

The Autobiography of Malcolm X Study Guide

The Autobiography of Malcolm X by Malcolm X

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Introduction

The Autobiography of Malcolm X is the life story of Malcolm Little: son of a Baptist minister, wide-eyed teenager in Boston, street hustler and prison inmate in New York, faithful and energetic member of the Nation of Islam, and, finally, Muslim pilgrim determined to create an organization for all blacks regardless of their religion. It is also a tale of, as the author puts it, a "homemade" education pursued in the schools, on the streets, in prison, and at the feet of his mentor Elijah Muhammad. Many considered Malcolm X's separatist philosophies (later softened) disturbing and in direct opposition to those of the period's other well-known black activists, including Martin Luther King, Jr., who argued for integration and nonviolent confrontation.

While the book received high praise when it was first published in 1965, it immediately engendered questions about its authorship. The book is unusual in that it was transcribed and constructed by Alex Haley from thousands of hours of conversations he had with Malcolm X in the early 1960s. In fact, while Malcolm X did read drafts of the book, he never lived to see it in print. In early 1965, a trio suspected to have been associated with the Nation of Islam gunned him down as he was about to give a speech in Harlem. Haley, then a recently retired Coast Guard member working as a journalist, went on to write the critically acclaimed family history, *Roots*.

In 1966, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* received an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, and in 1992, it was produced as a film.

Author Biography

Since his father was both a minister and an activist for Marcus Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement and his mother had such light skin she could pass as a white woman, Malcolm X seemed almost predestined to a life of challenging America's racial status quo. Born on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska, as Malcolm Little, Malcolm X experienced a childhood marked by violence and poverty. While his mother was pregnant with him, white men threatened to burn down the family's house. When Malcolm was six, white supremacists murdered his father, plunging the family into years of hunger and deprivation.

Though Malcolm was a good student, a school career counselor told him that because he was black, he could aim only as high as a job as a skilled laborer. He soon set out on a path that led to a dead end period of his life, filled with drugs and crime in Boston and then in New York City. While Malcolm was in jail, his brothers and sisters encouraged him to follow Elijah Muhammad, head of the Nation of Islam, as they were doing. The Nation of Islam is a religious and cultural organization founded in the early 1930s in Detroit by W. D. Fard and advocating Islam and economic self-determination for African Americans. Malcolm became a member of the Nation as soon as he was released from prison in 1952.

Malcolm's enthusiasm for Islam as preached by Elijah Muhammad—who taught that white men were devils and that complete separation of the races was the only solution to racism in America—prompted his rise through the ranks of the Nation of Islam. He dropped his last name and replaced it with X to symbolize the identity and history that whites had stripped from blacks during slavery. In January 1958, Malcolm X married Sister Betty X, a fellow member of the Nation of Islam and a nursing student. They had six daughters.

Malcolm X developed a national reputation as an angry black activist, attracting the attention of various law enforcement agencies and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which were concerned that his ideology promoted racial violence. Muhammad continued to rely on Malcolm X more and more, until jealousy and Muhammad's sexual indiscretions caused an irreparable rift between the two in 1963. Muhammad expelled Malcolm X from the Nation, and Malcolm X began hearing that members of the Nation were planning his death.

During a pilgrimage to Mecca soon after his expulsion, Malcolm X experienced a second conversion of sorts: he decided that the Islam he had practiced under Muhammad's tutelage was not the true Islam. In 1964, he established his own organization to minister to blacks of all faiths and another organization called the Organization of Afro-American Unity that planned to unite blacks all over the world against racism.

In 1959, Alex Haley had written an article for *Reader's Digest* on Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. In early 1963, Haley persuaded Malcolm X to tell him his life story, and



the two men met often for conversations that Haley eventually transcribed and structured as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. On February 21, 1965, as Malcolm X stepped onto a stage to address a crowd of supporters in Harlem, three men believed to have been associated with the Nation of Islam gunned him down. Later that year, Malcolm X's autobiography was published to widespread acclaim.



Plot Summary

Chapter One: "Nightmare"

The Autobiography of Malcolm X begins with Malcolm Little telling about his years as a trouble-making but clever child in the 1930s. His father, Earl Little, is a Baptist preacher who advocates the ' 'back-to-Africa" philosophy of black activist Marcus Garvey. Once, their house is burned down, and another time it is damaged□both times by groups of white men. His mother, Louise, is made a widow when Earl is murdered; then the state welfare agency tries to break up the family. Eventually, fighting against the state and struggling to keep her children fed becomes too much for Louise, and she is committed to a mental asylum. The children are sent to various foster homes in the region.

Chapter Two: "Mascot"

Malcolm is expelled from school when he is thirteen years old, and state officials move him to a detention home. Though Malcolm is a very popular student at the white junior high school and is elected the seventh-grade class president, he later feels that he was simply a "mascot" for the school.

His half-sister Ella invites him to visit her in Boston for the summer, a visit that changes his life by showing him a world outside his small town. When he returns to school the next fall, a school counselor tells Malcolm that he should not consider becoming a lawyer because he is black. Ella invites him to move to Boston

Chapter Three: "Homeboy"

Malcolm lives with Ella in the ' 'snooty-black" neighborhood of Boston. But Malcolm is attracted to the "town ghetto section," where he meets Shorty, a pool hall employee. The two strike up an immediate friendship, and Shorty finds Malcolm a job shining shoes at the famous Roseland State Ballroom. Shorty also initiates Malcolm into the various aspects of city living, including straightening his hair through a painful process called ' 'conking." Looking back, Malcolm sees this as his "first really big step toward self-degradation," trying to look like a white man.

Chapter Four: "Laura"

Malcolm quits his shoe shining job to devote more time to dances at Roseland. Ella then finds him a job at the ice cream parlor, much to his dismay. While working, he meets Laura, a studious young girl who isn't haughty like the other customers. Malcolm and Laura attend Roseland dances, where he introduces her to the seamy side of life. Malcolm is meanwhile accepting the advances of Sophia, a rich, attractive white woman who gives him money.



Chapter Five: 'Harlemite'

Ella helps Malcolm get a job as a dishwasher on the train between Boston and New York. After only one day in New York, Malcolm decides to live in Harlem, the center of American black life in the 1940s. Malcolm eventually takes a job as a waiter at his favorite bar in Harlem, Small's Paradise. Meanwhile, Malcolm goes out at night, dancing, drinking, and smoking marijuana.

Chapter Six: "Detroit Red"

Malcolm is barred from Small's after offering a prostitute to an undercover policeman, so his friend Sammy the Pimp helps set him up selling marijuana to his numerous musician contacts.

Chapter Seven: "Hustler"

Malcolm next turns to robbery with Sammy. But their friendship cools after Sammy draws a gun on Malcolm during a fight. Malcolm begins to use cocaine on a regular basis. Racial tensions increase in Harlem, and Malcolm moves into the numbers racket and other illegal pursuits. He experiences many brushes with danger and death during this period.

Chapter Eight: "Trapped"

West Indian Archie, with whom Malcolm has placed thousands of dollars worth of bets, is gunning for Malcolm because he believes that Malcolm is trying to cheat him and make him look weak. Others are also targeting Malcolm, who is now a drug addict, using cocaine, opium, and Benzedrine, and smoking marijuana regularly. Sammy finally calls Malcolm's old friend, Shorty, who takes him back to Boston.

Chapter Nine: 'Caught'

In Boston, Malcolm's friends can hardly believe how mean and hard he has become. Malcolm begins to think about what hustle he will choose next. He decides on house burglary and gathers Shorty, Rudy, Sophia, and her sister into a gang to steal from wealthy Boston homes. They are very successful until Malcolm is caught leaving a stolen watch for repair at a shop.

Chapter Ten: "Satan"

Not quite twenty-one years old, Malcolm is sentenced to jail for the burglaries. The other inmates consider him so mean and irreligious that they call him "Satan." Malcolm meets Bimbi in jail, the first man he has ever known who could command respect simply with



words. Bimbi impresses on him the importance of learning, which prompts Malcolm to take a few extension courses in jail. Various members of Malcolm's family start converting to an American Muslim sect called the Nation of Islam and mention in their letters to Malcolm their leader, Elijah Muhammad, who teaches that 'the white man is a devil.' Malcolm is impressed enough to begin the process that culminates in his own conversion.

Chapter Eleven: ' 'Saved''

Still in jail, Malcolm begins his daily correspondence with Elijah Muhammad, learning about history, religion, and philosophy. He also starts proselytizing (recruiting outsiders to one's cause or faith) other inmates about the Nation of Islam, meanwhile expressing disdain for those blacks, especially intellectuals, who favor integration of whites and blacks.

Chapter Twelve: "Savior"

In the summer of 1952, Malcolm is released from prison and moves immediately to Detroit to be near his family and their local Nation of Islam temple. He becomes involved in recruiting more Nation members, meanwhile becoming closer to Muhammad. In 1953, Malcolm is named an assistant minister of Temple Number One. He replaces his last name with X to commemorate the fact that when blacks were brought to the United States they lost their real names and were instead given meaningless slave names.

Chapter Thirteen: "Minister Malcolm X"

Muhammad expresses his faith in Malcolm X by sending Malcolm X to his old haunt, New York City. Despite not having spent any time thinking about women since his conversion, Malcolm X decides that it was now time to take a wife. In 1958, he chooses Sister Betty X, a nursing student and Nation instructor, as his wife.

Chapter Fourteen: "Black Muslims"

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, a documentary about the Nation, a book, and numerous newspaper articles are exposing more and more people to the organization. Malcolm X appears on television and radio debates, where he speaks against integration and for separation of races. Muhammad, because of his own declining health, gives Malcolm X a larger role in the running of the Nation.



Chapter Fifteen: "Icarus"

In this chapter, Malcolm X explains his separatist philosophy, his disdain for other organizations that claim to help blacks, and how his message was received in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Chapter Sixteen: "Out"

In 1961, Muhammad's health continues to worsen, and Malcolm X's frustration with the Nation's lack of action on various issues grows. The story breaks about Muhammad's illegitimate children, throwing Malcolm X into a period of torment and doubt. Muhammad silences Malcolm X for a comment about the Kennedy assassination he considered inappropriate, and threats against Malcolm X's life surface. After much anguish, Malcolm X officially breaks from the Nation of Islam to start his own organization for blacks of all faiths.

Chapter Seventeen: "Mecca"

Malcolm X makes a *hajj*, or pilgrimage, to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. He is impressed with the sense of brotherhood he feels while on the *hajj* and also with the "color-blindness" of the Muslim world's religious society. In response, he softens his previously strong stance against whites and issues a letter to his new mosque outlining his beliefs.

Chapter Eighteen: "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz"

Malcolm X, during his *hajj* in Saudi Arabia, takes the Arabic name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. He is treated as a visiting Muslim dignitary during another trip he takes to other parts of the Middle East and Africa. Malcolm X comes to a number of different conclusions during this trip, including that African-American leaders should travel extensively overseas to give them alternative solutions to "the American black man's problems." In addition, he admits that his previous statements about white people were too sweeping.

Chapter Nineteen: "1965"

The final chapter of the book outlines how Malcolm X sees his philosophy changing and how he anticipates the change will affect the organization he is starting, the Organization of Afro-American Unity. He mentions in this chapter the great possibility of his assassination.

