetoric and Stylistics," *McNair Scholars Journal* 16, no. 2 (2012): 59.
[27] Slam poetry is the term used in competitive settings while spoken word is used in open mic settings. Stoudamire, "Rhetoric and Stylistics," 61.
[28] Chepp, "Public Knowledge," 241.

art and activism. [29] Gorman stands in a line of Black poets who have used poetry as a political vehicle. In her TED talk, *Using your voice is a political choice*, Gorman discusses the influence of her heritage. She expresses the confidence it gives her to "speak up." [30] Before every performance she repeats a mantra, calling back to her "honorary ancestors," saying: "I am the daughter of Black writers, who are descended from Freedom Fighters who broke their chains and changed the world."[31] Gorman believes she is standing on the shoulders of Black poets such as Phyllis Wheatley, Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde, expressing that: "it's only from the height of these shoulders that we might have the sight to see the mighty power of poetry, the power of language made accessible, expressible."[32]

The ethos of spoken word poetry as a "mighty power" to speak up for the oppressed suggests an apt comparison of the genre with the form and function of biblical prophetic poetry, as both have a socio-political purpose. The tradition in which spoken word is rooted has a long history of theological expression. From the time of slavery the bible has had a profound influence on African-American arts and culture.[33] Contemporarily a number of poets express their faith through the medium of spoken word. Jefferson Bethke's spoken word performance *Why I hate Religion But Love Jesus* attracted a global audience of almost 30 million views in 2012.[34] The performative, provocative and political characteristics of spoken word lend themselves to the message of the "upside-down Gospel" Jesus preached on the Sermon on the Mount, challenging the status quo.[35] It is an apt medium for the expression of prophetic imagination.

The Hill We Climb and Prophetic Imagination

The Hill We Climb was written and delivered in the particular context of the 2021 inauguration, following "a political era defined by half-truths, insults and capped by a failed insurrection."[36] Tasked with writing a poem about national unity, Gorman was halfway

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[29] Stoudamire, "Rhetoric and Stylistics," 59.
[30] Amanda Gorman, "Using your voice is a political choice," TED talk, transcript, accessed April 27, 2024,
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Katherine Clay Blassard, "Reading Between the lines: The Bible in the African American Neo-Slave Narrative," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 4, no. 2 (2014): 159.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Maya King and Nolan D. McCaskill, "The political roots of Amanda Gorman's genius," *Politico*, accessed February 9, 2022.

through when the Capitol Hill riot took place. [37] She acknowledged the need to speak into the turmoil of the social and political landscape, saying:

> We have to confront these realities if we are going to move forward, so that's also an important touchstone of the poem…There is space for grief and horror and hope and unity, and I also hope that there is a breath for joy in the poem, because I do think we have a lot to celebrate at this inauguration.[38]

Gorman's words suggest the use of prophetic imagination, as defined by Brueggemann, in completing her task. The poem fearlessly addresses painful realities but also celebrates the positive, expressing hope in the future. Dave Eckstrand reflects on the themes Gorman's poem addresses in his Literary review.[39] He outlines how Gorman presents America as a country which, despite experiencing racial conflict and polarized politics, has made progress in climbing "the hill of justice."[40] Gorman evidences this, in an autobiographical moment, by celebrating the fact that she as "a skinny black girl descended from slaves" finds herself reciting for the president, while hoping one day to be president herself.[41] She asserts that, despite America going through a dark and difficult period, the country is "unpolished," not "broken." [42] She encourages her listeners to "forge a union with purpose," confronting injustice, and looking to "the past we step into and how we repair it." [43]

Inevitably, in such a politically fractured landscape, reaction to the message of Gorman's poem was polarized. Malcolm Salovaara writing for *The American Conservative* regarded Gorman's performance as propaganda and "nothing less than an embarrassment to our country."[44] The children of former President Trump published a "savage attack" on Gorman comparing her to the mythological sirens who lured sailors to their deaths with "enchanting music and beautiful voices" yet noting, "Her poem doesn't even rhyme…It has no iambic pentameter. It is very unprofessional and impolite to speak with our hands."[45] Melanie McDonagh writing in *The Spectator* called *The Hill We Climb* a "terrible poem" and according

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[37] Alter, " Capture the Moment."
[38] Ibid.
[39] David Eckstrand, "Literary Reflection and Book Review: The Hill We Climb by Amanda Gorman. "Accessed September 13, 2021. https://irondpreschurch.org/literary-reflection-and-book-review-the-hill-we-climb-by-amanda-gorman/ (Page no longer available.)
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Elie Gould, "Criticism or Blind Contempt? The Integrity of Publishing," *The Stray*, accessed April 29, 2024.
[45] Dan Boxer, "Trump Children Savagely Attack Amanda Gorman," The Haven, accessed April 29, 2024.

to Manisha Sinha, was "staggeringly patronising in picking apart Gorman's structure, grammar and use of poetic devices."[46] Elie Gould deems the criticisms to be lacking in academic rigour.[47] Like the Trump children McDonagh failed to appreciate the characteristics of the genre. More crucially, Gould asserts that McDonagh's critique lacked insight regarding Gorman's use of biblical references.[48]

Terry Mattingly observes that commentators from across the political spectrum overlooked the theological basis of the poem's message. [49] The *New York Times* offered a "faith-free" story while other news agencies provided only superficial recognition of the poem's biblical themes.[50] Perhaps this reflects Hurley's view that the contemporary world no longer regards poetry as a mode of theology and reads religious expression in poetry with "hermeneutics of suspicion."[51] To appreciate the theological message of the poem Hurley suggests the reader must resist the temptation to view the poem "through a secular lens."[52] This thesis will examine the poem from a theological perspective demonstrating how it's form and function resonate contemporarily with that of the biblical prophets in exercising prophetic imagination. In Part 1 I will consider how poetry may still be a unique medium for authentic theological reflection in the contemporary context when it exhibits the characteristics of prophetic imagination outlined by Heschel and Brueggemann. Part 2 will consider the genre of spoken word, its historical background and how its form and function naturally enable it to be a mode for prophetic imagination. Part 3 will analyse *The Hill We Climb* as a spoken word performance, showing how its form and function follow in the biblical prophetic tradition in critiquing contemporary American society yet also communicating a theological message of energising hopefulness.

Part 1: Prophetic Imagination in Poetry

This section will establish how contemporary poetry may fulfil a prophetic function. Brueggemann's classic work *The Prophetic Imagination* will be referenced, as it outlines how

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[46] Manisha Sinha, "Amanda Gorman's success stirred a bleak undercurrent," CNN, accessed April 29. 2024.
[47] Gould, " Criticism or Blind Contempt? "
[48] Ibid.
[49] Mattingly, " Hamilton."
[50] Mattingly felt the best analysis of the faith content of the poem was provided by *The Forward* (a progressive Jewish website), who explained the significance of the reference to the prophet Micah in the poem.
Ibid.
[51] Hurley, "Faith in Poetry," 4, 6.
[52] Ibid, 5.

the prophet uses imaginative means to engender hope in an alternative way of life.[53] Davis Hankins, in the foreword to the 40th Anniversary edition published in 2018, states that Brueggemann's work has contributed to an increasing appreciation of the value of non-conceptual content in conveying theological messages.[54] He believes the theory Brueggemann presents remains relevant in the contemporary world, which continues to need imaginative critique and energising.[55] Brueggemann was influenced by the work of Heschel, who expounded on the biblical prophets use of doxology in advocating for freedom and justice. [56] Heschel's seminal work *The Prophets* provides an in-depth study of the Hebrew prophets, highlighting their "essential gifts of creativity and imagination."[57] Referencing the work of Heschel and Brueggemann I will outline how the form and function of Hebrew poetry reveals the hallmarks of prophetic imagination. I will argue, referencing the work of Andrew Winkles, that when these hallmarks are present in contemporary poetry they evidence an authentic expression of prophetic imagination.

Historically poets such as Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton and Klopstock have claimed their works to be instruments of divine revelation.[58] There is therefore what Franke describes as an "inextricable interdependency" between poetic form and divine revelation.[59] David Lonsdale asserts that there have been two trends in understanding this interdependency.[60] One affirms the prophetic character of poetry while the other preferences prophecy, delineating it from poetry.[61]

Prophecy as poetry

Heschel asserts that the experience of inspiration for the prophet and poet are psychologically similar:

> The prophet is a poet. His experience is one known to the poets. What the poets know as poetic inspiration, the prophets call divine revelation……The inspiration of the artist is what is meant by 'the hand of the Lord which rests

[53] Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination, xiii.
[54] Ibid, xv.
[55] Ibid, xvi.
[56] Ibid, 17.
[57] Richard Rohr, "Prophets as Poets," *Center for Action and Contemplation*, accessed April 27, 2024.
[58] Franke, "Poetry, Prophecy."
[59] Ibid.
[60] David Lonsdale, "Prophecy and the poetic word," in *Prophetic Witness and the Reimagining of the World Poetry, Theology and Philosophy in Dialogue – Power of the Word V,* edited by Burrows Mark S., and Hilary Davies and Josephine von Zitzewitz, chap.5, (London and New York: Routledge Studies in Religion, Taylor and Francis, 2021).
[61] Ibid.

> upon the prophet.' …Prophecy is the product of poetic imagination. *Prophecy is poetry...*[62]

It is widely accepted that prophetic scripture is poetry. Franke views poetic form as crucial to theological revelation and regards the prophetic oracles of Isaiah as containing some of "the most sublime poetry ever written."[63] Robert Lowth, in his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews (1787)* highlighted the poetic quality of scripture.[64] As a consequence of Lowth's work, poetic and prophetic inspiration came to be understood as having the same source.[65] Both poetry and prophecy employ, among other devices, imagery, metaphor, musicality and rhythm.[66] However, while the prophets imaginative use of language is poetic in style it does not originate from "emotion recollected in tranquillity" but is rather, "charged with agitation, anguish and a spirit of non-acceptance." [67] Therefore, according to Heschel, the issue in determining the prophetic in poetry is not in the "kinship of imagination" but in the manifestation of the prophetic experience. [68]

Heschel describes the prophet as one who has a burden on his heart for the poor, vulnerable and oppressed. [69] The prophet identifies body and soul with the life of "a whole people" and bears witness to a divine "word" for them. [70] In bearing witness the prophet utilises the poetic medium but the primary focus is not on creating an art form per se: "he is a preacher whose purpose is not self-expression or 'the purgation of emotions,' but communication. His images must not shine, they must burn."[71] Heschel's view preferences prophecy, delineating it from poetry as a whole. The bible itself makes this distinction. Ezekiel complained that his prophecy was dismissed as poetry saying, "Ah, Lord God, they are saying of Me: 'Is he not a maker of allegories?' "(Ezek.20:49)" [72] He declares: "You are like to them like one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it." (Ezek. 33:32) [73] The ambition of the prophet, unlike the poet, is not primarily to compose a work of art.

