

*Michael Grant's citation is highlighted below.*

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The New York Times

## The Opinionator

A Gathering of Opinion From Around the Web



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### Parsing the Poem

By [Tobin Harshaw](#)

While plying their art in front of millions of viewers was nothing new for Itzhak Perlman or Yo-Yo Ma, it must have been more than a tad unsettling for Elizabeth Alexander, the inaugural poetess. And while Rick Warren was the controversial choice for the day's events, Ms. Alexander's selection also led to conflicting anticipations. Writing shortly after the announcement in December, the Atlantic's [Ta-Nehisi Coates was thrilled](#).

Elizabeth Alexander is going to present a poem at the inauguration. I don't want to disrespect anyone here with what I'm about to say. But there is an interesting parallel, here again, in the Obama and Clinton selections. Maya Angelou is a very inspirational writer who, I think, has helped a lot of young women through some tough times.

But Elizabeth Alexander is a student, and dare I say, master of the craft. Her work is inspirational in a way that the Great Gatsby, or Mad Men is inspirational, in that it just says so much about who we are. When Clinton picked Maya Angelou it was revolutionary for a lot of young black kids in schools across the country—we had to study that poem in English class. Picking Alexander is a much more subtle move which I hope folks won't miss. Put bluntly, the whole “competence aesthetic” has been extended to the poets also. I'm not dissing Clinton here, or giving undue credit to Obama—this is about the moment in history. So much has changed since then.

While the Corner's John Derbyshire was [cranky even by his own lofty standards](#):

Elizabeth Alexander (the inaugural poetess). Obama's selection of a race- and “gender”-whiney free-verse blatherer was not inevitable. (It was predictable, but that's not the same thing.) He could, for example, have chosen the current U.S. Poet Laureate to read his inaugural poem. That's what a Poet Laureate is traditionally for. (“expected to compose poems for court and national occasions” — Webster's Third ... and yes, I know, “Poet Laureate” isn't the official title, but that's still what everybody calls it.) It's not like the current P.L. isn't transgressive enough: she's a lesbian. Just the wrong color, I guess.

So, how'd she do?

Blogging poet Barbara Jane Reyes of Poeta Y Diwata has [some measured praise](#):

In choosing a rather plainspoken register, and in her deliberately even toned delivery, the end result was just OK, if not a little underwhelming, but not sorely disappointing. From what I can remember of the poem, I feel like it must've been the opposite of Maya Angelou's what I imagine as booming inspirational verse with winged beasts in flight and all. I could be wrong about Angelou.

Alexander doesn't boom; at least I don't think she does. As well, the nation really wasn't anticipating (1) images of themselves as everyday people, teachers, farmers, working mothers, etc. quietly going about their everyday lives as momentous occasions are happening, but rather the momentous occasion itself, in all its revelry and glory, and (2) a poet who doesn't orate with flair, charisma, and passion. In fact, I think Rick Warren's invocation and his rhetoric of inclusion, delivered with a Christian sermon's dramatic touches, was really the more anticipated type of "verse" for the occasion.

[After Alexander's poem, I had to get back to my desk (as I'd just spent too much time watching the break room's TV), so I don't really know what's happened since. I've just read on Dean Rader's blog that Rev. James Lowery's benediction included the final stanza of a poem by James Weldon Johnson, and was thus very "poetic" in his delivery.]

Still, this is not to say there is no value to Alexander's poem; I very much appreciate her calling our collective attention to the everyday Americans are going about our lives as this grand thing called "history" is happening. It's unpopular and unglamorous, and in this way, it isn't the safest thing a poet could do.

"The [best moment](#) in Alexander's poem may have been her catalogue of professions (teacher, farmer) who, in going about their business embodied the practice of everyday poetry," adds culture blogger Dean Rader.

"Echoing Whitman, William Carlos Williams and Langston Hughes, Alexander also invoked Angelou toward the end of her poem, 'On the brink, the brim, the cusp,' suggesting the optimism sitting, not so patiently, on the nation's tongue."

And [Michael Grant](#) at the Moderate Voice wrote that "Elizabeth Alexander's inaugural poem [sketched the late America](#) in a way that completed Obama's café snapshot."

The Hartford Courant's Colin McEnroe is [willing to wait on the judgment of posterity](#):

"Alexander's poem had, at first hearing, echoes of both Whitman and Angelou. It didn't seem to stir the crowd — here or in D.C. — but that may be because she doesn't really have the charisma of a Frost or an Angelou. I think it might actually be a pretty good poem. They liked the rhymes in the 87-year-old Rev. Joseph Lowery's benediction better."

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## About The Opinionator

The Opinionator provides a guide to the wide world of newspaper, magazine and Web opinion. [Eric Etheridge](#), a former editor at Rolling Stone and the author-photographer of the book "Breach of Peace: Portraits of the 1961 Mississippi Freedom Riders," is the daily writer of the column and your personal guide to the world of opinion journalism. [Tobin Harshaw](#), an Op-Ed staff editor of The New York Times, writes a weekend Opinionator column, which summarizes the debates that dominated the blogosphere over the previous week and looks to the events that will shape the news in the days ahead.