Chapter Twenty: "Epilogue"

This part was written by Alex Haley, Malcolm X's collaborator on the autobiography, after the Muslim leader's murder. Haley discusses how the book came to be, the difficulties in getting information about Malcolm X, and the events leading up to and following his death.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Malcolm X's story opens with a troubling story about how the Ku Klux Klan visited his home while his mother was pregnant with him. From here, Malcolm goes on to tell the story of his childhood in a chapter called "Nightmare."

One of eight children, Malcolm grew up in poverty, moving a number of times before his family settled in Michigan. His father, a dark man, was a freelance Baptist preacher who spread the word of Marcus Garvey, a man who stressed the need of Negroes to become free of the white man (Malcolm's words). His mother, who was from the West Indies, was very light skinned; Malcolm inherited lighter skin from his mother and he realized from a young age that his parents treated him differently as a result. Malcolm writes that, at the time, parents almost instinctively treated lighter skinned children better because the notion that white was better had been brainwashed into their thinking. From a very young age, Malcolm learned how a person's skin color had a direct effect on how he or she was treated.

Once the family settled in Lansing, Michigan, Malcolm's father continued to preach about returning to Africa. This did not go over well with the local white community, and Malcolm's father was brutally murdered. Malcolm's mother was then left to raise eight children alone, with very little money. She tried to obtain some insurance money but did not have much luck. From this point forward, the family gradually began to fall apart, and Malcolm and his siblings were eventually placed in numerous foster homes. Sadly, his mother was sent to a mental institution where she remained for the twenty-six years. Malcolm writes that, although the family was separated, they did their best to remain close.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Malcolm X's early life experiences taught him a lot about skin color and how people are treated in the world, and in particular how African-Americans were treated throughout the United States' history and during his childhood. Early in the chapter, Malcolm talks about the way most of the men in his family died violent deaths and eerily predicts that his own death will be the result of violence.

Malcolm also talks extensively about religion and Christianity in particular. His early experiences with his father's role as a freelance Baptist minister and his mother's Seventh Day Adventist faith shaped Malcolm's views of religion. These views would take shape over time and have a big impact on Malcolm's later work.

Perhaps most importantly, however, is the result of the state's treatment of Malcolm's mother and his family following his father's death. Malcolm's mother tried to fight the state's desire to take her children away from her, but the state's persistence eventually



wore her down to the point where she suffered a breakdown. Malcolm writes that the state system would have never treated a white family this way. However, despite his bitterness at how the state and the white man treated his family, he understands that, if his situation had been different, he would not have ended up doing the work for which he became known. He writes that if his family had remained together, he would have likely married a local girl and worked in a traditional job for a black man of that time.

Throughout the account of his early childhood, it is obvious that this crucial time in his life greatly influenced his later work.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Having been relocated to live with the Gohannas family, Malcolm writes that he got into trouble at school and he was ordered to attend a reform school. Along the way, however, Malcolm was sent to a detention home where "bad" boys and girls were held until their hearings.

Owned and run by a white couple, the Swerlins, the detention home was not an unpleasant experience. Malcolm got along well with the Swerlins, and they liked him as well. The detention home was located about twelve miles outside of Lansing, Michigan. When Malcolm was eventually sent to school, he was the only African-American attending. He did very well in school, consistently scoring as one of the top three students in his school. He also played on the basketball team and was elected class president.

While living with the Swerlins, Malcolm's older sister by his father's first marriage came to visit. In his sister, he saw, for the first time, a proud black woman. While in seventh grade, Malcolm was able to visit her in Boston, where he also witnessed (for the first time) a strong African-American community. Not too long afterward, in eighth grade, the Swerlins arranged for Malcolm to live with a different family. Shortly after that, Malcolm moved to Boston with the help of his sister, who had arranged for the official custody of Malcolm changed from Michigan to Massachusetts.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In this chapter, Malcolm points out a number of crucial factors that affected his later work. While his time with the Swerlins was initially pleasant, Malcolm became much more aware of his situation after visiting his sister. While in Boston, he had the opportunity to witness a very strong African-American community. Upon his return home, he realized that while the Swerlins treated him well, they never viewed him as a complete person, but rather treated him more like a favorite pet. He understood that the Swerlins would never see him as one of them. He also realized that he was treated at school like a mascot, the title of this chapter.

Malcolm wrote about the inequality demonstrated by a teacher at his school. Malcolm consistently performed among the top three students in his school. In a discussion with a teacher, Malcolm said he would like to be a lawyer. The teacher immediately told him he would never be able to do this, and recommended other jobs more "suitable" for a black man. Malcolm noticed, however, that this same teacher was very encouraging of other students who had high aspirations, yet much lower grades. This was a turning point in his life.



These two incidents-his initial visit to Boston and the teacher's unfair treatment of him-were highly influential times in his life. Malcolm wrote that, had he been encouraged by the teacher to pursue a career as a lawyer, he might have ended up, as he put it, "a brainwashed black Christian."



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

After arriving in Boston, Malcolm's sister Ella encouraged him to explore the city before finding a job. Her reasoning was that once he found work, there would be no time to see the city. Malcolm spent about a month visiting all areas of the city. Because of his size (he was very tall), people thought he was much older. Through his travels of the city, Malcolm learned of the social status of the various African-Americans.

Malcolm preferred the ghetto area. Upon befriending Shorty, a man also from Michigan, Malcolm quickly landed a job as a shoeshine attendant at a ballroom. Here, he learned a whole new vocabulary used in the black community and a lot about the "hidden" life of the city. It was also in this position that he decided to straighten his hair into a greased back style called a "conk." The straightening procedure was extremely painful, and he quickly learned just how far he and other black men were willing to go to look "white."

Chapter 3 Analysis

Throughout this chapter, Malcolm reveals a new side of city and African-American life that he had previously not known. From the upper social classes to the ghettos, Malcolm witnessed stereotyping among blacks. He also decided that his comfort level was in the ghettos, because people did not pretend to be something they were not, an idea that further shaped his beliefs.

He also learned that things are not always as they appear. In his job shining shoes, for example, he learned that he made most of his money not through shining shoes, but through other side arrangements. While working, he learned about credit when he bought his first suit, and he was then financially obligated to the shop where he purchased the suit.

One of the most important things he discusses in this chapter, however, is the process he and so many other black men endured to straighten their hair. "Conking" was a chemical process used to straighten and grease back men's hair. The process was extremely painful, yet many men endured it because it made them look whiter. Through this ritual, Malcolm learned of the extents to which he and others went to achieve an unnatural look. He noted that conking his hair was his first really big step toward self-degradation. Regularly conking his hair was part of a brainwashed belief that the straight hair of whites is superior to the kinky hair of blacks. Malcolm also referenced the many black women who wore wigs of unnatural colors in straight styles. Malcolm later came to understand more fully that trying to change such an innate part of his physical being was the equivalent of saying that blacks' hair is "less than," and that this was symbolic of the way blacks were treated in general as being "less than."



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

As Malcolm became more ingrained in city life, he also became adept at "Lindy Hopping," a favorite dance style of the time. While working at a soda fountain after leaving the shoeshine job, Malcolm met Laura, a quiet, studious girl. As they got to know each other better, Malcolm learned that Laura loved to Lindy Hop. They made a date to go out dancing. In order to make the date, Laura lied to her grandmother whom she was living with, an act that made her uncomfortable.

While out with Laura, Malcolm was approached by a beautiful blond white woman, Sophia. Malcolm quickly took Laura home and returned to the club to spend time with Sophia. As he continued dating Sophia, Malcolm spoke of the pride and status he gained among his black male friends by being associated with a good-looking white woman.

At the close of the chapter, Malcolm writes that he never saw Laura again, but heard that she later turned to drinking, drugs, and prostitution. He partly blamed himself for her demise.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Perhaps the most poignant element to this chapter is Malcolm's willingness to quickly "drop" his black girlfriend for the status symbol of a white woman. His rejection of Laura, an intelligent girl who had done well in school, contributed to her self-destructive lifestyle. His rejection of Laura for a white woman made the "blow double heavy." Malcolm felt shame the remainder of his life for how he treated Laura, and wrote how he, like many other black men, were unable to see the foolishness of their actions in desiring white women.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

After Malcolm was fired from the soda fountain, his sister Ella helped him get a job on a railroad route selling beverages and snacks to customers, despite her disapproval of Sophia. This allowed him to travel to New York City for free, where he discovered Harlem, the all-black community of the city. During his visits to Harlem, Malcolm's co-workers introduced him to all the hot spots, to which Malcolm was immediately attracted. He knew that he would move to Harlem, where he took on a job as a waiter at one of his favorite bars, Small's Paradise, after being fired from the railroad job due to his rude behavior toward the white patrons. In Harlem, Malcolm was introduced to many other sides of city life, and he began heavy use of alcohol and marijuana.

During this time, Malcolm used a railroad pass to visit his hometown. He sees his siblings and also drops in to see Mrs. Swerlin. Everyone is shocked by his appearance of a bright red conk and wild zoot suit, but the local kids were impressed with his big city style.

Back in Harlem, Malcolm received a lesson on the history of the community, and learned that it had been occupied by various cultures prior to becoming known as it had then. The Dutch had first settled there, then Europeans, Irish, Jews and then African-Americans. This history also included a famous nightlife and music scene that attracted many white people to the area. Some Harlem clubs catered exclusively to white people. Malcolm listened with interest to all the customers who would tell stories of early Harlem.

Chapter 5 Analysis

In his early days in Harlem, Malcolm learned a lot in a short time, and was introduced to a lifestyle he had not known before, or at least not to the extent that it existed in Harlem. These were eye-opening experiences, and also demonstrated that many young black males such as he had to get involved in some type of illegal activities in order to survive. He also learned that many of these activities catered to white people--something he describes in greater detail in later chapters.

Malcolm lived in Harlem during a period of the "Black Renaissance" when many African-Americans earned reputations in the fine arts as quality musicians, many of whom Malcolm met and interacted with. Yet, as he later writes, many of these people could barely make a living. In addition, Harlem's role in catering to whites shed light on the hypocrisy of many high-powered whites who were clearly racist in their actions, yet secretly spent time in Harlem for a variety of reasons. All of this combined to further educate Malcolm in the inequalities facing black Americans. His street education also

played a large role in his own involvement in illegal activities, which would later land him in prison.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

"Detroit Red" opens with a discussion on the gambling scene, where Malcolm, among many others, would play a numbers gambling game. While he never hit big, he did occasionally win a few hundred dollars. Almost everyone played the numbers game in the poverty-stricken Harlem. It is in this chapter that Malcolm introduces the reader to West Indian Archie, a large black man who was a "runner" of the numbers. He had an excellent memory, and would memorize the numbers that everyone played rather than keeping slips--this was advantageous because he would never be caught by detectives with gambling papers.

Malcolm also learned how to detect undercover police officers, a necessary ability for hustlers who were involved in illegal activities. He also learned much more about the various activities in Harlem, including robbery and prostitution. Malcolm was banned from Small's after accidentally giving a prostitute's phone number to an undercover police officer. At this point, Malcolm did not take on another job, but began selling marijuana instead (called reefers in the book). He worked closely with his friend Sammy, the only person in Harlem he trusted. When the local detectives started trailing him, he took his "job" on the road and used his old railroad passes to travel for free, following musicians and selling reefers. Sophia continued to visit Malcolm throughout his time in Harlem.