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[62] Heschel, *Prophets*, 468-469.
[63] Franke, "Poetry, Prophecy."
[64] Heschel, Prophets, 479.
[65] Ibid, 479-480.
[66] Lonsdale, "Poetic word."
[67] Heschel, *Prophets*, 7.
[68] Ibid, 469.
[69] Ibid, 4-5.
[70] Ibid, 7.
[71] Ibid, 8.
[72] Ibid, 494.
[73] Ibid.

Jacques Maritain also distinguished prophecy from poetry in *Art and Scholasticism* (1930).[74] The focus of art is a "natural" one; the poet focuses on writing a poem which has the characteristics of beauty.[75] It may have the capacity to affect the listener but this is not the primary aim of the poet.[76] Conversely, the prophet's main focus is "supernatural"; it is to communicate the word of God for the benefit of the listener.[77] Maritain stated that, "There is only one eternal nourishment …the three divine Persons and the humanity of Christ. It is a deadly error to expect poetry to provide the supernatural nourishment of man." [78] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, like Maritain, was aware that a focus on beauty in theological expression potentially creates a religious "aestheticism," preoccupied with its own beauty rather than the true and convincing beauty of the glory of God.[79] In *The Glory of the Lord* Balthasar considers the concept of beauty in art and how it may enable authentic theological revelation.[80]

Balthasar proposed viewing beauty analogically, considering both humanity's similarity to and dissimilarity from the divine.[81] Central to Balthasar's theological aesthetics is contemplating "the form of God's revelation in Christ and the scriptures." [82] The contemplation of the form of Christ "exactly corresponds to the aesthetic contemplation that steadily and patiently beholds those forms which either nature or art offers to its view." Such beauty will convince, enrapture and be experienced as, "the movement of man's whole being away from himself towards God through Christ."[83] The prophetic experience is, as Maritain asserted, a supernatural one. However, Balthasar's theory of beauty opens the way for art to express divine revelation when the focus of the artist is Christological in nature.

Austin Farrer proposed that prophetic poetry may be discerned from poetry as a genre through considering the approach of the poet. The prophet encounters the poetic image in a process of "divination" in which the message is revealed.[84] The divination of these images, unlike the work of the poet, is governed by the will of God. [85] The prophet does not speak his

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[74] Lonsdale, "Prophets as Poets" in *Poetic Word.*
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Richard Viladesau, "Theology and aesthetics," in *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 28,30.
[80] Ibid, 25.
[81] Ibid, 30.
[82] Ibid, 34.
[83] Ibid, 34-35.
[84] Lonsdale, "Prophets as Poets" in *Poetic Word.*
[85] Ibid.

own words but speaks into the events of history to proclaim, "What the lord declares and requires on the day on which he speaks." [86] Franke argues that poetry has prophetic revelatory power to speak truth into history.[87] From the time of Dante a number of prophetic poets have interpreted history in epic form employing biblical typology.[88] Heschel has asserted that prophetic poetry will resonate with historical prophecy in terms of its imagery and message. He writes that the prophet is to be distinguished by "….the coherence of the inspired messages as a whole (with their constant implication of earlier communications), by the awareness of being a link in the chain of the prophets who preceded him, and by the continuity which links the revelations he receives one to another." [89]

Prophetic poetry may therefore be delineated from poetry as a genre by considering the influence of the prophetic experience. The prophet has a Christological focus and speaks God's truth through divinely inspired images. I will now consider the hallmarks of prophetic imagination within poetry.

Poetry as Prophecy

Brueggemann in *The Prophetic Imagination* describes the function of the prophet based on the role of the Old Testament prophets, initiated by the call of Moses.[90] Moses made a radical break from the exploitive and oppressive regime of Pharaoh's Egypt and established an alternative community based on the freedom of God.[91] Breaking from the "the royal consciousness" of Pharaoh's regime meant asserting an alternative theology which in turn created an alternative sociology, characterised by justice and compassion.[92] According to Brueggemann the prophetic experience entails two key tasks. The first task is "prophetic critique" of the "royal consciousness."[93] The "royal consciousness," or "Totalism" as Brueggemann has updated it to, is the socio-ideological position which dominates social space and does not allow for an alternative possibility.[94] The prophet seeks to nurture an alternative consciousness by rejecting the present socio-ideological position.[95] In so doing the prophet

[86] Ibid.
[87] Franke, "Poetry, Prophecy."
[88] Ibid.
[89] Heschel, *Prophets,* 497.
[90] Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination, 5.
[91] Ibid, 5-6.
[92] Ibid 9.
[93] Ibid 11.
[94] Ibid 127.
[95] Ibid 3.

does not ask, "Is this viable?" but rather, "Is this imaginable?"[96] This use of imagination frightens totalitarian regimes, making them wary of the artist.[97] The prophets of Israel intuited that imagination preceded any implementation of change.[98] Employing meaningful symbols and metaphors linked to their redemptive past, such as the Exodus, counteracted the numbness engendered from suffering under an oppressive regime and released the passion of lament.[99] Such resistance through truth telling is subversive and destabilises the dominant power.[100]

The second task of the prophetic experience is "prophetic energising."[101] The prophet brings to expression new realities based on what has been promised.[102] It is a confident assertion that "something is at work in the darkness."[103] This hopefulness breaks through the despair experienced by those who find themselves excluded from the "royal prosperity."[104] The prophet utilises symbols of hope, which like those which enable lament, are taken from the deepest memories of the community.[105] The poetic language used powerfully displays, "how singularly words, speech, language and phrase shape consciousness and define reality."[106] The promises of the "one who is for us," a theological hope, must be articulated lyrically in order to touch those without hope.[107]

Brueggemann suggests this energising hope is lyrically communicated via Doxology, citing the example of the Song of the Sea (Ex 15-18, 21.)[108] The Song of the Sea is one of prophecy's long-standing connections to poetry.[109] Brueggemann notes that:

> It comes at the culmination of the inscrutable emancipation from Pharaoh's brutal slavery. The Exodus narrative begins with the "cry and groan" of the slaves (Ex. 2:23-24). Now it ends in a celebrative dance of freedom as the women articulate with their bodies what it feels like to be out from under the insatiable brick quota of Pharaoh.[110]

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[96] Ibid 39.
[97] Ibid 40.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid 41, 44-45.
[100] Walter Brueggemann, "An Indispensable Upstream word: The Gift of Prophecy," Reflections, accessed April 27, 2024.
[101] Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination, 4 .
[102] Ibid, 14.
[103] Ibid, 15.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid, 64.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid, 65.
[108] Ibid, 16.
[109] Ibid, 24.
[110] Walter Brueggemann, "The Conditions from which the Poems Arose," *Churchanew*, accessed April 27, 2024.

Its form is that of a traditional victory song sung by women dancing and playing drums.[111] Gerald Janzen asserts that Miriam and the dancing women led the celebration in a hymnic pattern, with Moses and the children of Israel responding antiphonally.[112] It exhibits parallel structures typical of Hebrew poetry and was written in a format appropriate for large gatherings, where a call and response structure would be followed:[113]

> Your right hand, O lord,
> Was majestic in power.
> Your right hand, O Lord,
> Shattered the enemy. (Ex 15:6)[114]

Janzen regards the form as liturgical, making comparisons with Psalm 40:2-4 , as both texts share the corresponding elements of a cry to God, God's saving response, the celebration of deliverance and the effect on those who hear this praise of God.[115] The energy of the doxology of the Song of the Sea is founded upon speaking God's name and claiming a new place for the community to dwell.[116] It tells an inverted history in which the dominant power is de-stabilized.[117] Miriam lyrically communicates the message that God intervenes in specific historical contexts to bring justice and freedom.[118] Janzen concludes it is Miriam's singing of the song which gives "redemption its revelatory voice."[119] The song is not just a response of praise but the act of participation is part of the continuing deliverance, "the song which arises in the throat is experienced by the singer as part of the very energy of deliverance that is the action of God…Thus the meaning of the event is disclosed in the language of response that the event evokes."[120] It is the liturgical aspect of the event which enables the Israelites to understand its meaning.[121] It is in singing the song that they "appropriate the freedom of God

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[111] Carol Meyers, "Miriam's Song of the Sea; a Women's Victory Performance," *the torah.com*, accessed April 27, 2024.
[112] Gerald Janzen outlines the debate surrounding authorship of The Song of the Sea and concurs with the view that authorship should be attributed to Miriam rather than Moses. See J. Gerald Janzen, "Song of Moses, Song of Miriam: Who is seconding Whom?," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly,* 54, no. 2 (April 1992): 213-216. On the other hand, Brueggemann attributes the Song of the Sea to Moses but acknowledges the academic debate regarding authorship. Brueggemann *Prophetic Imagination,* 17
[113] Andrew O. Winckles, "The Prophetic Imagination of P.B Shelley," (master's thesis, Eastern Michigan University, 2009), 24.
[114] Ibid, 25.
[115] Janzen, "Song of Moses," 216-217.
[116] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 17.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Brueggemann, "Poems Arose."
[119] Janzen, "Song of Moses," 219.
[120] Ibid, 217.
[121] Ibid, 218.

as their own freedom."[122] Heschel regards doxology as "the last full act of human freedom and justice."[123] Brueggemann notes that "prophecy cannot be separated very long from doxology, or it will either wither or become ideology."[124] The work of Heschel and Brueggemann highlights the importance of poetic form in the prophetic task. Analysing prophetic imagination in poetry therefore requires an analysis of both its form and function.

