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“Human Family” by Maya Angelou: Analysis

“I have learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel,” says one of the most inspiring voices in history. Maya Angelou was an American poet, a Civil Rights activist, and a memoirist among other things. She is most known for her memoir written in 1969 titled “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”, as it was the first nonfiction bestseller written by an African American woman. Her powerful poems such as “Still I Rise” have been vital to influencing the poetry world. Her 1991 poem entitled “Human Family” was even used in an Apple commercial to promote diversity just before the 2016 Olympics in Rio, Brazil. Despite her passing in 2014, Angelou’s works are still inspiring and prevalent in today’s society.

The main theme that should be taken away from Angelou’s “Human Family” is that despite our differences, we must learn to accept one another, because in a way, we are all alike. Angelou uses different rhetorical techniques and a specific rhyming scheme in order to convey this message to her audience. Maya Angelou typically wrote poems with a deeper meaning behind them, but this poem in particular has a long-lasting message that is still significant even twenty years after it was published.

“Human Family” is a poem that addresses diversity within the human race. In her poem, Angelou repeats the phrase “We are more alike, my friends, / Than we are unalike” three times, applying emphasis that despite differences, it is important that we accept each other, as we are all a part of one race: the human race. Her poem properly promotes diversity and forces people to realize that in more ways than we think, we are all similar. Throughout her poem she gives several examples of how individuals can be different in various ways: “Mirror twins are different / although their features jibe, / And lovers think quite different thoughts / While lying side by side”. Angelou’s poem is not only powerful, but her intentions are pure, as she wants everyone in the world to recognize differences in one another and accept them for who they are.

Angelou uses the ACBC rhyming method in her poem. This rhyming scheme makes the poem seem simpler, while it still conveys an inspirational message to the reader. For example, Angelou says, “The variety of our skin tones / Can confuse, bemuse, delight, / Brown and pink and beige and purple, / Tan and blue and white”. After reading this stanza for the first time, it seems simple and light, however, the underlying message is especially powerful. Angelou tells the reader that people’s skin tones may vary, but that shouldn’t affect how you treat others. She poetically and gracefully discusses racism in her poem, while keeping the light tone of her poem consistent.

Some experts believe that this poem by Angelou can be somewhat difficult to understand or left up to interpretation by the reader. It’s been said that “Without poetic devices, Angelou’s words become an intense focus of her work, leaving the reader to contemplate the idea alone, rather than attempt to sort through abstractions and devices” (Walker, “‘Human Family’ Analysis”). However, one of the biggest technology companies in the world, Apple, believes that the message is simple, as they used a reading of this poem by Angelou in one of their commercials to promote diversity leading up to the 2016 Olympics. The visuals with the commercial – along with Angelou’s voice reading the poem – further emphasizes Angelou’s point of how important it is to recognize the differences of one another but to treat everyone as if they are the same.

Even though Maya Angelou was – and is still considered to be – one of the most famous poets, not many people understand how she attempts to change society through her powerful words and rhyme. A poem such as “Human Family” properly shows how she has tried to make people realize how vital it is for the people of the human race to acknowledge differences but also take note of how similar we are in more ways than one. This poem was Angelou’s way of fighting for inclusion in all aspects of the world – whether that be in regard to race and gender or as simple as our thoughts and actions.

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Works Cited

About The Author Andrew Walker More from this Author Andrew joined the team back in November 2015 and has a passion for poetry. He has an Honours in the Bachelor of Arts, et al. “Analysis of Human Family by Maya Angelou.” *Poem Analysis*, 31 Jan. 2020, poemanalysis.com/maya-angelou/human-family/.

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