When Malcolm received a draft notice during World War II, he evaded the draft as many other black men did. His viewpoint was that the whites had treated his people poorly for years, and now they expected them to go and fight for the country. When Malcolm went in for the required physical, he pretended to be crazy--his plan worked, and he was refused admission into the Army.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter continues to show the underworld of Harlem and Malcolm further narrates his downward spiral into drug addiction and illegal activities. His activities continue to lead him on the path toward prison.

His opposition to serving in the Army is also significant, as he makes a strong case why blacks should not have served in the war to fight and give their lives for a country that had treated them so poorly.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

As a hustler, robber and drug dealer, Malcolm had many close brushes with the law. He and Sammy committed some burglaries together, and Malcolm stayed high on a variety of narcotics to keep from feeling nervous and worried all the time. He began running numbers and had regular contact with West Indian Archie. At this time, he also began working with a local madam. By this time, Harlem had lost much of its nightlife, with most whites now afraid to go into Harlem. Nevertheless, the underground nightlife continued. Malcolm's role for the madam was to meet white people downtown and escort them into Harlem, where they could meet up with black prostitutes. Malcolm noticed that most of these men were older, influential members of the white society.

Malcolm was twice questioned on local robberies because the description of the robber closely matched his own. He went to work downtown for a Jew named Hymie, who was also involved in illegal activities. Hymie would talk with Malcolm about the similarities between the oppression of Jews and the oppression of blacks. Hymie was later murdered.

As Malcolm continued in his illegal activities, he knew that his time was short if he were to continue the way he was.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Malcolm's ongoing activities continued to make him a target of local police and other hustlers. His association with Hymie was also one that influenced how he viewed white people, which he later discusses in more detail as he begins to see the whites as "devils" and recounts all the various white people he had known throughout his life.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

West Indian Archie had it out for Malcolm, for whatever reason. Regardless, this type of standoff in Harlem typically ended in someone's death. Neither one could back down from the standoff, so Malcolm continued about his days with his ears to the "wire," or grapevine, trying to figure out why Archie was after him. Malcolm had been carrying pistols for some time by this point, and he continued to do so during this time. He also continued his relationships with many well-known musicians.

After a date with a friend to see Billie Holliday, Malcolm ended up alone in a bar where he was approached by Archie. Due to luck, some friends of Archie's interfered and neither Archie nor Malcolm was hurt, although one would have ended up shot if the friends hadn't interfered. By this point, Malcolm was at his end in Harlem. His friend Sammy contacted Malcolm's old Boston friend, Shorty, who came and took Malcolm back to Boston. Malcolm was a heavy drug user at this point in time. Meanwhile, Sophia and Malcolm had continued to see each other, even though she had married a wealthy white man.

Chapter 8 Analysis

This chapter marks the beginning of the end in many ways. Malcolm had run out of options in Harlem and had no choice but to leave. He took this history to Boston; in short time he would run out of luck and end up in prison. It is during his time in prison that he underwent a complete turnaround, found the religion of Islam and began the work for which he is famous.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Back in Boston, Malcolm quickly put together a small gang consisting of Shorty, Sophia, her sister and their friend Rudy. (His sister Ella, shocked at what Malcolm had become, was obvious about her disappointment, but still stood by him.) With the new gang's combined connections, they began a series of house robberies. Rudy worked as a waiter for whites' upper class parties, and Sophia and her sister were able to get into houses for "tours" by putting on acts, such as pretending to be college students conducting surveys. The gang managed some successful robberies for a while, until Malcolm began to make some serious mistakes.

One night, Malcolm saw Sophia and her sister in a bar with a friend of Sophia's husband's. Rather than ignoring them, Malcolm walked over and talked to them. He was using snow cocaine during this time, a drug that gives the user a sense of over-confidence. The friend, understanding that Malcolm knew Sophia, later broke into Malcolm's apartment. Malcolm first hid under the bed, and then later emerged, realizing he did not have his gun on him. The man left the apartment.

Later, Malcolm took a stolen watch to a jeweler to be repaired. The victim had described the repair, and undercover cops were at all the jewelers, waiting for the burglar to show up. Malcolm was picked up by a plain-clothes cop; when he had an opportunity to shoot the cop in the back, he did not do so; instead, he offered his gun to the cop, who was shocked, but obviously appreciative of the fact that he could have been killed but was not. Two more detectives emerged, and Malcolm was arrested. That same day, Sophia's husband went to Malcolm's apartment with the intent to kill him. If Malcolm had not been arrested, he would have been shot by the husband. Malcolm states that he believes all of these coincidences were the work of his god, Allah.

Malcolm was sentenced to prison for the robbery. He noted how his involvement with a white woman was treated as a more serious crime than the burglaries.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Throughout this chapter, Malcolm reflects on his downward spiral and a few key topics. For one, he was very self-aware throughout this period in his life, and very honest in his recollection of it. He clearly understood that his actions were leading him down a dead-end path. He also understood that many blacks were unable to exist solely on "real" work. Shorty, for instance, had been able to make a career out of his music, yet he was constantly struggling. Malcolm had witnessed this for many well-known musicians as well. This was combined with his disillusionment with the "upper class" blacks who tried, in his mind, to associate themselves with whites and turn their backs on fellow blacks in order to get ahead. To Malcolm, the ways of hustling and other illegal activities were



preferable because they were honest in the fact that people in the ghetto did not put on airs and try to be something they were not.

Also important in this chapter is the reaction of whites to Malcolm's relationship with a white woman. During his interrogation of the robberies, the fact that he was involved with Sophia seemed to be of greater importance than the fact that he had broken into homes and stolen. His real crime, then, was being with a white woman. Had Sophia ever informed her husband about her involvement with Malcolm, it surely would have meant his death. This was evidenced by her husband coming to find him on the night Malcolm was arrested.

Finally, Malcolm's arrest turns out to be a good thing not only in that he avoided Sophia's husband, but also because in prison, he came to know the Islamic religion, which completely turned his life around. He found a reason to learn, study English and history and gain a new perspective on the plight of the blacks in America and throughout the world--themes that would be very important in his later work. In other words, he believed that his troubles happened for a reason.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

At the age of twenty-one, Malcolm was sentenced to eight to ten years in prison, of which he served seven. During his first few weeks, he earned the nickname "Satan" for his constant cursing of God. Alone in his cell, he would shout out curses against God, religion, and the officials.

The Charleston State prison was an ugly place. Each prisoner had his own cell, but there was only a bucket for a toilet, and the stench along the row of cells was horrible.

Before long, Malcolm learned how to work the guards through bribes for cigarettes and reefers. He learned that cigarettes were the equivalent of money in prison. He also met a fellow inmate, Bimbi, a well-read, well-spoken prisoner who greatly impressed Malcolm. Bimbi was able to command the respect of all those around him through his words, not force. Even the guards seemed to respect Bimbi, and they would hang around to listen to him when he spoke. Further, Bimbi didn't swear. At the time, Malcolm writes, his own vocabulary probably consisted of about two hundred words, mostly profanity.

At one point, Malcolm tried arguing with Bimbi about religion. A self-professed atheist, Malcolm was not able to argue with Bimbi; in fact, he had to concede and stop cursing against God because Bimbi's arguments were so convincing.

Bimbi seemed to like Malcolm, and helped him sign up for one of the correspondence courses offered through the prison. Malcolm's sister Hilda suggested he take a course in English. Malcolm's writing was so bad he wrote that he had forgotten English. His handwriting and language skills were very poor, and letter writing was now one of his primary methods of contact with the outside world, including his siblings.

It is also during his stay in Charleston that Malcolm received an interesting letter from his brother, Philbert. In the letter, Philbert wrote of the "natural religion of the black man," Islam. Malcolm wrote a scathing letter in return. Then, he received another letter from his younger brother, Reginald, also speaking of the religion. In the letter, Reginald did not reveal all about the religion, but promised Malcolm good things if he gave up cigarettes and eating pork. Having spent some time with Reginald in Harlem, Malcolm was more open to his brother's suggestion. He also thought it would be a good way to confuse the prison guards and put them on edge, which it did. Both other inmates and the guards thought it odd when Malcolm gave up these things, and it raised questions within the prison.

Meanwhile, Malcolm's sister Ella had arranged a transfer to another prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts. This prison had much better conditions. It was an experimental prison with rooms for each inmate instead of cells. Malcolm writes about how all prisoners who



are released may not recall much about the time they served (including himself), but they all remember the bars. He writes how rehabilitation is impossible as long as the bars remain.

The library at Norfolk was extensive, donated by a wealthy man named Parkhurst. Malcolm began a self-education that included reading nearly everything he could get his hands on. In particular, he read a lot of history and philosophy, from which he was able to better understand how blacks were treated around the world. He also further shaped his own philosophies.

While Malcolm was in Norfolk, his siblings continued to write to him about this "new" religion, and Reginald came to visit him. During the visit, Reginald slowly worked up to talking about it, which effectively kept Malcolm anticipating the rewards for giving up smoking and pork. When Reginald finally spoke, he told Malcolm about the Nation of Islam and its leader, Elijah Muhammad. He spoke of how the white man is the devil and how history had been distorted by the whites. Malcolm reflected on his own past, and much of this rang true for him. Malcolm's siblings encouraged him to write to Elijah Muhammad, which in part influenced his further study of penmanship and writing skills. Malcolm did choose to write Elijah, and wrote him on a regular basis thereafter.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Malcolm's transformation began in prison as he first witnessed the power of education through Bimbi, and later through his introduction to the Nation of Islam. Through his self-taught education, Malcolm read greatly in religion and history and learned how history had been distorted. He learned of great black Americans about whom he had previously known nothing, such as Nat Turner. He came to understand that if all blacks were educated in these matters, they would be able to see things differently, a concept that he later carried into his many public speaking engagements.

Most importantly, however, was his introduction to the Nation of Islam and the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. His own experiences echoed the sentiment that the white man was the devil. When Malcolm did write Muhammad at the encouragement of his siblings, he was embarrassed about his past and writing skills, yet Muhammad did not judge him. Rather, he wrote back stating how many blacks had no choice but to turn to crime in order to survive in the repressive society built by whites. He enclosed \$5.00 in the letter, encouraging Malcolm to continue his studies.

Free from the haze of drug addiction, and with access to the library supplied by Parkhurst, Malcolm was able to understand things he never would have been able to outside of prison. He writes that prison was the best thing that could have happened to him. In addition, with his newfound belief in God, or Allah, he came to understand how his life events happened for a reason and under the guidance and direction of Allah.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

As Malcolm begins his correspondence with Elijah Muhammad, he writes of his inadequacy with the English language. His solution was to copy every page of the dictionary, a page a day. Through this rigorous exercise, he learned a vast vocabulary and was able to better communicate, both in writing, and later in his speaking engagements.

Malcolm continued his education, reading about a number of historical events where whites suppressed others of color, such as the English control over India where Mahatma Gandhi struggled against oppression. Malcolm realized that racism was not merely an issue of civil rights in America, but of human rights throughout the world.