Poetic Form and Language

Lowth first described the unique form of Hebrew poetry and his work is still considered a "ground-breaking and incisive analysis."[125] He identified the device of "parallelism" where one line answers to another within the structure of the poem.[126] This may be in a synonymous form where the same idea is repeated in "equivalent terms," as in Hosea 11:8:

> How shall I resign thee , O Ephraim
> How shall I deliver thee up, O Israel!
> How shall I resign thee as Admah!
> How shall I make THEE as Zeboim![127]

Lowth also identified antithetical parallelism where an idea in one line is opposed by an idea in the next line e.g. Isaiah 54:7-8:

> In a **little anger** have I forsaken thee;
> But with **great mer**cies will I receive thee again:
> In a **short wrath** I hid my face for a moment from thee:
> But with **everlasting kindness** will I have mercy on thee.[128] (Emphasis added)

A third more abstractly defined form of parallelism is synthetic or constructive parallelism, which serves to describe sentences answering to each other in forms not covered by the other types of parallelism.[129] The parallelistic structure of Hebrew poetry imbues it with a musical quality as it was written like a chant and structured in a call and response manner.[130] Lowth also identified the style as "parabolic," abounding in the use of imagery, metaphor and allegory which had an established meaning for the listener.[131]

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[122] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 16.
[123] Ibid, 6.
[124] Ibid, 17.
[125] Winckles, "Shelley," 30.
[126] Ibid, 31.
[127] Ibid, 32.
[128] Ibid, 33 (my emphasis.)
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid, 38.
[131] Ibid,3 4-35.

Poetic language has the power to transform the listener. Heschel describes the prophet as an "assaulter of the mind" whose words penetrate the conscience. [132] Terence Hoagwood in *Prophecy and the Philosophy of Mind* asserts that the radicalism of biblical prophecy, "provides a glimpse of how prophetic poetry, through the use of images and symbols, can begin to enact a real revolution of ideas that spill out into the world at large."[133] William Benjamin, writing on the power of language, expresses that a "magical spark (can) spring between word and action."[134] His essay, *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, draws connections between language, naming and action.[135] He regards naming as a creative act with mystical power.[136] The act of creation was a linguistic act and for Benjamin it is a metaphor for how linguistic expression becomes reality. [137] God spoke, made and then named; it is the naming that designates the full expression of being. [138] Creation was complete when man was given the gift of language. [139] Benjamin does not imply that man has the same creative power as God but does suggest that language has the power to affect reality. [140]

Franke describes poetry as having a "marked language." [141] Sound effects within poetry give it a sense markedly different from everyday speech, implying it is to be understood differently.[142] Its meaning is not to be discerned from the concrete world before our eyes but in the unseen things evoked by poetic language.[143] Metaphor conveys a "secret language" and the use of rhyme fuses words together suggesting new meaningful connections.[144] This phenomena of poetry, described in 1744 by Giamattista Vico as "poetic logic," followed a tradition from Dante which understood poetry as a divine art for the expression of theological knowledge beyond rational knowledge.[145] Dante, Boethius and Milton all developed a unique poetic form suited to expressing their individual theological themes. [146] Hurley asserts that theological revelation in poetry has been governed not just by religious conviction but through

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[132] Heschel, *Prophets,* 12.
[133] Winckles, "Shelley," 17.
[134] Ibid, 45. (my emphasis.)
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid, 47.
[139] Ibid, 47-48.
[140] Ibid, 47.
[141] Franke, "Poetry, Prophecy."
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Hurley, "Faith in Poetry," 3.

an awareness of the power of poetic form and having "the artistry to wield it."[147] The work of Robert Alter, writing in 2011, has reinforced to the contemporary world how the form and language of Hebrew poetry is suited to divine revelation.[148] Alter particularly emphasizes the power of metaphor, symbolism and myth to create diverse and complex meanings in prophetic poetry.[149] These poetic features alongside the rhythm, musicality, and sound connections within poetry make it a more effective medium than prose for the prophet to cast his vision and claim to be "God talking."[150]

A Framework for the Analysis of Prophetic Imagination in Poetry

Having considered that prophecy is poetry and how poetry *may* be considered prophetic, I will now outline how this framework may be usefully applied contemporarily from the work of Winckles. Winckles considers how Shelley's work fulfils the two key prophetic functions outlined by Brueggemann, critiquing and energising.[151] His critique focuses on how Shelley's poetry is tied to the historical reality of his day.[152] He also gives consideration to the parabolic form of Shelley's poetry (with some consideration given to parallelistic structure, specifically in *The Mask Of Anarchy.*)[153]

Winckles notes that much of Shelley's prophetic poetry has a similar structure to Hebrew poetry, in that it describes the injustice of the status quo and then moves to a vision of hope. [154] He applies his framework of analysis to *Prometheus Unbound, Mask of Anarchy* and *Queen Mab*. I will focus on his critique of *Queen Mab* for the purposes of outlining his approach. Winckles points out that the style of Shelley's poetry is parabolic as it uses extensive imagery to describe events.[155] *Queen Mab* is a prophetic vision of society where images of past crumbling civilizations are used to signify the path England is on, as a result of injustice and greed.[156] Winckles identifies how Shelley critiques the dominant power of his day, casting "the fairy Mab" in the role of the prophet who awakens the spirit Ianthe from slumber to instruct her on the realities of the world.[157] Shelley critiques the church's alignment with the powers of

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147 Ibid,2.
148 Lonsdale, "Prophets as Poets" in *Poetic Word.*
149 Ibid.
150 Ibid.
151 Winckles, "Shelley," 5.
152 Ibid, 11.
153 Ibid, 38.
154 Ibid, 42.
155 Ibid.
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid, 58.

the day in oppressing the people: "War is the statesman game, the priest's delight/The lawyer's jest/ the hired assassin's trade."[158] He critiques the economic system of the industrial revolution: "Commerce has set the mark of selfishness/The signet of its all enslaving power/Upon as shining ore, and called it gold:."[159] He addresses, as he did in his " Defence of Poetry," the effect capitalism has had on the poor: "Whose life is misery, and fear, and care;/Whom morn wakens but to fruitless toil;."[160]

Winckles identifies Shelley's themes as prophetic, as they reflect the themes addressed in critiquing the "royal consciousness," as outlined by Brueggemann.[161] He notes how Shelley had a deep awareness of his own historicity and his prophetic function within it.[162] His concern for economic injustice aligns with the main concerns of the Old Testament prophets.[163] Shelley believed poetry had the power to move within history to effect change.[164] In his *Defence of Poetry* he described poets as "prophets and legislators."[165]

The second half of *Queen Mab* offers a doxology of hope.[166] Having exposed the "dominant consciousness" a community of resistance is formed and the spirit Ianthe asks, " Is there no hope in store?"[167] Mab responds, "How sweet a scene will earth become!" and envisions a new day when nature and humanity will be restored.[168] Imagery is used to convey a hopeful vision, the book of Revelation being referenced:

> The Lion now forgets to thirst for blood:
> There might you see him sporting in the sun
> Beside the dreadless kid; his claws are sheathed,
> His teeth are harmless, custom's force has made
> His nature as the nature of a lamb.[169]

Winckles identifies this vision as prophetically energising, noting that while it could be criticised as idealistic and impractical, prophetic vision looks confidently to the day when this

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[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid, 59.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid, 78.
[163] Ibid, 87.
[164] Ibid, 92.
[165] Quoted in Winckles, "Shelley," 92.
[166] Ibid, 61.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid, 43.

hope will be realised.[170] Winckles also identifies the extensive use of Christological imagery in *Prometheus Unbound,* noting that while Shelley critiqued the established church, his essay *On Christianity* evidences a profound respect for the doctrines of Christ and the influence of Christ's teaching on his political views.[171]

Winckle's approach to analysing prophetic imagination in the work of Shelley will be drawn on to critique *The Hill We Climb.* Brueggemann's theory will be applied in considering how the form of the poem critiques contemporary American society while providing a hopeful vision of the future. Hurley acknowledges that the contemporary world has a lack of confidence in poetry as theological expression. [172] From the 19th Century philosophical and scientific thought has undermined the acceptance of theology in poetry. [173] Hurley overcomes this prejudice by using a revisionist approach to contemporarily analysing the work of the Romantic poets as modes of theology. He approaches these poets by considering their individual poetic styles and asking how they, "reflect and are inflected by their separate religious faiths." [174] This approach will be applied to analysing the use of prophetic imagination in Gorman's poem. The next chapter will consider the form and function of the spoken word genre chosen by Gorman and how its characteristics may be suited to theological expression. Contemporary spoken word poetry is rooted in a tradition which, as Robert Cataliotti asserts, has provided: "a way of remembering, a way of enduring, a way of mourning, a way of celebrating, a way of protesting and subverting, and ultimately, a way of triumphing.' [175] This suggests a prophetic role for the genre characteristic of that described by Brueggemann and Heschel.

Part 2 The Spoken Word Genre and Prophetic Imagination

This section will demonstrate that Gorman's choice of spoken word was apt for the function of prophetic critique and energising, as defined by Heschel and Brueggemann. The work of a number of contemporary researchers in the field of spoken word will be referenced. Their work traces the evolution of the genre from the African oral tradition to the contemporary spoken word scene, considers it's form and function and highlights how its characteristics align with those of Hebrew prophetic poetry, enabling it to be a vehicle for prophetic expression.

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[170] Ibid, 63.
[171] Ibid, 96.
[172] Hurley, "Faith in poetry," 4.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Ibid, 5.
[175] "Say it Loud: African Spoken Word," Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, accessed October 20, 2021.

The Development of Spoken Word

Joanne Gabin presents an overview of African-American poetry from the time of slavery to the end of the twentieth century. [176] She describes the genre as a "furious flower," appropriating a metaphor from Gwendolyn Brooks poem *The Second Sermon on the Warpland* (1968), to signify both its radical and aesthetic nature: *The time/cracks into furious flower. Lifts its face/all ashamed. And sways in wicked grace.*[177] She regards African-American poetry as "the aesthetic chronicle of a race…struggling "to lift its face all unashamed."[178]

Gabin situates spoken word poetry in a long tradition of poetry associated with the political struggle for Black liberation and inclusion.[179] The tradition developed from a diversity of verbal art forms which served as a "vessel for remembrance" throughout slavery, maintaining the African identity and resisting oppression.[180] They were performed to motivate the subsequent struggle for freedom.[181] Gabin asserts that contemporary African-American poets represent a "third renaissance" of black poetry.[182] The first was the "New Negro Renaissance " of the 1920's which saw a "flowering" of poetry from African-American authors such as Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnston and Claude McKay.[183] Their poems expressed a new self-determination, reflecting a greater exploration of the language and voice of the black vernacular, combined with the musicality of jazz and blues.[184] Gabin identifies the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's, inspired by the assassination of Malcolm X, as the second "furious flowering" of African-American poetry.[185] Poets emerging at this time had a revolutionary vision of Black liberation.[186] Most notable among them were Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal and Askia Muhammad Touré. [187] Touré, reflecting on the movement, described it as, "the largest cultural upsurge that our people have had in this century." [188] Gabin notes that the poets she identifies as part of the contemporary "third renaissance" in African-American poetry, such as Ras Baraka, Kevin Powell and Esther Everem, are revisiting the ideals of the

[176] Gabin, "Furious Flower," Introduction.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid, "Roots in Liberation."
[180] "Say it Loud."
[181] Ibid.
[182] Gabin, "Furious Flower," Furious Flower.
[183] Ibid, "New Negro Renaissance."
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid, "Furious Flower."
[186] Ibid.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid

Black Arts Movement "in the language of hip-hop" and are thus placing themselves in "the tradition of struggle that they see as artistic, political, spiritual and psychological."[189] She refers again to the words of *The Second Sermon on the Warpland, " It is lonesome, yes/ For we are the last of the loud./Nevertheless, live./Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind./*" [190] Gabin suggests this new generation of poets are blooming "in the noise and whip of the whirlwind" saying: "After 250 years of African American poetry, these young poets are 'the last of the loud', ferocious in their call for humanism and beautiful in their response to the magic and music of language." [191] A clear parallel can be drawn between the approach of these contemporary poets whose "furious flowering" uses powerful language to call for justice and with the Hebrew prophets described by Heschel who "feel fiercely" for the oppressed and whose images "burn." Their work fulfils a prophetic function rather than being "art for art's sake."

