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“Human Family” by Maya Angelou: Poetry Explication

“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 shaped 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 de Janeiro, Brazil. Despite her passing in 2014, Angelou’s works are still inspiring and more relevant than ever. Angelou’s “Human Family” suggests 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 to convey this message to her audience.

“Human Family” addresses diversity within the human species. In her poem, Angelou repeats the phrase “We are more alike, my friends, / Than we are unalike” (lines 35-40) three times to conclude, emphasizing that despite differences, it is important that we accept each other, as we are all a part of one race: the human race. The poem 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” (lines 21-24). This stanza perfectly explains the message she is trying to convey. We all know that mirror twins are identical in a sense, yet they are not the same, Yes, they share similar features, but they are still two different human beings with different personalities and interests among other things. Angelou’s other example with lovers properly portrays this message as well. She explains that even though two people can share one love for one another, they still individually think of and do different things – even though they go back to the same bed every night.

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” (lines 9-12). At first, this stanza seems simple. However, the underlying message is especially powerful. Angelou suggests that skin tones may vary, but that shouldn’t affect how we treat others. She poetically and gracefully discusses racism, while keeping the light tone of her poem consistent.

Some experts believe that this poem can be somewhat difficult to understand and puts the burden of interpretation on 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”). For example, in the second stanza, Angelou says, “Some declare their lives are lived / As true profundity, / And others claim they really live / The real reality” (#). These lines can be interpreted in various ways. What is “true profundity” and how does one “truly” live that way? What is the “real reality”? There are so many questions that have numerous answers, and Angelou leaves it to the reader to interpret it the way they see fit.

Maya Angelou was – and is still considered to be – one of the poets most celebrated for her 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 to acknowledge differences but also take note of how similar we are. Even one of the biggest technology companies in the world, Apple, believes that her 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. This poem was Angelou’s way of fighting for inclusion for all, despite our minor and major differences.

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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