As Malcolm began a regular correspondence with Elijah Muhammad, he learned that his brother Reginald had been suspended from the Nation of Islam. Reginald had continued a taboo relationship, and Malcolm wrote a letter to Muhammad in defense of his brother. That night, Malcolm had a dream in which an Asian man visited him. He later came to see this as a vision of the true leader of the black people. Malcolm received a letter in return from Elijah Muhammad, stating that if he had believed the truth before, but now doubted it, then he didn't believe the truth in the first place.

Malcolm came to understand that his brother was wrong and the Nation was right. As a result of this rejection from the Nation and from his own family, Reginald became insane and he was admitted to an institution. At the time, Malcolm saw this as Allah's way of punishing Reginald.

Meanwhile, Malcolm began spreading the word of the Nation of Islam to his fellow inmates. He continued his education, and started taking parts in debates in prison and giving lectures, receiving training from the prison debating society. During the last year of his sentence, Malcolm was transferred back to Charleston. While a different reason was given, he knew that it was because of his teachings of Islam (the Nation of Islam) to his fellow inmates that were seen as a threat.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Malcolm's treatment of his brother Reginald was at the time understandable, but in the larger sense, it foreshadows the future accusations made against Elijah Muhammad, who was accused by his sons of the same immoral acts. Malcolm later came to realize that Reginald's insanity was a result of the hurt he felt from the rejection by his religion and family.

Malcolm's continuing education (his "university," as he called it) also pointed the way for his later arguments against integration and toward a more global view of human rights.



As he learned of oppression around the world, Malcolm realized that civil rights and integration were not the answer (at least for him) and that civil rights weren't even an issue until human rights were granted. He began speaking out against the civil rights activists of his time. The teachings that whites were the devils rang true for him at the time as well, but he would later back down on this issue through interactions with certain whites. However, while in prison, this idea made sense as he reflected on his past.

His early teachings in prison, debates and public speaking opportunities also paved the way for his teachings once out of prison. He clearly made an impact upon the other inmates. This was evidenced both by the responses he got from them and by his subsequent transfer back to Charleston. Another key element to the teachings of the Nation was that ex-convicts were not chastised. Instead, the Nation allowed released prisoners an opportunity to change, one that was not readily available elsewhere. The Nation forgave people of their past sins, just as Elijah Muhammad had forgiven Malcolm when he first wrote to him.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Upon his release from prison in 1952, Malcolm moved to Detroit, Michigan, to be with his brother Wilfred and to become involved with a temple of practicing Muslims. It was after his release that he purchased his well-known glasses, in addition to a suitcase and a wristwatch.

He continued his communications with Elijah Muhammad. When he finally had the opportunity to meet Muhammad in person, Malcolm spoke of his discontent with the Nation's lack of recruiting methods for new members. At the time, the attitude was that people would come when they were ready. Malcolm, however, wanted to see a more active recruitment. Elijah Muhammad accepted his suggestions, and Malcolm began recruiting members. He would meet with Muhammad regularly to keep him informed of new developments.

It was also at this time that Malcolm dropped his last name of "Little" and began using "X." The reason was that during slavery, whites had stripped blacks of their last names and instead assigned them random names. No black person in America knew his or her real birth names, and so, by using X, Malcolm symbolized the unknown. Elijah Muhammad, impressed with Malcolm's commitment, made him the minister of the Detroit temple.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Malcolm demonstrated his dedication to the Nation of Islam and used his skills learned on the streets of Harlem and honed in prison to recruit new members to the Nation. His first purchases out of prison are significant in that he quickly traveled a lot on behalf of the Nation. His ability to influence others, combined with an education that could provide the necessary information (much like Bimbi at the Charleston prison), made him the perfect spokesperson. He was also very passionate about his mission and had a somewhat blind faith in Elijah Muhammad, believing in him completely. This devotion would later be challenged.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Malcolm's devotion to Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam and dedication to teaching others about the religion continued. He quit his job to study full-time under Elijah Muhammad and to serve the Nation. He was sent to Boston to open a temple, which he did successfully in only a few months. While there, he reunited with his old friend, Shorty. They had a cordial visit, although Shorty was not interested in the religion.

One of the methods he used to "fire up" other blacks was to speak in detail about the horrors of slavery to show how the white man was the devil. Once Malcolm had his temple going successfully, he was moved to Philadelphia, where he was again successful in recruiting new members and spreading the word. Then, impressed with Malcolm's record and dedication, Elijah Muhammad sent him to open yet another temple in an area where there were millions of blacks...New York City.

Once in New York, Malcolm saw some of the people he had known previously. Many were shocked at his transformation. Malcolm learned that his old friend Sammy had died of a drug overdose. He also learned that West Indian Archie was very ill, and he went to visit. While there, they made peace, and Malcolm spoke of how Archie's incredible memory could have been put to much greater use if they had lived in a different society. He spoke briefly about his religion, and Archie was happy for Malcolm that he had changed. Malcolm left, leaving Archie with all the money he had on him at the time.

Malcolm continued to preach that the white man's religion had brainwashed the blacks into worshipping a blond, blue-eyed man. He also continued to talk about the evils of slavery and the many evils that were still done against blacks. However, he had a harder time recruiting in New York. This was in part, he believed, due to the strict moral code and discipline required. The temple continued to grow, but more slowly than Malcolm preferred.

It was during this time that Malcolm began to think about women. While he did not allow himself to feel much for women, one did catch his eye, and he believed she would make a good Islamic wife. Her name was Betty, and she was a nurse. In 1958, Malcolm proposed-over the phone. She accepted without hesitation, and they had a small wedding with the blessings of Elijah Muhammad. The wedding surprised not only members of the organization, but also Malcolm's family. While Malcolm's view toward women was one of viewing them as the weaker sex, he also wrote about the differences in the concept of love between the Western religions and Islam. He wrote that the white man falls in love with a woman's beauty, which fades, while Islam teaches men to look into the inner woman, and for women to see the inner man. It was also during this time, five years later, that Ella, Malcolm's sister, decided to accept the Nation of Islam's faith.



At the close of the chapter, Malcolm relates an incident that demonstrated the strength of the nation of Islam. A young black man, who was a member of the Nation, was severely beaten by cops as he passed by a street scuffle. The man's head was cracked open and he required extensive medical treatment; however, the police had kept him at the station, where he was unconscious and bleeding. After a group of the Islams gathered outside the precinct, Malcolm was allowed inside. The police asked Malcolm to get rid of the crowd outside, but he replied that the crowd was the police's problem. The crowd left once they were assured that the young man, Brother Hinton, was receiving medical care. Following this incident, the Nation of Islam sued on behalf of Hinton, and the jury awarded him \$70,000, the largest award against police brutality up to that time.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Malcolm's recruiting efforts and dedication to the Nation are significant because he sought to do the best for the organization. His complete devotion and trust in Elijah Muhammad is also important. Malcolm turned his life over to the Nation and to Muhammad. He continually speaks of his feelings toward Muhammad, the man who did not reject him while in prison and who helped him turn his life around. All of this is important, as these things will later be challenged. However, Malcolm's respect for Muhammad is very apparent, even in the retelling of the story after Malcolm's separation from the Nation.

Malcolm's marriage to Betty demonstrates his awkward ways with women, which developed through his earlier relationships with women. Previously, he had never been involved in a committed relationship. Although he is very controlled with his emotions, proposing over the phone, it seems that Betty had an understanding of his awkwardness and could sense that he cared for her more than he showed on the outside.

Finally, the incident with Brother Hinton demonstrates the growing power and success of the Nation of Islam and its tangible impact in society.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

The Nation of Islam began to receive a lot of media attention, and Malcolm frequently spoke on behalf of the Nation. He always credited Elijah Muhammad, who had expressed complete trust in Malcolm and gave him free rein to represent the Nation how he saw best. Malcolm became well known, often cited by whites as the "angry black man." He began making appearances on radio and speaking at universities. He wrote various newspaper columns and started his own paper, "Muhammad Speaks."

Despite the attention, Malcolm felt that the media only focused on the Nation's attitude toward whites and the separatist activities, which were in direct opposition to the prominent integration messages being used by other black leaders. One television program on the Nation, titled "The Hate that Hate Produced" focused on the militant views of the Nation. Malcolm found this to be entirely hypocritical, saying that it was ridiculous for whites to accuse others of hate, given their history and actions. Malcolm was also upset that the positive aspects of the Nation were not publicized, such as the organization's activities that reformed drug addicts and convicts.

Malcolm continued to speak for the organization as Elijah Muhammad became unable to due to illness. Malcolm's popularity continued and he found that other ministers were becoming jealous of him.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Malcolm's work continued to bring attention to the Nation, and Malcolm's presence as an angry man contributed to the attention and resulted in his fame. However, he never lost sight of Elijah Muhammad. He also continued to fight for media attention of the good works of the Nation that were so often overlooked by the media. This was a continuous struggle. As a former convict, however, Malcolm felt strongly about the Nation's positive work in helping black youths get off drugs and former convicts find purpose and direction.

As Malcolm's fame grew, the jealousy that arose in others would later become important as it had a direct result on Malcolm's separation with the Nation. Meanwhile, however, Malcolm continued his work in the name of Elijah Muhammad with unflinching devotion and zeal.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Despite Malcolm's differences with the civil rights movement, he strove to create unity in his public appearances because he felt strongly that black unity was the solution. He noted in this chapter that he felt that educated black liberals, not whites, were his biggest opponents. They sought integration while Malcolm did not. The press, however, would try to use these differences against Malcolm, but he would redirect questions to this end not by criticizing the civil rights activists, but by pointing out where they could do more. Malcolm did not want to fall into the trap that these questions were aimed at—that of dividing the black community.

Malcolm continued his arguments that racism was a human rights issue, not one of civil rights. He believed that blacks needed to combine their strengths and create a situation where they were self-reliant, not integrated.

During this time, he was invited to speak at many universities, where a book about black Muslims was used in the classroom. At one of these speaking engagements at Harvard University, he looked out a window and saw the apartment where his gang of the past had planned their robberies. He said that he lived like an animal, and was keenly aware of how the Nation of Islam saved him. In recalling the Greek myth of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun, Malcolm promised himself that he would always remember that it was Allah who gave him wings to fly, not himself.

Chapter 15 Analysis

While Malcolm was very clear in his disagreements with the civil rights activists, he was careful to continue to speak for black unity. He realized that the differences between himself and other leaders could create separatism within the black community, something he did not want to see. However, he was still clear in his disapproval, citing the Long March to Washington, which he says, lost its power because its leaders were funded by white philanthropists.

Malcolm's rising fame is contrasted with his realization while speaking at Harvard. He realized that he ran the danger of taking credit for himself, and when he saw that apartment out the window, he was quickly aware of how Allah protected him and guided him to where he was at that point.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

The chapter opens in 1961, with Elijah Muhammad's failing health. He is relocated to Phoenix after doctors recommend a drier climate. At this, Malcolm is given more responsibilities within the organization. This led to further jealousy within the Nation. Allegations were made against him, including that he used the organization's money for his own purposes. His new responsibilities also kept him away from his family for weeks at a time, although Betty was a supportive wife and understood the importance of his work.