African-American Poetry and the Bible

Gabin's review of African-American poetry details how the art form has been historically linked to Black liberation and self-expression but she does not reflect on the theological influence on the tradition. Conversely, Katherine Clay Blassard states that the profound influence of the bible on African-American literature from the days of slavery is "axiomatic," following the publication in 2000 of Vincent L Wimbush's *African Americans and the Bible.*[192] Blassard believes the endurance of this biblical influence among contemporary African-American writers is remarkable. [193] She notes that for writers such as Toni Morrison, Edward P. Jones and James McBride the bible acts as a linguistic, imagistic, and cultural resource.[194]

Wimbush states that it was in the late eighteenth century that African Americans first embraced the bible for themselves. [195] The text was a source of power and hope and a offered a "veiled criticism" of the religion of the white slaveholders. [196] As an enslaved people the

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[189] Ibid.
[190]Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Second Sermon on the Warpland," *Better Blackness* website, accessed April 27, 2024.
[191] Gabin, "Furious flower."
[192] Blassard, "Neo-Slave Narrative," 159.
[193] Ibid, 160.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Vincent L. Wimbush, "The Bible and African-American Culture," *in Encyclopedia of African American History and Culture,* vol 1. (New York :McMillan Library Reference, 1995), 315.
[196] Ibid.

narrative of the Exodus and the socio-political concerns of the Hebrew prophets resonated.[197] Engagement with the bible brought some respite from the suffering of slavery and developed the identity of an "African-American religious self."[198] African Americans appropriated biblical typology, most prominently the Exodus myth, in their art forms as a prophetic critique of their enslaved position. This, according to Lauri Ramey's research, is reflected in the lyrical and theological content of the negro spirituals.[199] Ramey's research demonstrates how the function and form of the spirituals align with that of Hebrew prophetic poetry. She concludes that they belong in the ancient tradition of poetry used for theological expression.[200]

Ramey argues that the spirituals should rightfully be considered as lyrical poetry rather than as folksongs or mere imitations of "white Protestant" hymns, as some have suggested.[201] The basis of her argument is their theological content and how this is integrated with a novel use of metaphorical structure.[202] While the spirituals draw on themes similar to white Protestant hymns, Ramey argues that they can be differentiated as they focus almost exclusively on the Hebrew scriptures, particularly the Exodus as a symbol of deliverance from bondage.[203] Fewer New Testament references are employed and they tend to focus on the suffering of Jesus and the redemption offered.[204] The imagery used therefore focused on the general theme of overcoming tribulation.[205]

Ramey identifies a unique use of "free floating imagery" in the spirituals which she links to the African perspective on time.[206] Past, present and future are deeply connected in the African consciousness.[207] Events and experiences are linked regardless of chronology.[208] In the spirituals this is reflected in a use of imagery and metaphor which "flies" through the Old and New testaments, unbounded by time and space, "lifting" people from slavery and offering hope for the future through the power of imagination.[209] The "disjunction" or "disanalogy"

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[197] Ibid.
[198] Ibid, 316.
[199] Lauri Ramey, " The Theology of the Lyric Tradition in African American Spirituals, " *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70, no. 2 (June 2002): 354.
[200] Ibid.
[201] Ibid, 350.
[202] Ibid, 347.
[203] Ibid, 350-351.
[204] Ibid, 351.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid, 352, 355.
[207] Ibid, 352.
[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid, 352, 355.

between events metaphorically compared in the spirituals creates novel meaning.[210] Ramey offers "Oh Mary, Don't you Weep, don't You Moan,," typical of a number of other spirituals, as an example.[211] The refrain *"Oh Mary, don't you weep, don't you moan/Pharaoh's army got drownded"* compares two dissimilar events. In the poem it functions as a creative metaphor for the comfort of God signifying his power.[212] The inclusion of Mary creates a more expansive metaphor than freedom from slavery.[213] The poem creates connections between the Exodus, Mary at the death of Jesus and the present bondage, linking them with divine deliverance and "The Promised Land" as a symbol of freedom from slavery.[214] The second stanza of *Mary Don't you Weep, Don't you Moan* envisions the ultimate Christian deliverance alongside the story of Hebrew deliverance, *One of dese mornings, bright and fair/ Take my wings and cleave de air/Pharaoh's army got drownded/Oh Mary don't you weep.* Ramey argues that these metaphorical blends evidence how slave poets were able to transcend their physical circumstances by imaginative means.[215]

Such creative metaphors were also acts of political insurgency, obliquely critiquing the slave holders' ethical conduct.[216] This suggests a prophetic role for the spirituals, in the tradition of the Hebrew scripture model, through critiquing the dominant power and imagining a more hopeful future.[217] The refrain "*Oh Mary, don't you weep, don't you moan/Pharaoh's army got drownded"* is typical of a "call and response" structure found in the spirituals, reflecting the communal living and working of the slaves. [218] Creating and singing the spirituals gave the slaves a forum for resistance and the "power of naming one's own reality" through language.[219] Ramey finds evidence in the spirituals of an "African American constitution of communal selfhood and a liberative theology." [220] The powerful imagery and call and response structure of the spirituals aligns with the parabolic nature and parallelistic form of Hebrew poetry identified by Lowth.

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[210] Ibid, 356.
[211] Ibid, 357.
[212] Ibid, 360.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid, 357-358.
[215] Ibid, 361.
[216] Ibid, 358.
[217] Ibid, 359.
[218] Ibid, 353.
[219] Ibid, 354.
[220] Ibid.

Clearly, as Wimbush's work asserts, the bible has had a profound influence on African-American identity and culture. From the end of slavery through to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 60's, the bible provided "the language and concepts of social and prophetic critique" in the fight for inclusion, peace and economic equality.[221] By the early decades of the twentieth century Wimbush notes that not all African Americans embraced this dominant biblical tradition. As a diverse group not all accepted this scriptural interpretation nor indeed did they all accept the canon of scripture.[222] However Wimbush asserts that the bible laid the blueprint for social reform within the African-American community.[223]

Contemporary Spoken Word in a Socio-Political Context

The potential of spoken word poetry to effect social reform has been researched by Valerie Chepp. Chepp's ethnographic research gathered data from a diverse range of contemporary spoken word artists in a range of settings, including open-mic, Slam competitions and poetry workshops.[224] She identified nine characteristics in the genre from the African-American oral tradition and used this data to form a typology. She asserts that this typology aids the understanding of the form and function of contemporary African-American spoken word poetry.[225] The typology is clustered around three main interrelating themes of cultural object, cultural audience and cultural process.[226] Cultural object characteristics describe the performance nature of the poem which describes a real lived experience and is often improvised.[227] The cultural audience characteristics describe how the poem is designed to be accessible to and engage an "everyday audience."[228] The cultural process describes the pedagogical nature of the performance and the importance of handing on a tradition of being part of a creative process which has the power to teach, inspire and raise consciousness.[229] Chepp concludes that contemporary spoken word poets, following in the African-American oral tradition, are engaging in "creative politics" within their performance communities by offering social critique and advocating for social change through poetry.[230] Chike Okoye and Stella Okoye-Ugwu, researched the characteristics of the oral tradition found in contemporary

[221] Wimbush, "Bible and African-American," 316.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Chepp, "Public Knowledge," 228 .
[225] Ibid, 228-229.
[226] Ibid, 229.
[227] Ibid, 230-233.
[228] Ibid, 234-236.
[229] Ibid, 237-240.
[230] Ibid, 241-242.

spoken word poetry in the context of post-colonial Nigeria, by reviewing the work of two well established Nigerian poets, Dike Chukwumerije and Deji Ige.[231] They concluded that the presence of characteristics from the oral tradition gave contemporary spoken word poetry political agency, "fitting for the malaise of the post colony." [232]

Consensus in the research findings of Chepp and Okoye and Okoye-Ugwu into characteristics of the African-American oral tradition found in contemporary spoken word poetry, suggest it is a powerful medium for raising social consciousness and inspiring change. The oral tradition is based on the idea of "Nommo," an African cultural belief in "the magic power of the Word." [233] Along with the elements of water, heat and seed, "Word" is "life force itself." [234] Seamus Heaney described this power as, "the redress of poetry." [235] Like Gorman in the contemporary context in America, Heaney found himself in a divided country in the context of Northern Ireland from 1969 onwards, through the course of the "Troubles."[236] Heaney recognised that poets faced a tension between "Art and Life," and had to work out how "to survive amphibiously in the realm of 'the times' and the realm of their moral and artistic self-respect."[237] In Heaney's political context he realised the challenge was not just writing good poetry, what he described as a "satisfactory verbal icon," but it was "a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament."[238] His aim was to use the vehicle of poetry as "a field of force'' to speak with reason into a complex political and religious divide.[239] Heaney asserted that poetry, in using "images and symbols adequate to our predicament," had the capacity to offer "redress'' by offering a "glimpsed alternative" and "a revelation of potential," saying:

These poetic fictions work against the grain of the present and hold out hope for redress for what is oppressive, unjust, venal, or destructive in the current situation. Thus poetry offers a response to reality which has a liberating and verifying effect upon the individual spirit.[240]

There is a prophetic function in what Heaney describes: calling out what is evil in society and offering a life-affirming alternative. It is for Heaney a secularized perspective

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[231] Chike Okoye and Stella Okoye-Ugwu, "From minstrelsy to the spoken word poet: Oral tradition and postcolonial Nigeria," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 8, no.1 (June 2021), especially section 3, "Theoretical framework and methodology."
[232]Ibid, "From minstrelsy," Conclusion.
[233] Stoudamire, "Rhetoric and Stylistics," 58.
[234] Ibid, 59.
[235] Lonsdale, "Seamus Heaney: prophecy and the 'redress of poetry'" in *Poetic Word*.
[236] Ibid.
[237] Ibid.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Ibid.
[240] Ibid.

grounded on "perspectives of humane reason" rather than the word of God as proclaimed by the biblical prophets or the prophetic poets of the Romantic age such as Blake or Shelley.[241] Gabin's review of African-American poetry and the research of Chepp and Okoye and Okoye-Ugwu suggests much contemporary spoken word poetry has a secular prophetic voice. However, as its history is tied to a biblical appropriation of themes, imagery and form it is a natural medium for prophetic imagination in the theological sense, as described by Heschel and Brueggemann.

Function and Form of Spoken Word

The work of Chepp, Okoye and Okoye-Ugwu and others has contributed to a greater understanding of the function and form and of contemporary spoken word. Okoye and Okoye-Ugwu have developed a novel framework for describing spoken word poetry.[242] Their framework is built on the premise that spoken word poetry is akin to a theatrical performance and so the aesthetics of sound, accompanying gesticulations and the effective expression of deep feelings are key elements.[243]

Okoye and Okoye-Ugwu's framework, termed "praxi-phonoaesthetics," describes both the practice (praxis) and the delivery (sound) of a spoken word poem.[244] The "praxi" element describes the poem's themes, its affective use of language and its performance features (e.g. accompanying hand and body movements).[245] The "phonoaesthetics" element describes the use of sound in the poem, as conveyed through use of rhyme, rhythm, cadence and vocal inflection.[246] An effective spoken word poem will have a good combination of message and delivery.[247] The "praxi-phonoaesthetics" framework is based on only two, albeit well-established, Nigerian poets. There are other important features in the tradition of spoken word poetry which Okoye and Okoye-Ugwu do not explicitly highlight, such as the prevalent use of metaphor and word play. These elements do however align with their broad categories and may logically be subsumed under them. Combining the "Praxis-Phonoaesthetic" framework with some of the characteristic features of spoken word poetry described by Chepp and Shawnkeisha

[241] Ibid.
[242] Okoye and Okoye-Ugwu, "Theoretical Framework and Methdology" in "From Minstrelsy."
[243] Ibid, "Concepts and Literatures."
[244] Ibid, "Theoretical framework and methodology."
[245] Ibid.
[246] Ibid.
[247] Ibid.

Stoudamire provides a more comprehensive and explicit framework for analysing spoken word poetry.

Stoudamire, in researching the connection between the African-American oral tradition and contemporary slam poetry, describes two of the most important communicative strategies as signifying and tonal semantics.[248] Signifying relates to the message of the poem and tonal semantics to its sound.[249] Stoudamires's analysis therefore aligns with Okoye and Okoye-Ugwu's "praxi-phonoaesthetics" framework. Signifying is the use of a reference to a previous speech, act or text which is used in a different way by a poet or writer. [250] The term signifying, from the African-American tradition, aligns with the literary critical term of *allusion,* "a reference to a person, event, or literary work outside the poem."[251] However, it also includes indirect encoded messages which have a rhetorical function, "signifying" on society regarding the struggles faced by the African-American community, by appropriating allusions meaningful to that community. [252] Chepp in describing the poem as a "cultural object" outlines the typical use of allusion, metaphor, word play, syntax play and repetition in the genre.[253] These devices may be used to signify as they are used to embed messages in the poem. The embedded message evokes vivid imagery. [254] In so doing they engage in the "cultural process" described by Chepp, providing critique of society as the Hebrew prophets did. The use of powerful imagistic language for this purpose also aligns with the parabolic style of the Hebrew prophets identified by Lowth. Specific features typical of the spoken word tradition such as use of allusion, signifying, metaphor, word play and imagery may be considered within Okoye and Okoye-Ugwu's broad praxis descriptor of "language use."

The phonoaesthetics element described by Okoye and Okoye-Ugwu, which focuses on the vocal delivery of the poem, aligns with Stoudamire's description of the use of "tonal semantics" in the spoken word tradition.[255] The term "tonal semantics" was described by Geneva Smitherman as "the use of voice rhythm and vocal inflection to convey meaning in

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[248] Stoudamire, "Rhetoric and Stylistics," 59.
[249] Ibid, 59,61.
[250] Ibid, 59.
[251] "Glossary of Poetic Terms," *The Academy of American Poets* website, accessed April 27, 2024.
[252] Stoudamire, "Rhetoric and Stylistics," 59-60.
[253] Chepp, " Public Knowledge," 231-232 .
[254] Chukwuma Ajakah, "Spoken word poets as griots of Africa's cultural heritage," *Vanguard*, accessed April 27, 2024.
[255] Stoudamire, "Rhetoric and Stylistics," 60.

black communication."[256] Alliteration also features.[257] Stoudamire specifies one important aspect of tonal semantics, "intonational contouring," which is the specific use of stress and changes in vocal pitch to convey meaning.[258] It can also involve a change of pace, use of pausing or running one line into the next.[259] The combination of a literary and musical heritage from traditional art forms gives spoken word musicality.[260] The form of the poem engages the "cultural audience" through making the language accessible and the call and response structure encourages participation.[261] There are similarities with the Hebrew poetic device of parallelism which creates a call and response structure.

Combining the characteristics of the "Praxis-Phonoaesthetic" Framework with Chepp's typology, Stoudamire's research and additional features noted on the Smithsonian Folkways platform provide a comprehensive framework for analysing the form and function of spoken word poetry.[262] These findings have been synthesised and presented in Appendix 1, showing how the form and function of spoken word poetry aligns with the characteristics of Hebrew prophetic poetry described above. The parabolic style of Hebrew prophetic poetry, which aligns with the "signifying" function of spoken word, is achieved through allusion, imagery, metaphor and word play. Spoken word poetic devices such as repetition, syntax play and call and response style align with the device of parallelism in Hebrew poetry.

As has been discussed, spoken word is rooted in a long history of activism which has engaged in socio-political critique and offered hope to the African-American community in particular. As a genre its form and function have been shown to align with the characteristics of Hebrew prophetic poetry, enabling it to be a medium for expressions of prophetic imagination. Hurley has said that if a poem is to perform as an effective mode of theology the poet must find a form commensurate with the message to be expressed.[263] Writing in 2018, Brueggemann passionately asserted the need for prophetic imagination in contemporary American society to counteract the "Totalism" of the "Make America Great Again" mantra, with its "racist accents and an uncritical embrace of the exceptionalism of 'the American

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[256] Ibid.
[257] "Say it Loud." (See footnote 175).
[258] Stoudamire, "Rhetoric and Stylistics," 60.
[259] Ibid.
[260] "Say it Loud: From the Pulpit to the Street."
[261] Chepp, " Public Knowledge," 234-235.
[262] Not all of these characteristics will be found in every spoken word performance, nor are they all unique to African-American spoken word traditions, Chepp, "Public Knowledge," 229.
[263] Hurley, "Faith in Poetry," 3,4.

Dream'."[264] In performing a spoken word poem Gorman chose a form commensurate with the message she wanted to express; a critique of division but inspiring hope of unity.[265] As a young Black woman the choice of genre was personally authentic, reflecting her tradition, her generation and her faith background. *The Hill We Climb* is therefore a fitting choice for reflecting on the agency of theological expression in contemporary poetry. In the next chapter I will evidence how the choice of the spoken word genre enabled Gorman to "reflect and inflect" her theological message.

Part 3 Prophetic imagination in The Hill We Climb

The Hill We Climb is a theologically rooted poem. Its themes of justice, peace and unity resonate with those of the Hebrew prophets, most notably Micah. Kuhrt asserts that, "the whole concept of *The Hill We Climb* is connected to Micah's vision of a diverse people who climb the "mountain of the Lord" seeking justice and peace." [266] Gorman fuses biblical metaphors and imagery with historical and literary allusions signifying the struggle for equality, in order to critique the values of contemporary American society and inspire hope for justice and unity. In so doing she exhibits prophetic imagination, conveying a message which both addresses and transcends the political polarisation of the poem's context.

Gorman as Prophet

Gorman's experience of writing *The Hill We Climb* bears the hallmarks of a prophetic approach. She explains that she did not flinch from truth telling but at the same time she was trying to present an imagined alternative which would bring healing:

> In my poem, I'm not going to gloss over what we've seen over the past few weeks and, dare I say, the past few years. But what I really aspire to do in the poem is to be able to use my words to envision a way in which our country can still come to-gether and can still heal…It's doing that in a way that is not erasing or neglecting the harsh truths that I think America needs to reconcile with.[267]

Gorman's awareness of the necessity for truth telling, lamenting of past hurts and the re-imagining of a better alternative are the markers of a prophetic intent, as identified by Brueggemann.[268] In speaking into the politically-fractured and violent context of the

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[264] Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination, 131.
[265] King and McGaskill, "The political roots."
[266] Kuhrt, "New expression."
[267] Quoted in Alter, "Capture the Moment."
[268] Brueggemann, "*Prophetic Imagination*," 5-15.

inauguration ceremony Gorman showed an awareness of and concern for her own historicity, similar to that shown by Shelley. As noted in the introduction, concern for themes of oppression and injustice, as for the Hebrew prophets, is the primary motivation for her work. Like Heaney in a divided Ireland, poetry is a medium of redress for Gorman, rather than being primarily an artistic expression. She therefore be regarded as one who "feels fiercely" for the plight of man, fitting with Heschel 's description of a prophet.