Despite the allegations against him, what were more troubling to Malcolm were the rumors that Elijah Muhammad had engaged in some immoral activities. The Nation followed a very strict moral code, and Malcolm believed in the necessity of a very strong spiritual leader after which the members, particularly the top personnel, followed.

Upon further investigation with Elijah's son, Wallace, Malcolm discovered that Muhammad had been involved sexually with three of his former secretaries and that he had illicit children. Further, the women told him that while Muhammad was kind to Malcolm's face, he criticized him behind his back. Malcolm and Wallace devised a plan to work with the ministry, arguing that a man's social work was more important than his personal errors.

Shortly thereafter, President Kennedy was assassinated, and Malcolm was called for a statement. His comments that the white's abusive culture now led to the killing of its own people was misinterpreted and printed erroneously. However, Muhammad felt that the comments were inappropriate and he suspended Malcolm for ninety days. Malcolm accepted his punishment, but also learned of death threats against him from within the organization. Upon reflection, he realized that these threats could have come from no other than Elijah Muhammad himself.

After adjusting to the shock and betrayal of this information from an organization he had devoted himself to for twelve years, Malcolm decided to form his own organization. He still felt strongly about black unity and human rights. He started the Muslim Mosque, Inc., and received a lot of support. To more fully realize his vision, he wanted to travel to Mecca. He asked for money from his sister Ella, who gave it to him with no questions asked.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Malcolm's shock and disbelief at the actions against him committed by the Nation of Islam were understandable. His leader, in whom he had so much personally invested, had let him down considerably and had fallen in his eyes. Yet, just as Elijah Muhammad



had supported Malcolm while he was in prison, Malcolm worked tirelessly to support Muhammad by speaking about his contributions to the organization and to society.

However, once he learned of the death warrant out against him, Malcolm realized his work with the Nation was over. He also thought that his ninety-day suspension over the Kennedy assassination remarks was too harsh a punishment, but he realized that it all fit with what he was learning. Throughout the turmoil, Malcolm's wife Betty remained supportive of him and never complained.

Malcolm received a lot of support when he opened his new organization. It is also in this chapter that Malcolm meets Cassius Clay, later known as the great boxer, Muhammad Ali. Their relationship was an important one for Malcolm.

This point in Malcolm's life was a major turning point. When it seemed that everyone was against him, he was once again able to find strength, with the help of Allah, and move forward.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Malcolm had been advised by a number of people that he needed to make a pilgrimage to Mecca to learn about "true Islam." Although his sister Ella had been saving money to make the pilgrimage herself, she gladly gave Malcolm the money so he could go. In the process of applying for his travel Visa, he met the Saudi ambassador, Mr. Shawarbi. The ambassador gave Malcolm a book on Islam and he also informed Malcolm that his activities had been followed by the author of the book, Adb-ar-Rhman Azzam. Mr. Shawarbi also gave him the number for his son and Mr. Azzam's son's number in Jedda.

As Malcolm boarded the plane following a stop in Germany, Malcolm saw many people leaving for the same pilgrimage, and they were all skin colors, including white. He then realized that skin color was not the problem there that it was back in America. He felt a freedom among the friendship and warmth of the Muslims, despite skin color.

The pilgrimage made an impact on Malcolm. He was surprised to learn that Cairo was such an industrialized city with modern schools. He also met Mr. Shawarbi's son. While in Cairo, others he met were surprised to meet a black Muslim from America. On his return trip, Malcolm encountered problems showing his status as a Muslim, but was aided by Mr. Azzam.

At the end of the pilgrimage, Malcolm wrote to both his family and in a public letter about what he had learned; namely, that he had met a number of fellow Muslims who were white, and through their belief in God, had been removed of their "whiteness." By this, he meant that the historic evils and attitudes of the whites were not present in these Muslims. He compared America's racism to Germany's, stating that Germany eventually destroyed its own people. Malcolm was grateful to Allah for the warm treatment he had received from his fellow white Muslims.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Malcolm's pilgrimage was a major turning point for him. For the first time, he was received with open arms by whites and treated as an equal. His faith, shared by others, overcame any boundaries created by skin color, and as he noted, it removed the "whiteness" of the white Muslims. For a man who had previously considered all whites to be born of evil, this was a crucial realization. The pilgrimage also shows Malcolm's willingness to be open to other experiences and his ability to change. He was again struck by the power of Allah and the ability of the Muslim faith to bring people together. He understood that there was a lot of change required in America, but the pilgrimage helped support his faith and belief in the power of Allah. He also noted that he felt a sense of hope for the situation in America, as he had met some younger whites who he

believed could see the problems facing the country. He signed his letters with a new Arabic name, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

On the return trip from the pilgrimage, Malcolm visited a number of African countries. On these trips, he discovered that his fame was known throughout the world, not just in America, which surprised him. He also started to see the issues he felt so strongly about as being more than simply a religious issue. He saw the continued need for black unity.

On this trip, he also learned that his name was being linked to some violence in America. To clear his name and clarify his purpose, he called a press conference. The press was eager to meet the new Malcolm, El-Haij Malik El-Shabazz. Malcolm called for the need for unified blacks throughout the world. He also used the term Afro-Americans for the first time. He announced his plans to form a new organization to further this idea, the Organization of African Unity (OAAU). He saw this organization as one that would enlist the support from African countries to help alleviate the problems in America. His ongoing belief in a worldwide, unified support system helped form the concept, as well as the support and reception he'd received on his travels.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Throughout his life, Malcolm had always believed that a global, unified front was the solution to the problem of racism. He saw that racism was a human rights issue. His travels and positive reception abroad further strengthened these beliefs, which led to his formation of the OAAU. Unfortunately, he was not able to see this organization develop.

Malcolm's changing view of whites is also significant, as he came to admit that his previous statements against whites had been too general--but his experiences up to that point had supported his narrow views. His trips abroad showed him another side of whites that he had not previously known.

Also significantly, Malcolm learned that what he had learned was Islam through the Nation of Islam was quite different from "true Islam." This was important, as again, he learned that not all whites were "devils." In his ongoing search for the truth, Malcolm decides to form the OAAU, which would closely support his beliefs.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

This final chapter takes place while Malcolm is still alive, although it does not go into a lot of detail about his actions during 1965, when he met Alex Haley, who helped co-write and edit the autobiography. Instead, the chapter outlines his vision and philosophies and how he plans to develop the new organization, the OAAU.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Once again, Malcolm predicts his future by stating that he is aware of the possibility he will be assassinated. His predictions of his own death show up periodically throughout the book, but of course, so close to his assassination, it is a poignant comment. Malcolm had plans to continue his work against racism. He was keenly aware that each day could be his last, and he sought to use each day effectively for his work.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

This chapter was written by Alex Haley, who had helped write and edit the autobiography, which had come to fruition as a result of thousands of hours of taped recordings between the two men. Malcolm never saw the finished manuscript of the book.

Chapter 20 Analysis

Alex Haley reviews the life of Malcolm X and discusses how he had difficulty obtaining the information for the book. He also provides an overview of the events leading up to and following Malcolm's death. Haley wrote that he tried his best to be a dispassionate chronicler of Malcolm's life, but that it had been difficult because Malcolm had been such an electric personality.



Characters

Amilah

Amilah (or Gamilah, as mentioned in Alex Haley's epilogue) was Malcolm X and Sister Betty's fourth daughter, born in 1964.

West Indian Archie

West Indian Archie was "one of Harlem's *really* bad Negroes," according to Malcolm. Still, Malcolm placed many numbers bets with Archie during the mid-1940s, when Malcolm himself was working in the numbers business. Archie threatened to kill Malcolm over a misunderstanding about money, but Shorty and Sammy arranged to have Malcolm leave town.

Attallah

Attallah was Malcolm X and Sister Betty's first daughter, born in 1958. She was named after Attilah the Hun, who sacked Rome.

Bimbi

Malcolm met Bimbi in jail. Bimbi, an old burglar, encouraged Malcolm to read and study and was the first man Malcolm had ever met who commanded respect simply with his words.

Sister Clara

Sister Clara was married to Elijah Muhammad and was, according to Malcolm X, a "dark, good wife."

Ella Mae Collins

Ella was one of Malcolm's father's three children from a previous marriage. Malcolm first met her while he was in seventh grade, and he considered her the proudest black woman he had ever seen. She owned property in Boston and was successful enough in business to help bring a number of her relatives from Georgia to live in Boston. The summer Malcolm spent in Boston with her changed his life, especially when he saw the contrast between the small town he lived in and the big city. The next year, he moved to Boston to live with her.



After a while, Malcolm decided that Ella was a snob and dismissed her efforts to help him. She wanted Malcolm to improve himself, but as a teenager and young adult he was only interested in having fun. After Malcolm converted to Islam, he encouraged her to convert as well. After a number of years, she converted and even set up a language school for young Muslim girls. She also loaned Malcolm the money to make his pilgrimage to Mecca.

Earl

Earl was one of Malcolm's father's three children from a previous marriage. He lived in Boston. When he became an adult, he was a successful singer who went by the name Jimmy Carleton.

El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz

See Malcolm X

Ilyasah

Ilyasah (from Ilyas, Arabic for Elijah, according to Malcolm) was Malcolm X and Sister Betty's third daughter, born in 1962.

Elijah Karriem

See Elijah Muhammad

Laura

Malcolm met Laura while working at an ice cream parlor in Ella's ritzy black neighborhood. Although she came from a "good" family and was studious, Laura distinguished herself to Malcolm by her friendliness. Ella became very fond of Laura and encouraged Malcolm to see her often. He loved taking Laura to dances, but she had to lie to her family about where she was going. According to Malcolm, their relationship started Laura on the downward path involving drugs, alcohol, and prostitution, for which he blamed himself.

Reverend Earl (Early) Little

Earl Little was Malcolm's father, a Baptist preacher who also advocated the "back-to-Africa" teachings of Marcus Garvey. He chose to do this kind of work because, according to Malcolm, he had seen three of his brothers killed by white men. A large man, well over six feet, and not typically intimidated, Little had to move his large family



around more than he would have liked because much of his preaching angered many local whites. He was murdered in 1931 by a white racist group in Lansing, Michigan, when Malcolm was about six years old.

Earl treated Malcolm a bit better than he treated his other children; Malcolm always wondered whether this favoritism was because his skin was lighter than the other children's. Earl had eleven children, three from a previous marriage and eight with Louise, Malcolm's mother. Louise and Earl fought often, usually over Louise's dietary restrictions.

Hilda Little

Hilda was Malcolm's quiet older sister. He remembers that she served as his 'second mother.' After their father died, Hilda helped around the house by taking care of the younger children while Louise went to work

Louise Little

Louise Little was Malcolm's mother, born in Grenada to a black woman who had been raped by a white man, according to Malcolm. She had very light skin and was often mistaken for a white woman. This fact helped her get jobs as a maid after her husband died, but as soon as her white employers realized that she was black—often when one of her children dropped by where she worked—she would be fired.

Louise had definite ideas about what she and her family should eat. For example, she refused to allow her children to eat rabbit or pork, and very often these restrictions were the source of fights that erupted between her and her husband. She occasionally had visions, and the day Earl was murdered she had a vision of his death.

After Earl died, the state welfare officials tried to take Louise's children away. Eventually she broke down under the stress of trying to rear her eight children alone. The house fell into disrepair, and the state placed all of her children in different homes and placed her in a mental asylum for twenty-six years. In 1963, her son Philbert removed her from the asylum and took her in.

Malcolm Little

See Malcolm X

Philbert Little

Philbert was one of Malcolm's older brothers who distinguished himself by enjoying his father's preaching, while Malcolm found it confusing. When Philbert and Malcolm weren't fighting with each other, they ganged up against other children. Philbert



converted to the Nation of Islam before Malcolm did and became a temple minister in Lansing, Michigan.

Reginald Little

Reginald was one of Malcolm's younger brothers and was always in ill health due to a hernia. Malcolm worked to have Reginald look up to him in the same way that Malcolm respected Wilfred. When Reginald was a teenager, he joined the merchant marine, but he left it and moved in with Malcolm in Harlem in the mid-1940s. Malcolm secured his brother a safe "hustle," or illegal way to make money, selling cheap clothes for about twice their worth, and was always impressed with Reginald's poise and street smarts. Reginald converted to the Nation of Islam but was kicked out for immoral activities before Malcolm left prison. He ended up in a mental asylum.

Robert Little

Robert was one of Malcolm's younger brothers. He spent time at Michigan State University, doing postgraduate work in psychology.

Wesley Little

Wesley was one of Malcolm's younger brothers.

Wilfred Little

Wilfred was the first child Earl had with Louise. Malcolm, as a child, felt very close to Wilfred and looked up to him, especially after their father was murdered. After his father's death, Wilfred quit school and took a job to help support the family. He converted to the Nation of Islam and became a temple minister in Detroit.

Yvonne Little

Yvonne was Malcolm's younger sister, born in 1929.

Mother Marie

Mother Marie was Elijah Muhammad's mother. Malcolm X loved to sit and listen to her tell stories about Elijah's childhood and humble beginnings.



Mary

Mary was one of Earl Little's three children from a previous marriage. She lived in Boston.

The Messenger

See Elijah Muhammad

Elijah Muhammad

Elijah Muhammad was the shy and slightly sickly leader of the Nation of Islam organization for some forty years from the mid-1930s. He and Malcolm first met after extensive correspondence while Malcolm was in jail. Malcolm, for the twelve years after he left prison and until his split with the Nation of Islam, revered Muhammad as if he were a god and served him as a minister and close advisor. Malcolm credited Muhammad for much of his knowledge about the world as well as for his rise from street-smart hustler to respected leader. The two shared an almost father-son relationship.

Muhammad came from a very poor background in Georgia, where he was born Elijah Poole. He had only a fourth-grade education and was sickly but worked to follow and spread the teachings of Master W. D. Fard. Fard taught Muhammad about Islam and that it was the best religion for American blacks. Eventually, Muhammad became a minister at one of Fard's temples and received the name Elijah Karriem. Muhammad's rise in the Nation of Islam was a steady one but was filled with setbacks such as the nearly six years he spent in jail for draft-dodging.

Malcolm X and Muhammad started to part ways in the early 1960s, after reports of Muhammad's illegitimate children surfaced and after Malcolm X became frustrated with the Nation's unwillingness to take stronger action on a number of issues. The final break occurred when Malcolm X made public statements about the Kennedy assassination, forcing Muhammad to "silence" him for ninety days.

Mr. Ostrowski

Mr. Ostrowski was Malcolm's English teacher at Mason Junior High School. Like many of the other teachers, he made racist jokes during class. When Malcolm was in eighth grade, Mr. Ostrowski asked him what he wanted to do with his life. When Malcolm answered, "be a lawyer," Mr. Ostrowski told him that blacks could not be lawyers. This incident crystallized Malcolm's discontentment about living in a small town after having spent the summer in Boston with Ella.



Elijah Poole

See Elijah Muhammad

Qubilah

Qubilah was Malcolm X and Sister Betty's second daughter, born in 1960.

Rudy

Rudy was one of Shorty's friends in Boston and was half Italian and half black. He worked for an employment agency that hired him out to wealthy white families as a waiter when they needed catering help for parties. His knowledge of wealthy households made him indispensable when Malcolm decided to gather together a burglary gang. Rudy, along with everyone else in the gang, eventually went to jail for the robberies.

Sammy the Pimp

Sammy the Pimp was one of Malcolm's best friends while he lived in Harlem during the 1940s. He was from Kentucky and had the reputation of having the best-looking whores in Harlem. Sammy "helped" Malcolm in a variety of ways, including getting him started in selling marijuana. Malcolm and Sammy partnered on a few robberies, but their relationship cooled when Malcolm hit Sammy's girlfriend and Sammy threatened him with a gun. However, Sammy later helped save Malcolm's life after Malcolm had angered dangerous people in Harlem. Sammy called Shorty, who came to Harlem and took Malcolm back to Boston.

Shorty

Malcolm met Shorty at a Boston pool hall soon after he moved there to live with Ella. He was from Lansing, Michigan, where Malcolm spent a few years of his childhood. Shorty found a job for Malcolm (whom he took to calling "Red") as a shoeshine boy at the famous Roseland State Ballroom. As well, he introduced Malcolm to all that the city had to offer, including drinking, gambling, expensive clothes, and women. Shorty helped save Malcolm's life by answering Sammy's call to take Malcolm back to Boston when he was threatened in Harlem

Sophia

Sophia, a well-to-do and attractive white woman, fell for Malcolm after she saw him and Laura dance together in Boston. They became a couple, breaking Laura's heart. Sophia gave Malcolm money that helped him move out of Ella's house and in with Shorty.



Malcolm X noted in his book that having a white, attractive girlfriend was an important status symbol for a black man during that period in Boston. After Malcolm moved to Harlem, Sophia visited him, even after she married a wealthy Boston man. She was eventually arrested with Shorty and Malcolm for armed robbery.

Sister Betty X

Sister Betty X served as an instructor to the women members of the Nation of Islam in housekeeping and hygiene. She was a nursing student when Malcolm X first noticed her and began to consider the possibility of their marriage. He did not waste much time courting her, dismissing the concept of romance, but asked her to marry him in a 1958 telephone conversation after the two had spent a minimal amount of time together. Malcolm X considered her a good Muslim wife who stood by him through good and bad times.

Malcolm X

Malcolm X had dramatic beginnings as the child of a Baptist preacher and his wife who were often threatened by gangs of angry whites. His father spread the ideas of black activist Marcus Garvey, and his mother was a light-skinned black woman from Grenada. He had seven brothers and sisters. Malcolm was a clever child who learned very early the value of making a fuss about anything that didn't please him. After his father was murdered and his mother was committed to a mental hospital, the family was split up and Malcolm went to live with the Gohannas family, who had previously fed him when his mother couldn't provide any food.

Throughout his early life, Malcolm X proved himself to be a ingenious man, combining street smarts with basic psychology to get what he wanted. He collected a number of nicknames based on the reddish tint of his skin and hair, for example, 'Red' and 'Detroit Red.' Eventually he became a drug addict and a criminal and was sent to jail for breaking into homes. In prison he discovered books and was converted to Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. This experience forever changed him and made him appreciative of education and hard work.

Malcolm, who took the last name X to symbolize the identity that was taken from blacks by whites during the American period of slavery, became a powerful speaker and leader who represented the Nation of Islam. But his style of organizing and leading varied greatly from Muhammad's. He also became bitterly disappointed at Muhammad's moral failings. Malcolm was ejected from the Nation but was excited to begin a new organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, reflecting his then less-harsh view of whites and an interest in internationalizing the black struggle.



Themes

Oppression and Slavery

One of Malcolm X's greatest desires was to open other African Americans' eyes to the history of black oppression and slavery in the United States and the world. The book's opening chapter immediately presents Malcolm's mother pregnant with him, struggling to save her family and home as white men threaten to harm them. By the end of the same chapter, the family's house has been burned down, and Malcolm's father has been murdered by a gang of white supremacists. Malcolm X's life has been defined by the oppression of his family and friends. His own abilities are ignored by a school counselor who dismisses young Malcolm's desire to become a lawyer or some other professional.

As an adult member of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X uses the violent history of slavery and oppression in the United States to shock those he tried to reach with his preaching. 'I wouldn't waste any time to start opening their eyes about the devil white man,' he remembers. "The dramatization of slavery never failed intensely to arouse Negroes hearing its horrors spelled out for the first time." Even after he is expelled from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X continues to tell the story of how poorly blacks have been treated in the United States, reminding his listeners that the poor treatment did not end when slavery was abolished. He tells fellow dinner guests in Ghana that racial violence in the United States is not unexpected, since 'black men had been living packed like animals and treated like lepers.'

Religious Conversion

Much of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is devoted to the author's conversion to Islam. Malcolm's conversion experience is classic in that he had fallen to the depths of depravity just before he embraced Islam through Elijah Muhammad and his Nation of Islam. His conversion takes place in prison, a place in which Malcolm has enough time and solitude to study and think. Malcolm leaves prison with all the fervor and energy of a new convert, impatient to spread his new awareness among his fellow blacks. To signify even further his separation from his old life, he takes a new name, Malcolm X.

Malcolm X later experiences a second conversion, to that which he calls in his book "the true Islam." After his expulsion from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X travels to Mecca on a religious pilgrimage, or *hajj*. On this *hajj* he has his second conversion after seeing the various skin colors of the Muslims around him during prayers. His political ideals change, and he decides that, while black people must work together on a global basis to change their condition, his earlier blanket condemnation of the white man was wrong. He writes a letter, in fact, to his followers back in the United States explaining that he has been "blessed by Allah with a new insight into the true religion of Islam and a better understanding of America's entire racial dilemma."



Leadership

One of the reasons for Malcolm X's split from the Nation of Islam is his disagreement with Elijah Muhammad about the style of leadership undertaken by the organization. Throughout the book, Malcolm X notes that he is a man of action. 'All of my life, as you know, I had been an activist, I had been impatient,' he says when remembering how he almost couldn't sit still in his eagerness to bring more converts to the Nation of Islam.

Muhammad's style is less assertive. After Malcolm X assumes a more involved role within the Nation, he expresses concerns about these differences. Malcolm X recalls, 'If I harbored any disappointment whatsoever, it was that privately I was convinced that our Nation of Islam could be an even greater force ... if we engaged in more *action*.' Malcolm X is a more forceful leader than his mentor, able of capturing the minds and hearts of diverse crowds of people. Many believe that this prompted the jealousy that developed between the two great men's supporters, ending in Malcolm X's ejection from the Nation and, ultimately, his death.

Self-Discovery through Education

The years in prison give Malcolm X the chance to contemplate who he is as well as what he can make of himself. He is aided by a surprisingly good library in jail, of which Malcolm X takes full advantage. As well, he takes correspondence courses in a variety of subjects—even Latin! It's in prison that he also learns about the Nation of Islam and decides to change his life through Elijah Muhammad's organization.

But for Malcolm X, the learning and self-discovery does not stop once he converts to Islam and leaves prison. Almost literally, he sits at the feet of his mentor, Muhammad, and learns the critical pieces of history that will help form his theories about race relations and politics. Malcolm X fervently believes all that Muhammad tells him, which, of course, makes it just that much harder when he discovers the suspect nature of Muhammad's interpretation of history, as well as his moral failings. This sets Malcolm X up for another phase of self-discovery, in which he seems to get even closer to his true self—out on his own, ejected from the Nation of Islam.