Poetic Form and Prophetic Critique

Stephen Dooner provides an in-depth literary critique of the poem and his work will be referenced here alongside commentary from other online platforms. As a spoken word poem Gorman's 'performance' and how it enhanced the poem's message will be highlighted. Seth Perlow writes that " Gorman distinguished herself by performing with remarkable dynamism and grace….Her delivery made poetry a more vital, stirring part of the ceremony than it usually is."[269]

Dooner's critique highlights a number of poetic devices used which are typologically associated with contemporary spoken word. Praxis features such as allusion, metaphor, imagery, syntax play, repetition and word play are employed alongside the phono-aesthetic features of rhyme, alliteration, repetition, stress, pausing and enjambement.[270] Many of these features, as discussed, align with the parabolic nature and parallel structure of Hebrew poetry. Dooner illuminates how these devices communicate Gorman's themes of justice and hope.[271]

The themes running throughout the poem resonate with Hebrew scriptural themes. Kuhrt asserts that in the opening lines Gorman addresses contemporary injustice, just as Micah in his time spoke against institutionalised violence, corruption and how the "powerful dictate what they desire " in Micah7:3. [272]

> When day comes we ask ourselves:
> Where can we find light
> In this never-ending sh**ade**?
> The loss we carry, a sea we must w**ade**.[273] (Emphasis added)

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[269] Seth Perlow, "What made Amanda Gorman's poem so much better than other inaugural verse," The Washington *Post*, accessed April 27, 2024.
[270] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 10:43- 45:47.
[271] Dooner offers some theological insights but primarily critiques the poem form a literary perspective.
[272] Kuhrt, "Hill we Climb."
[273] Amanda Gorman, "The Hill We Climb," January 20, 2021. The text is widely available online; see, for instance, https://thehill.com/homenews/news/535052-read-transcript-of-amanda-gormans-inaugural-poem/, as are videos of the performance. See, for instance, https://www.ted.com/talks/amanda_gorman_the_hill_we_climb. The emphasis is mine.

Rohr observes that the poem begins in the style of the psalms of lamentation.[274] Gorman offers lament for injustice through contrasting imagery of light and darkness, conveying the fear caused by division as well as the hope for unity.[275] Light is a major biblical symbol. [276] As well as signifying "life itself," light in the bible symbolises spiritual enlightenment, truth, justice, goodness and holiness.[277] It is always understood as the "antithesis and conqueror of darkness." [278] Delivering these lines, Gorman pauses before the phrase "never ending shade," emphasising the suffering of the present moment. [279] The reference to, "a sea we must wade," signifying the present suffering, may allude to Micah's reminder of God's faithfulness and justice in Micah 6:4: "For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery."

Themes of justice and peace are introduced using rhyme, allusion and word play.[280] The poem is written in free verse with no specific rhyme scheme or metrical pattern yet rhyme is a defining feature of the poem.[281] The rhyme "ade"(shade/wade) in the opening lines runs like a thread throughout the poem. [282] The use of enjambement, carrying the sense on to the next line, creates rhythm, engaging the listener: [283]

> We've braved the belly of the beast.
> We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,
> And the norms and notions of what "**just is**"
> Isn't always **just-ice.** (The Hill We Climb, ##-##)

The allusion to "the belly of the beast" references the dark moment in history being spoken into by Gorman.[284] This "dark moment" refers both to the broad history of the country, in terms of the fight for equality, as well as the events in the years and weeks preceding the inauguration.[285] They include the murder of George Floyd and the insurrection at the U.S Capitol.[286] Rohr regards it as a reference to Jonah, signifying the consequences of a prophet

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[274] Rohr, "Prophets as Poets."
[275] Emma Baldwin, "The Hill We Climb," *Poem Analysis* website, accessed April 27, 2024.
[276] Ryken Leyland, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2010), Kindle.
[277] Ibid.
[278] Ibid.
[279] Gorman, "Watch Amanda."
[280] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 15:24-17:27.
[281] Baldwin, "Hill We Climb: Structure and Form."
[282] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 15:24- 15:48.
[283] Baldwin, "Hill We Climb: "Literary Devices."
[284] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 15:24- 15:48.
[285] Baldwin, "Hill We Climb: Literary and Historical context."
[286] Ibid.

reluctant to tell the truth.[287] Gorman is asserting the need to confront the wrongs of inequality at this particular moment in American history. She demonstrates the truth telling capacity of the prophet and acknowledges the pain of injustice for those who are marginalised. Gorman uses a play on words with "just -is" and "justice" to signify that what "just – is" is not always "justice."[288] Listening to the performance, Gorman's use of stress on the words "quiet" and "peace" combined with her effective use of pausing between *"*just is*"* and "isn't always justice" clearly communicates this message.[289] There are many historical and literary allusions in the poem that powerfully evoke voices in the African-American experience.[290] Dooner asserts that words from Martin Luther King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* resonate here, when he said: "Justice too long delayed is justice denied."[291] Alluding to Dr. King is a use of signifying, as defined by Stoudamire, as the embedded message references black struggles. Appropriating imagery which resonates with the history and experience of the oppressed community is a feature of prophetic imagination.[292] In signifying Dr. King Gorman was employing imagery which effectively conveyed her critique of the current political struggles.

Prophetic Energising

In keeping with prophetic practice the theme of hope is introduced. [293] Rhyme creates cadence, and alliteration moves the theme from a negative to a positive key, with a climactic sense at the end of a line.[294] The reference to "dawn" symbolises hope, again evoking light imagery.

> And yet the dawn is ours before we **knew it.**
> Somehow, we **do it.**
> Somehow, we **w**eathered and **w**it**n**essed
> A **n**ation that is**n**'t broke**n**, but simply
> u**n**fi**n**ished.

The use of alliteration highlights a key line in the poem: "a nation that isn't broken but simply unfinished."[295] This line connects the poem to the story of the musical Hamilton, based

[287] Rohr, "Prophets as Poets."
[288] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 15:24-17:27.
[289] Gorman, "Watch Amanda," 0.28-0.39.
[290] Ibid.
[291] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 15:24-17:27.
[292] Brueggemann, "*Prophetic imagination.*"
[293] Baldwin, "Hill We Climb: Detailed Analysis."
[294] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 17:27-18:35.
[295] Ibid, 17:27-18:35.

on the story of American Founding Father Alexander Hamilton which is known to have influenced Gorman.[296] In the musical, when Hamilton is dying, he sings the lines:

> America, you great unfinished symphony, you
> Sent for me
> You let me make a difference [297]

Gorman also alludes to Lincoln's Gettysburg address (1863), which similarly utilised alliteration, inspiring soldiers fighting in the Civil War by saying, "It is **f**or us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the u**nf**inished work which they who **f**ought here have thus **f**ar so **n**obly adva**n**ced."[298] In so doing she is saying that America is still a work in progress.

Allusion is one of the most important devices used in the poem.[299] The parabolic form of Gorman's poem situates it in the prophetic tradition of spoken word and Hebrew prophetic poetry. In the next lines Gorman alludes to the U.S constitution, echoing the humility of its words which seek "to form a more perfect union." The use of alliteration builds Gorman's challenge to unity in a climactic fashion:[300]

> And yes ,we are **f**ar **f**rom **p**olished,
> **f**ar **f**rom **p**ris**tine** .
> But this doesn't m**ean** we are striving to
> **f**orm a union that is **p**erfect.
> We are striving to **f**orm our union with
> **p**urpose,
> To **c**ompose a **c**ountry **c**ommitted
> To all **c**ultures, **c**olors, **c**haracters
> And **c**onditions of man.

In her performance Gorman lays stress on the alliterative words: polished, pristine, perfect, purpose, compose, country, committed, cultures, colors, characters and conditions. [301] Stress is also is laid on "mean" to rhyme with "pristine," the devices of alliteration and rhyme are stressed in the performance to reinforce the call to unity.[302] These devices are combined with signifying Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, made during the 1963 March on Washington, when he said, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a

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[296] Ibid, 18:35-20:42.
[297] Ibid, (my emphasis.)
[298] "What inspired Amanda Gorman's 'The Hill We climb'? " South China Morning Post, accessed April 27, 2024 (My emphasis).
[299] Baldwin, "Hill We Climb: Literary Devices."
[300] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 20:14- 22:44.
[301] Gorman, "Watch Amanda," 1:10 – 1:33.
[302] Ibid.

nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character."[303]

As Gorman further builds momentum the rhetorical styles of both Lincoln and John F. Kennedy are alluded to.[304] She combines this style with the use of gesture to reinforce the words "between," "before," "future," and "first":[305]

> And so we lift our gazes not
> To what stands **b**etween us,
> **B**ut what stands **b**efore us.
> We close the **d**ivide ,
> Because we know to put
> Our **f**uture **f**irst, we must **f**irst
> Put our **d**ifferences aside.

The use of chiasmus, a reverse repetition of words or sounds to make a point, echoes the rhetorical style of Kennedy when he said: "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country." [306] Gorman moves from "divide" to "first" and then from "first" to "differences aside." [307] The rhyming of "divide" and "aside" combines with alliterative effects to create a powerful rhetorical message. [308] In the next lines the allusion to Lincoln's second inaugural address, delivered after the civil war, strongly echoes the context of Gorman's poem, coming as it did so shortly after the Capitol Hill riot.[309] Gorman uses antithesis, contrasting the violence of military "arms" with a peaceful reaching out of human "arms," again using arm movement to reinforce the message:[310]

> We lay down our arms
> So we can reach our arms out to one
> another.
> We seek harm to none, and harmony for all.

These lines echo the style and sentiments of Lincoln when, employing the device of antithesis, he expressed the intent to work for national healing, peace and unity, "With malice

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[303] South China Morning Post, "What inspired." (my emphasis.)
[304] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 22:44- 24:46.
[305] Gorman, "Watch Amanda," 1:37-1:40.
[306] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 22:50-24:46. (my emphasis.)
[307] Ibid.
[308] Ibid.
[309] Ibid, 24:58-26:03.
[310] Gorman, "Watch Amanda," 1:40-1:49.

to none with charity for all."[311] In channelling Lincoln and Kennedy, Gorman is using a rhetorical style to remind the nation of the fundamental aspirations of America. The form is also similar to antithetical parallelism identified by Lowth in Hebrew poetry and to the call and response structure in the oral tradition from which spoken word evolved. The musicality created engages the audience in the performance of the poem. The meaningful allusions resonate with the listening community and so cast a vision of hopefulness.

Further building her climactic plea for unity and inclusiveness, using alliteration and a play with letters, Gorman signifies by once again echoing words from King's *Letter From a Birmingham Jail* when he wrote, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, **tied** in a single garment of destiny."[312] Gorman plays anagrammatically with "tired" and "tried" linking them with "tied" in the next line:[313]

> Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:
> That even as we **g**rieved, we **g**rew,
> That even as we **h**urt, we **h**oped,
> That even as we tired, we tried.
> That we'll be tied to-gether.
> Victorious.

Dooner asserts that this device, aligned with signifying King, achieves a thematic move from darkness to hope, from death to resurrection.[314] He uses theological vocabulary in this instance to analyse Gorman's themes. While acknowledging the words in the next lines are also referenced in a song from *Hamilton,* Dooner recognises the primary reference as being a biblical text from Micah 4:4.[315] Like the prophet Micah, Gorman casts a "vision of redemption."[316] The use of scripture recasts a biblical promise of "peace and plenty."[317]

> Scripture tells us to envision that:
> "Everyone shall sit under their own vine
> and fig tree,
> And no one shall make them afraid."

In the next lines, according to Kuhrt, Gorman echoes Micah's words in Micah 4:3 when he declared: "They will beat swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. Nation

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[311] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 24:58-26:03.(my emphasis.)
[312] Ibid, 26:20-28:21. (my emphasis.)
[313] Ibid.
[314] Ibid, 28:04-28:21.
[315] Ibid, 28:21-31:15.
[316] Heschel, *The Prophets*, 127.
[317] Rohr, "Prophets as Poets."

will not take up sword against nation and nor will they train for war anymore."[318] The rhyming thread of 'ade' in these lines in the words, "afraid" "blade" and "made" and subsequently with "glade" generates hope and anticipates respite from the current fear and instability.[319]

> If we're to live up to our own time, then
> victory
> Won't lie in the bl**ade**, but in the bridges
> we've m**ade**
> *That* is the promised gl**ade**,
> The hill we climb, If only we dare it:

The metaphor of "the hill" is central to the poem.[320] It is the title phrase and according to Dooner, alludes to the "mountaintop" speech of Martin Luther King Jr. and to biblical text.[321] The metaphor of "climbing a hill" was central to the Civil Rights movement in the 1950's and 1960's.[322] Dr. King's speech was delivered in April 1968 the day before he was assassinated. He said "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop…And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know to-night, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"[323]

Dr. King aligns his experience with that of Moses who climbed Mount Sinai and saw the Promised Land but did not live to enter it. Mount Sinai in the bible is the "mountain of God," a place of holiness and authority.[324] Biblical scholars relate it to the context of The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:1.[325] The metaphor of the hill is connected with the image of light in Matthew 5:14 (NRSV): "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hid." The hill is therefore a symbol of God's kingdom rule.[326] Gorman uses it to critique contemporary American society and show how it falls short of this ideal.

The concept of a "city on a hill" has been a metaphor for "American exceptionalism throughout American history.[327] It is a vision of American identity first articulated by early

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[318] Ibid.
[319] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 31:30-32:32.
[320] Baldwin, "Hill We Climb: Symbols."
[321] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 31:30-32:32.
[322] Ibid.
[323] "Martin Luther King, Jr. 'I've been to the Mountaintop'," *American Rhetoric* website, accessed April 24, 2024.
[324] "Bible Signs and Symbols 'Mountain/Hill'," Jesusway4you.com, accessed April 28, 2024.
[325] Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament,* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2014), 55.
[326] Kenner, *New Testament,* 55-56.
[327] Nichole Renée Phillips, "Amanda Gorman's 'City on a Hill'," Religion and Politics, accessed April 28, 2024.

settler John Winthrop.[328] Philips explains that Winthrop, a seventeenth century Pilgrim Father, used the concept of a "city on a hill" to describe the colony he founded as a place of religious and political freedom.[329] Gorman, speaking on the theme of "America United" in the context of the political, social and racial unrest surrounding the inauguration, references the metaphor of a hill but asserts that it is still to be climbed.[330] This, according to Philips, signifies that reaching the top of this hill is elusive for some, such as Blacks, other people of colour and women.[331] That is why Gorman calls on people to, "close the divide."[332]

Such use of imagery linked to Black history resonates strongly with the African-American community. The idea of generations of people continually climbing towards a better future is central to the Black lived experience and is reflected in the arts.[333] The poetry of Langston Hughes utilises the metaphor in his poem *Mother to Son* in the lines: "Well, son, I'll tell you/Life for me ain't been no crystal stair."[334] In employing the metaphor of "climbing a hill" Gorman strongly identifies with the Civil Rights tradition and the role the arts has played within it.[335] These lines are the core of the prophetic critique of the poem. Gorman is calling out the problems of the recent past. [336] She directly references the threat to democracy in the Capitol Hill riot, using rhyme and half rhyme:[337]

> Because being American is more than a
> pride we **inherit -**
> It's the past we step into
> And how we
> repair it.
> We've seen a force that would shatter our
> nation
> Rather than **share it,**
> Would destroy our country if it meant
> delaying democracy.
> And this effort very nearly **succeeded.**
> But while democracy can be periodically
> Delayed,
> It can never be permanently **defeated.**

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[328] Ibid.
[329] Ibid.
[330] Ibid.
[331] Ibid.
[332] Ibid.
[333] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 32:34-33:11.
[334] Ibid.
[335] Ibid, 33:26-34:58.
[336] Ibid,35:08-37:07.
[337] Ibid.

In the lines "Rather than share it," Dooner believes Gorman is following the social activism tradition in confronting white supremacy.[338] She is also engaging in prophetic critique like the prophet Micah.[339] Gorman is saying that while progress has been made in American society there is still far to go.[340] She emphasises the significance of this moment in American history through the repetition of "eyes."[341]

> For while we have our eyes on the future,
> History has its eyes on us.

The subsequent lines allude to the words of Dr. King when he said, "the moral arc of history is long but it bends towards justice."[342] In Dooner's view Gorman expresses faith in democracy.[343] Given her reference to the words of Micah it is also plausible that Gorman is expressing faith and hope in the promise of God's ultimate justice even though it may not be evident at this particular moment in time. Based on this promised "just redemption" energy and hopefulness build climactically from this point in the poem onwards.

> This is the era of just redemption.
> We feared it at its inception.
> We did not feel prepared to be the heirs
> Of such a terrifying hour.
> But within it we've found the power
> To author a new chapter,
> To offer hope and laughter to ourselves.

The climax of the poem is signalled by a rhetorical chiasmus.[344] It is similar in form to antithetical parallelism identified by Lowth:

> So while we once asked: How could we
> possibly prevail over catastrophe ?
> Now we assert: How could catastrophe
> possibly prevail over us?

It continues to build to a climax, the use of rhyme and half rhyme creating a musical rhythm:[345]

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[338] Ibid, 33:26-34:58.
[339] Kuhrt, "New expression."
[340] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman, " 33:26-34:58.
[341] Baldwin, "Hill We Climb: Detailed Analysis."
[342] Dooner, " Amanda Gorman, " 35:08-37:07.
[343] Ibid, 37:19-39:23.
[344] Ibid.
[345] Ibid, 39:40-41:19.

We will not be turned around,
Or interrupted by **intimidation,**
Because we know our inaction and **inertia**
Will be the inheritance of the next generation
Our blunders become their burdens.

The next lines once again reference the prophet Micah (Mic. 6:8), reminding the audience of God's desire for mercy:[346]

But one thing is certain:
If we merge mercy with might, and might
with right,
Then love becomes our legacy,
And change our children's birthright.

Gorman is following in the prophetic tradition of prophetic energising. The hopeful vision she casts, like the Hebrew prophets, is of a society based on justice and compassion.

Dooner describes the last section of the poem as a peroration, or summing of the points, where Gorman situates her message in its full historical context.[347] He likens this section of the poem to the musical technique of a "mash up" where one song is mixed with another.[348] Gorman is "mashing" Dr. King's "I have a dream speech" with Maya Angelou's poem, "Still I Rise," performed at Bill Clinton's inauguration.[349] In Dr. King's speech he repetitively cried, "let freedom ring" from the states of America such as New York, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and California as well as the states associated with racist abuse and white supremacy such as Georgia, Tennessee and Mississippi.[350] Maya Angelou's poem, charting the African-American journey from pain to a more hopeful future repeats the refrain "I rise" throughout and ends with; "I rise, I rise , I rise."[351] Both voices of the Black experience and hope are fused here providing historical coherence with previous prophetic voices, as Heschel suggested a work of prophecy should:

So let us leave behind a country better
than the one we were left.
With every breath from our bronze-
pounded chests,
We will raise this wounded world into
a wondrous one.

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[346] Rohr, "Prophets as Poets."
[347] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 41:10-42:26.
[348] Ibid.
[349] Ibid.
[350] Ibid.
[351] Ibid, 42:36-43:03.

We will rise from the gold-limbed hills
of the West!
We will rise form the windswept
Northeast, where our forefathers first
realized revolution!
We will rise form the lake-rimmed cities
of the Midwestern states!
We will rise form the sun-baked South!
We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover,
In every known nook of our nation,
In every corner called our country,
Our people, diverse and dutiful.
We'll emerge, battered and beautiful.
When day comes, we step out of the shade ,
A flame and unafraid.
The new dawn balloons as we free it,
For there is always light,
If only we're brave enough to see it,
If only we're brave enough to be it.[352]

The metaphor of the hill is implied in the idea of "rising" and is fused with light imagery in the words "flame" and "dawn balloons," signifying a dynamic hopefulness. Further words from Micah 7:8 resonate here: "when I fall I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me." This fusion of allusion and imagery from the bible with historical references is reminiscent of the "free floating imagery" of the spirituals identified by Ramey. The use of repetition is parallelistic in form, engaging the audience in a call and response style. As Gorman delivers the lines she increases both her pace and volume to reinforce the hope of her message. In the last two lines she stresses the words "brave," "see" and "only," pausing for emphasis before the last three words, "to be it."

Gorman critiques injustice in American society in *The Hill We Climb,* a theme Micah addressed in his political context. Employing the metaphor of climbing a hill, so potent for the African-American community and abounding in theological significance, she challenges the reality of the exceptionalism of the American Dream. Through the "divination" of biblical symbols, references and allusions Gorman expresses an eschatological hope for the future. The message offers the oppressed more than potential redress following an appeal to reason. Her message can be distinguished from other spoken word poets and activists whose focus is on critique. Spoken word poet and activist Saul Williams believes his work has a role to play in

[352] Gorman, "Watch Amanda," 4:39-5:29.

disrupting the system and "sparking fires."[353] Slam poet Christina Jackson uses her poetry to communicate about issues of racism and sexism and to "put these issues in the faces of her audience so they can see things the way she sees them."[354] The message of Gorman's poem, in using prophetic imagination to both critique and energise, transcends the present circumstances. I would argue that the poem offers doxology.