Style

Foreshadowing

Malcolm X uses foreshadowing to highlight how far his life has taken him as well as to prepare his readers for disappointment and trauma. For example, early in the book he speaks of his successes as well as of his less admirable points. When he moves to Boston, he relates, he hears about Harvard Law School. 'No one that day could have told me I would give an address before the Harvard Law School Forum some twenty years later,' he continues. A few sentences down the page, he hints, "I didn't know how familiar with Roseland I was going to become," referring to the many nights he spent dancing and partying at the famed ballroom.

Malcolm X's references to his death increase as the autobiography moves toward its finale. Much of this, of course, has to do with his awareness that some in the Nation of Islam want him dead after his split from the organization; but Malcolm X's allusions to his own death are still remarkable in their context. For example, he says that he considers each day to be "another borrowed day" and that he is living each day "as if [he were] already dead.'

Point of View

This autobiography was "told to" another party, Alex Haley, who edited and organized the information Malcolm X related to him in numerous conversations. Nonetheless, the book is written in the first person, with Malcolm X as the "I" in the story. It is written in a conversational style, almost as if the author is sitting across from the reader. Malcolm X's life is presented in a chronological fashion, opening with his birth and ending in 1965 just before he is murdered.

The reader of any autobiography should realize that the information in the book is selected from all of the events in the subject's life. Events and conversations are remembered through the lens of time; in this book, Malcolm remembers events decades after they took place. In addition, there were two people who made judgments about what would appear in the autobiography: Malcolm X *and* Alex Haley. In fact, in his epilogue, Haley notes that he had to struggle to keep Malcolm X speaking about his own life and not about Elijah Muhammad and also that some of the stories Malcolm X told him may have been somewhat stretched.

Historical Context

Struggle for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 1960s

Until a number of court cases struck down segregation of the races in the United States, blacks were barred or restricted—sometimes by law—from a variety of public venues, such as restaurants, neighborhoods, golf courses, schools, and movie theaters. The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka* made separate schools for blacks illegal. Over the next couple years, the Supreme Court handed down a series of decisions invalidating segregation of golf courses, swimming pools, and beaches.

Some historians see Rosa Parks's spontaneous 1955 refusal to give up her seat in the front of a Montgomery, Alabama, bus to a white man as the first step in the American civil rights movement. Parks, an African-American woman, was arrested and fined for violating the city's segregationist laws about where she was allowed to sit. Four days later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a young Baptist minister in Montgomery, urged a local bus boycott, and various black organizations supported his effort. By 1956, the boycott supporters won a small but critical victory when a federal district court issued an injunction prohibiting the racial segregation of buses in Montgomery.

The boycott and subsequent events catapulted King into the national limelight as a civil rights leader. During the Montgomery protest, King was jailed and his house was bombed. King's philosophy of non-violence attracted a large following in the late 1950s and 1960s. His tactics included peaceful demonstrations and marches, sit-ins at segregated facilities, a willingness to go to jail, and public disobedience to law. While Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam never directly advocated violence to accomplish their goals, neither did they reject the possibility that violence might be necessary—in direct contradiction to King's philosophy. In his autobiography, Malcolm X is somewhat disdainful of leaders such as King and accuses them of being co-opted by whites.

From the late 1950s through the 1960s, African Americans and supportive whites engaged in sit-ins and freedom marches, often at risk to their lives. Many of the demonstrations were met with violence, such as the 1963 confrontation between police and marchers in Birmingham, Alabama. The local police commissioner responded to the largely peaceful demonstration by releasing dogs and using cattle prods against the civil rights protesters. Malcolm X recalled this incident when he spoke with Arabic and African Muslims during his overseas trips in 1963 and 1964.

One of the largest civil rights demonstrations of that era was the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, led by King. Nearly a quarter-million Americans of varying backgrounds gathered in front of the Washington Monument to hear King deliver his now-famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Malcolm X belittles King and this demonstration in the book, calling the march the "Farce on Washington" and claiming that it was little more than an "integrated picnic."



Night Life in Harlem

The Cotton Club, a famous Harlem nightclub mentioned by Malcolm X in his autobiography, was open only to wealthy white patrons who wanted to sample some of the bawdy nightlife they had heard about. But African-American club owners opened their own establishments, some of which became popular after-hours spots for many of the black musicians with whom Malcolm spent time in Harlem.

Jazz and swing, two types of music Malcolm X mentioned enjoying while he was street hustler in both Boston and Harlem, gained a wide following from the mid 1930s onward and eventually became the most popular kind of music in the nightclubs frequented by Malcolm and his friends. Most dance establishments and nightclubs in the 1930s and 1940s were racially segregated. If blacks were allowed in white establishments it was usually on one specific night a week—such as the night Malcolm X remembered being reserved for domestic help at the famous Savoy in New York. As well, he remembered dancing to such jazz luminaries as Dinah Washington and Lionel Hampton at places such as the Savoy.

Origins and History of the Nation of Islam

The Islamic religion was founded by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The primary text for Islam is the Koran (or Qur'an), believed by Muslims (or Moslems) to be the final revelation by Allah, or God, to Muhammad. Muslims are to fulfill the five basic requirements, or "pillars," of Islam: belief that there is one God, Allah, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God; performance of five daily ritual prayers; giving alms, also known as a religious tax; observance of the dawn-to-sunset fast during the lunar month of Ramadan; and making the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Nation of Islam dates back to 1930, when a door-to-door salesman peddling cloth and other items appeared in a Detroit ghetto, telling anyone who would listen that the true religion for African Americans was not Christianity but Islam. He went by various names, but he appears in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* under the name Master W. D. Fard. He used both the Bible and the Koran in his preaching. The central teachings of the Nation as originally promulgated by Fard include the story of a black scientist named Yakub who, thousands of years ago, created a weaker race of white men who were permitted to have temporary dominance over the Earth. But soon, according to Nation doctrine, there would be an apocalyptic clash between the force of evil (whites) and good (blacks), with blacks winning. It is this theology that Malcolm X rebelled angrily against at the end of his autobiography, embracing, instead, what he called the 'true Islam' of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

Elijah Muhammad, also known as Elijah Poole, was one of Fard's most trusted lieutenants, taking the reins of the Nation of Islam after Fard's mysterious disappearance in 1934. Muhammad maintained leadership of the Nation for the next

four decades, establishing that Fard had been Allah and had appointed Muhammad as his official messenger.

The Nation approached the problems of racism in America in two ways: they urged economic independence for blacks (including a separate nation) and pushed members to recover their identities, which the Nation felt had been stolen from blacks when they were enslaved and brought to America. The Nation encouraged an almost Puritanical ethic for its members, including hard work, frugality, cleanliness, debt avoidance, and the prohibition of alcohol, drugs, smoking, and pork. The Nation of Islam became famous for its restaurants that sold bean pies and whiting—part of Muhammad's efforts to improve the health of the African-American community.

Critical Overview

Many reviewers of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* agree about the power and desire evident in the book. Truman Nelson, writing in the *Nation* soon after the release of the book, lauds it for its "dead-level honesty, its passion, its exalted purpose." And, according to Warner Berthoff in *New Literary History*, the way Malcolm X blends "his own life story with the full collective history of his milieu. . . gives Malcolm's testimony its strength and large authority."

Malcolm X's conversion to Islam and how that is relayed in the book is a commonly addressed subject in both the book's early and recent reviews. I. F. Stone, in an article for the *New York Review of Books* soon after the book's publication, notes, 'To understand Malcolm's experience, one must go to the literature of conversion,' such as William James' s classic examination *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Berthoff agrees, commenting, "Above all, the book is the story of a conversion and its consequences."

However full of praise the reviewers were after the book's release, though, discussions soon appeared over how much of an impact Alex Haley, Malcolm X's collaborator, had on the final project. The book was published not long after Malcolm X' s death, and critics such as David Demarest, Jr., in *CLA Journal* have acknowledged Haley's strong role. Demarest notes, "One is tempted to feel that had the book been entirely Malcolm's,... the book would have revealed less of Malcolm than it now does." But Nelson urges readers to "put aside" any misgivings they might have "about a book 'as told to' someone." Haley, according to Nelson, did a marvelous job of revealing the true sense of Malcolm X in the work's tone and words.

Many critics have noted the book's similarities to other famous autobiographies. Carol Ohmann, in the journal *American Quarterly*, compares Malcolm X's autobiography with Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, noting that the two books "resemble each other in the conceptions of the self they convey, ... and in the ways, looking backwards as autobiographers do, they pattern or structure the raw materials of their own lives." Barrett John Mandel, in the journal *Afro-American Studies*, compares Malcolm X's autobiography to those written by Saint Augustine, John Bunyan, and Jonathan Edwards.

Some have criticized Malcolm's ideologies and philosophies as set forth in his autobiography. Stone, for example, notes that in some passages Malcolm "sounds like a southern white supremacist in reverse, vibrating with anger and sexual obsession over the horrors of race pollution." And James Craig Holte, in the journal *MELUS*, argues that Malcolm X's conversion to Elijah Muhammad's form of Islam is a "simple, single-minded vision," especially when contrasted against his later "more complex self-examination" during his pilgrimage to Mecca.

For all of Malcolm X's fiery rhetoric, many reviewers have seen in his autobiography evidence of a man who simply wanted to be accepted into the mainstream of American life. Robert Penn Warren, famed novelist, comments in the *Yale Review* that the activist



was ultimately seeking respectability. "In the midst of the gospel of violence and the repudiation of the white world, even in the Black Muslim phase, there appears now and then the note of yearning," he writes. The sense that Malcolm X's philosophy was changing by the end of the book underlines his desire to be understood; in fact, the trip to Mecca gives him a sort of authority and propriety, according to Warren. However, Stone believes that Elijah Muhammad's interest in "the virtues of bourgeois America," with Malcolm X rejecting those more quiet "virtues," was the basis for his and Malcolm X's split.

Ultimately, though, most reviewers agree that *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is a classic of American literature. Stone believes that the book has "a permanent place in the literature of the Afro-American struggle," and Warren sees it as "an American story bound to be remembered." In fact, in a moment of impressive prescience, Warren states in his 1966 article that the book will no doubt "reappear someday in a novel, on the stage, or on the screen"—predating Spike Lee's movie interpretation of the book by nearly thirty years.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3



Critical Essay #1

Sanderson holds a master of fine arts degree in fiction writing and is an independent writer. In this essay, she examines how Malcolm X, despite the fiery rhetoric, fulfills the image of the classic American success story.

The general reaction among the white community in the United States to Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam in the 1950s and 1960s was one of alarm. He and the Nation were painted as fomenting violent revolution just as many whites and some more conservative blacks believed that life was beginning to get better for African Americans.

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the Muslim leader remembers the heated response to a documentary made in 1959 about the Nation of Islam: "The public reaction was like what happened back in the 1930s when Orson Welles frightened America with a radio program describing, as though it were actually happening, an invasion by 'men from Mars.'" For example, panic erupted around the documentary's revelation that the Nation was teaching its members judo and karate—viewers and the press interpreted these actions as evidence of the Nation's malevolent intentions, even though Malcolm X asked the obvious question, 'Why does judo or karate suddenly get so ominous because black men study it? Across America, the Boy Scouts, the YMCA ... they *all* teach judo!"