Doxology, as both Brueggemann and Heschel assert, is a powerful means of communicating hope. As Brueggemann has said, the promises which underpin theological hope must be expressed lyrically in order to engage those who need to hear them.[355] Gorman achieves this through use of allusions, biblical references, metaphors and imagery. The form of the poem and Gorman's delivery of it affect a doxology of hopefulness which energises and inspires. The use of rhyme, alliteration and enjambement create rhythm which, alongside the use of prosody and gesture, create musicality**.** Rhetorical devices and structure affect a call and response style further engaging the listener. Gorman's prophetic doxology may be compared to Miriam's Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:21). Miriam's celebration is based on knowing God is faithfully at work.[356] Gorman's celebratory ending is confidently asserting and celebrating a good outcome for her community, who like the Israelites, have faced slavery and oppression. She links her voice with that of Angelou, King and others, appropriating their symbols of hope and freedom which in turn resonate with biblical themes of hope and light. This imagery imbues the poem with energising hopefulness envisioned from the top of "the hill." Confidence is expressed in the fulfilment of God's promises while acknowledging that the hill is still being climbed. The response invoked in the engaged listener is testament to "the mighty power of poetry, the power of language made accessible, expressible."[357]

Conclusion

"The Hill We Climb" received positive acclaim from across America, including across the political spectrum (despite some inevitable criticism).[358] This highlights the power of

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[353] Saul Williams, "The power of poetry on stage and off," Wbez Chicago, Podcast audio, February 22, 2019 (Page no longer found).
[354] Stoudamire, "Rhetoric andStylistics," 61.
[355] Brueggemann, "*Prophetic imagination*, " 65.
[356] Brueggemann, "Poems Arose."
[357] Gorman, "Using your voice."
[358] Andrea Shalal, "Poet Amanda Gorman,22, captures 'bruised, but whole' U.S at Biden, Harris inauguration," *Reuters*, accessed April 28, 2024.

poetry to impact the psyche of popular culture. In the foreword to the published version of Gorman's poem Oprah Winfrey writes:

> Everyone who watched came away enhanced with hope and marveling at seeing the best of who we are and can be…..her words washed over us, they healed our wounds and resurrected our spirits. A nation, "bruised but whole," climbed off its knees. And finally, a miracle: we felt the sun pierce the "never-ending shade." That is the power of poetry. And that is the power we collectively witnessed at the inauguration.[359]

Reflecting on the impact of the poem, Dooner asserts that Gorman's performance is "the beginning of something new."[360] In employing the genre of spoken word she is connecting the voices of "jam speak" with the Black church tradition and together with allusions to contemporary arts such as the musical *Hamilton*, is reviving the spirit of poetry in the younger generation.[361] Dooner believes this has the potential to make poetry more accessible and revive the use of rhetoric in popular American culture.[362] He cites the example of the Irish culture where he believes poetry is more naturally entwined with everyday life and almost anyone you meet can quote W.B Yeats or Patrick Kavanagh.[363] Felice Belle believes spoken word poets are "shaping the next great poetry movement."[364]

Spoken word poetry has a contemporary audience. The scriptural references may have been missed by media platforms viewing the poem through a "secular lens" but the secular world nonetheless responded to the lament offered for past suffering, the prophetic critique of injustice in American society and the hopeful vision of the future which Gorman cast. Winfrey describes this phenomena, saying "They don't come very often, these moments of incandescence where the welter of pain and suffering gives way to hope. Maybe even joy. Where a deep distress that has dogged our souls and shaken our faith- so difficult to articulate and even harder to bear- is transformed into something clear and pure."[365]

Rohr viewed the response to the poem theologically, proclaiming *The Hill We Climb* to be a work of "poetic prophecy."[366] He drew parallels with the lament, prophetic critique and

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[359] Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, (London: Chatto &Windus, 2021) 2.
[360] Dooner, "Amanda Gorman," 44:45- 46:09.
[361] Ibid.
[362] Ibid, 46:34-49:00.
[363] Ibid.
[364] Felice Belle, " The Poem Performed," *Oral Tradition* 18, no. 1 (2003).
[365] Winfrey, Introduction to Gorman, *The Hill We Climb,* 1.
[366] Rohr, "Prophets as Poets."

message of hope in the book of Micah.[367] This article has outlined the hallmarks of prophetic imagination present in the poem and shown how they relate to the prophetic scripture of Micah and biblical imagery such as "the hill" and "light". I have demonstrated that the form of the poem as spoken word uses poetic features such as imagery, metaphor, allusion, rhyme, alliteration and enjambement in a rhetorical/parallelistic/call and response style which aligns with Old Testament poetic form and are employed for a prophetic function. In performing a spoken word poem Gorman adopted a style commensurate with her theme, as Hurley identified a poem expressing religious faith must.[368] She employs it as an "efficacious mode of theology" to "reflect and inflect" her individual faith.[369] Gorman is among those poets who, as David Jones says "Even after the rubicon of secularism has been crossed, poets in a society dominated by unbelieving may still, it seems, retain not only the old, 'ineradicable longings for…the farther shore', but also the verse craft and 'impletive rite' of creation by which faith might yet be forged in poetry."[370]

Gorman's poetry has not only the potential to bridge the gap between poetry and popular culture but, like other theologically inflected spoken word poetry, has the potential to bridge the gap between the church and secular society.[371] Karl Rahner asserts that theological discourse requires a "poetic" element to counter-balance the conceptual with the real lived experience of those truths: there needs to be a "reductto in mysterium."[372] Theology in its intellectual forms cannot, as theologian Frank Burch Brown has said, "fully succeed in bringing all of life and the world into relation with God."[373] The practice of Theopoiesis, combining the use of imaginative and beautiful discourse with theology, creates an "aesthetic theology" which may bridge the gap between reality and abstract theology.[374]

Brueggemann is aware of the gap to be bridged between the contemporary "mainline" church community and secular society.[375] He argues that the secularisation of the church has left it is disenfranchised and it does not have "enough social or moral clout" to have a prophetic

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[367] Ibid.
[368] Hurley, "Faith in Poetry," 3.
[369] Hurley, "Faith in Poetry," 4- 5.
[370] Ibid, 5.
[371] See Nate Patrin, "Rap reckonings: How gospel is reborn in hip-hop's search for the spiritual," The Vinyl Factory, accessed April 28, 2024, for a discussion on the contemporary flourishing of theological expression within spoken word and the hip-hop industry.
[372] Viladesau, "Aesthetics," 13.
[373] Ibid, 15.
[374] Viladesau, "Aesthetics," 13,19.
[375] Brueggemann, "*Prophetic Imagination*," xxvi.

voice and effect social change.[376] Brueggemann suspects that whatever is "prophetic" must be "more cunning and more nuanced and perhaps more ironic" if it is to have agency in contemporary society.[377] Rather than conceptual and confrontational preaching of text, the prophet must employ "immense imagination" in communicating the wisdom of scripture.[378] Brueggemann notes, "What is now required is that a relatively powerless prophetic voice must find imaginative ways that are rooted in the text but that freely and daringly move from the text toward concrete circumstance."[379] Brueggemann believes poetry has a vital role to play in raising awareness about social and political injustice.[380]

Through her imaginative and nuanced approach Gorman has used the spoken word genre to potentially make theology more accessible to popular culture. She is a practicing Catholic but has chosen to speak outside of the established church community. Gorman has woven scripture, biblical truth and wisdom through her poem using the language and medium of poetry to affect a response and inspire social change in the concrete context of the inauguration, with all the social and political turmoil that surrounded it. The poem is evidence of using biblical text non-conceptually, allowing the truth and wisdom of scripture to speak in a non-confrontational manner. Kuhrt concludes that Gorman's references to Micah throughout the poem are in contrast to the boasts of "Make America great again."[381] Micah's most famous words are "What does the LORD require? To act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, NRSV).[382] Gorman's humble assessment of the nation was that it "isn't broken/but simply unfinished/" and called on everyone to "forge our union with purpose."[383] She has offered an alternative theologically based doxology.

Brueggemann, writing in 2018 , asserted the need for an alternative doxology to the "Make America Great Again" mantra in the contemporary political context of America.[384] We might question the power of Gorman's poem to advocate for racial justice and democracy but I would offer Brueggemann's reflection on the impact of the Song of the Sea:

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[376] Ibid.
[377] Ibid.
[378] Ibid.
[379] Ibid.
[380] Brueggemann, " Poems Arose."
[381] Kuhrt, "Hill We Climb."
[382] Ibid.
[383] Ibid.
[384] Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination, 131.

> It is only a poem, and we might say rightly that singing a song does not change reality. However we must not say that with too much conviction. The evocation of an alternative reality consists at least in part in the battle for language and the legitimization of a new rhetoric….. Doxology is the ultimate challenge to the language of managed reality and it alone is the universe of discourse in which energy is possible.[385]

Gorman's poem, like the spirituals, uses scripture and biblical imagery to inspire hope beyond the seen reality of a politically fractured America and the cause of racial injustice. As Kuhrt asserts: "In the words of Amanda Gorman, we saw a stirring example of how the language of faith can inspire hope in the most high-profile way possible."[386] Using the "beautiful talk" associated with the oral tradition she transforms the imagination of the listener and creates the energy needed to believe in an alternative reality.[387] Gorman's words prepare the way for action. The Christological message echoes the Sermon on the Mount as she challenges everyone to be the "light." Gorman's faith based approach enables *The Hill We Climb* to reflect a theological beauty which has the power to attract and convince both believer and non-believer. Her words orientate the soul "towards the noble and beautiful act."[388]

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[385] Ibid, 18.
[386] Kuhrt, "Hill We Climb."
[387] Stoudamire, "Rhetoric and Stylistics," 59.
[388] Merton, *Conjectures,* 93.

Appendix 1. Spoken Word Poetry: A Framework for Analysis

Okoye and Okoye ***"Praxi-Phonoaesthetics Framework"***	**Chepp** ***Typology of African American Spoken Word***	**Stoudamire**	**Smithsonian Folkways.**	**Lowth's Hebrew Poetic Devices. (Winckles)**
Praxis	**"Cultural Object"**			
Themes				
Language Use	• Allusion • Word play • Metaphor • Imagery • Syntax play	Signifying		Parabolic Style
	• Repetition			Parallelism
Performance • Hand/body movements	Improvisation			
Phonoaesthetics				
Rhyme				
			Alliteration	
Rhythm Cadence Voice inflection		Tonal semantics • Intonational contouring • Stress • Pitch change • Pace change • Enjambement	Musicality	
	"Cultural Audience"			
	• Folk/popular audience • Call and response			Parallelism Call and Response
	"Cultural Process"			
	Function (Rhetoric)	• Signifying • Tonal semantics		Prophetic critique (Lament, Truth telling)

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