In a sense, the public perception of the Nation of Islam was that its members were aliens. Their separatist philosophy argued that the solution to America's racial woes was an independent black nation, and their strict moral codes, ultra-conservative demeanor and dress, and dietary restrictions offered to many Americans a frightening snapshot of radical discipline.

The story of Malcolm X is about a man who fulfills the classic American tale of struggle and success based on hard work, self-education, and overcoming mistakes. In fact, his autobiography is much more than a revolutionary guidebook—it is also an outline for how to beat your enemy at his own game and come out way ahead of where anyone thought you would through the mainstream American techniques of education and hard work.

Malcolm's childhood is one hard knock after another. His father is murdered and his mother literally goes insane trying to keep the family together. By the time he is about twelve years old, Malcolm is an orphan ward of the state, living with a foster family. He doesn't despair, though, despite his misfortune, and thrills at being able to beat the older men at hunting, for example. "It was the beginning of a very important lesson in life—that anytime you find someone more successful than you are ...—you know they're doing something that you aren't," he instructs his readers in one of the numerous lessons he presents in his autobiography. Striving at education and learning sustain him until a racist school counselor dismisses his desire to become a lawyer, even though he is at the top of his class. "It was then that I began to change—inside," remembers Malcolm X.



Though he leaves school to hang out on the streets of Boston and Harlem, Malcolm's drive to succeed never falters. During all of the years of hustling, he is always learning and thinking, trying to figure out how to do whatever he is engaged in faster and smarter than the next guy. For example, when the pressure from the Harlem police gets to be too much, Malcolm simply puts wheels on his marijuana sales operation and travels up and down the East Coast, following his musician friends to their gigs and selling to them. It is as if a fire burns in his belly, pushing him to be the best, even if his "best" is robbery or numbers. The more experienced hustlers are his teachers and Malcolm proves himself a willing student. The chapters dedicated to his time in Boston and Harlem are sprinkled with references to Malcolm "learning" about street life and getting his "first schooling" in how to succeed in the ghetto.

Throughout the book, Malcolm makes clear that, despite how much he despises the way whites have treated blacks, he has deep respect for the high points of American culture, especially its educational institutions. While visiting Boston for the first time, he walks past Harvard University; he uses this moment to bring the reader up to date with his accomplishments by dropping the comment, "Nobody that day could have told me I would give an address before the Harvard Law School Forum some twenty years later." Despite the tough-guy talk, his pride at how far he had come is evident in this and many other similar scenes. In one of the book's later chapters, Malcolm X almost sounds as if he is bragging when he says that according to a *New York Times* poll, he was the second most sought after speaker on college campuses in 1963. A few paragraphs later, he wants to make sure that his readers know that by that same year he had spoken at "well over fifty" colleges, including those "in the Ivy League."

Malcolm X cites education, in fact, as one of the reasons for his ultimate break with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Muhammad, according to Malcolm X, feels intimidated when he speaks to influential and prestigious audiences, worried as he is about the inadequacy of his fourth-grade education; this public work he leaves to Malcolm X. Malcolm loves being around those involved in education and learning, noting, "Except for all-black audiences, I liked the college audiences best.... They never failed in helping me to further my own education." Jealous feelings develop over Malcolm X's comfort with the Nation's intelligentsia and add to the reasons Muhammad already has for Malcolm X's banishment.

Malcolm X was a passionate and life-long learner, and he knew that these activities would make it easier for him to succeed at whatever he did in the American culture. In prison he is rescued from the possibility of a life of ignorance by Bimbi, an old burglar who chastises Malcolm for failing to use his brain. In no time, Malcolm is reading everything he can get his hands on, even taking a correspondence course in Latin. His reading material in prison includes Gregor Mendel's *Findings in Genetics*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and works by Thoreau, Spinoza, Kant, and Nietzsche. The reading habit stuck with him his whole life. "You will never catch me with a free fifteen minutes in which I'm not studying something I feel might be able to help the black man," he notes.

At the end of his life, Malcolm X is acutely aware of his lack of an official education, dissatisfied that he had to rely on his "homemade" education instead. "My greatest



lack has been, I believe, that I don't have the kind of academic education I wish I had been able to get," he muses in his autobiography's final chapter. "I don't begin to be academically equipped for so many of the interests that I have." Malcolm X, despite being a severe critic of America, understands the role of education and struggle in the great American success story. Everything Malcolm X did was arranged as a self-education of some sort—even his two conversion experiences. The chapters about his introduction to Elijah Muhammad and Islam contain images that are perfect examples of the student-teacher relationship. And when Malcolm X becomes disenchanted with his mentor's theology and philosophy, he travels to Mecca to gather "new insight into the true religion of Islam and a better understanding of America's entire racial dilemma."

All this is not to diminish the radical and challenging nature of Malcolm X's thinking in his autobiography. However, like many self-made Americans, Malcolm X understood the value of educating himself into the mainstream. By the end of the autobiography, Malcolm X has made some kind of peace with his more revolutionary and incendiary pronouncements against whites, deciding that his earlier blanket indictments against those who did not agree with him, and his association with a rather fanatical group, were all part of his personal ongoing learning process. Sounding almost as conciliatory as his former nemesis, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X explains his new heart: "Since I have learned the *truth* in Mecca, my dearest friends, I have come to include *all* kinds ... black, brown, red, yellow, and *white*!"

As I. F. Stone notes in the *New York Review of Books*, even while Malcolm X is undergoing his second conversion, he is still the consummate salesman, the American always thinking of a better way to get something done. 'He had become a Hajj but remained in some ways a Babbitt, the salesman, archetype of our American society,' writes Stone. Malcolm X was a quintessential American, in fact, despite his earlier rejections of that title. During his stay in Africa, he rejects the idea that he is anti-American or un-American while speaking to an "agent" from some U. S. surveillance group. (He suspects that the person is with either the FBI or the CIA.) In fact, with his American label firmly attached, Malcolm X goes on his pilgrimage to Mecca 'doing some American-type thinking and reflecting' about how he might be able to "double or triple" the number of converts to Islam if the colorfulness and energy of the *hajj* is "properly advertised and communicated to the outside world."

Malcolm X's self-education into the America mainstream and his striving always to do things faster and better very nearly allow him to secure a piece of the American dream. Just before his death, according to Robert Penn Warren in the *Yale Review*, Malcolm X was about to make a downpayment on a house in a Long Island Jewish neighborhood. Warren wrote:

He no longer saw the white man as the 'white devil.' ... and he was ready, grudgingly, not optimistically, and with a note of threat, to grant that there was in America a chance, a last chance, for a 'bloodless revolution.'

Malcolm X yearned for acceptance, and he knew that one of the primary ways one could earn this in America was by fighting against the odds, through hard work and



education—whether in the elite classrooms of the Ivy League or the streets of Harlem. These factors in his life have made him an almost mythological figure, surrounded by stories of victorious struggle, many of which appear in his autobiography.

Source: Susan Sanderson, Critical Essay on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.



Critical Essay #2

Carson is an instructor of English literature and composition. In this essay, she analyzes Malcolm X's book as a spiritual autobiography.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X is not only a searing indictment of racism in America but also the moving story of one man's extraordinary metamorphosis from criminal to convert to religious leader. Among the forms of autobiography elucidated by William C. Spengemann, it most closely resembles the formal paradigm established by *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* in the fifth century. Like the *The Confessions*, *The Autobiography* has a three-part structure. It begins with an already converted narrator examining the sinful events from his past life that have brought him to the present moment. He not only has to accept the past as part of the Creator's divine plan but also to believe, and convince his readers to believe, that his old sinful life was a necessary part of conversion and the achievement of divine wisdom. In the second section, the converted narrator moves into a meditative search for the timeless wisdom that will enable him to serve the will of Allah. In the final section, having learned that faith is wisdom, he submits completely to Allah's divine will.

In the first section of *The Autobiography* (Chapters 1-9) Malcolm's purpose is both instructive and confessional. The narrative voice is that of the thirty-nine-year-old religious and political leader whose conversion enables him to see and understand Allah's divine plan in his earlier life. His tone is both ironic and angry as he relates Nebraska and Michigan memories that shaped his earlier belief that the white man is the devil. In the middle of the decade known as the roaring twenties, his pregnant mother faces down a group of hooded Ku Klux Klansmen. Several years later other Klansmen burn another of Malcolm's homes and all its contents. Negroes with money live "parasitically" off those without. An English teacher tells Malcolm that becoming a lawyer is "no realistic goal for a nigger." Honest black men can only envision a future as waiters or bootblacks. However, the converted, adult Malcolm, recognizing Allah's divine plan for his life in these past experiences, closes the chapters by recalling his childhood with a genuine prayer: "All praise is due to Allah." Were it not for Allah, he believes that he would have become "a brainwashed Black Christian." Instead, he has used his past experience both to chastise the white race for its historical treatment of blacks and to dramatize both unconscious as well as conscious examples of racism.

While the early chapters of the first section of *The Autobiography* are primarily instructive, the remaining chapters are primarily confessional. Here, the voice is that of the thirty-nine-year-old religious penitent, whose conversion enables him to metaphorically descend to the very nadir of his existence, as he confesses his sins and riotous living. He describes his entrance into the seductive worlds of Roxbury and Harlem where violence, crime, drugs, alcohol, prostitutes, and promiscuity abound. It is a world where innocents like Malcolm and Laura are soon corrupted. Throughout this section, however, Malcolm's words are deliberately chosen not to titillate his readers but rather to demonstrate how seductive music, dance, money, drugs, and the high life can be—especially for a rural teenager who finds himself in a world of glamour and money.



In such a world, an older, married, white woman like Sophia is as attractive to a sixteen-year-old black male as a flashy car. She represents the unattainable, the breaching of a taboo. The narrative voice, moving back and forth from that of the teenage Malcolm to that of the converted Malcolm, delineates the level of degeneration of which Malcolm and all humans are capable. Moreover, Malcolm makes his readers aware that everyone, whether an active participant or detached observer, is culpable. He clearly accepts the past as necessary to Allah's divine plan for his conversion and achievement of divine wisdom. Here, as earlier, he closes this first section of *The Autobiography* with a genuine prayer: "All praise is due to Allah."

In the second section (Chapters 10-12), an imprisoned Malcolm begins his own mental and spiritual search for the timeless wisdom that will enable him to serve the will of Allah before he himself has actually come to know Allah. At first anger rules him so forcefully that he escapes into drugs and spends a lot of time in solitary, pacing for hours "like a caged lion." Without quite understanding why, however, he begins his conversion to Islam by responding to his brother's request not to eat any more pork or smoke any more cigarettes. A chance remark by a fellow Negro prisoner Bimbi, the first man Malcolm has ever seen "command total respect with his words," prods him into taking correspondence courses. Gradually, Malcolm's views of himself and the world undergo a radical change. His history studies present telling evidence of white enslavement of native peoples of color on the continents of Africa and North America. In a lengthy correspondence with Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, he learns that the followers of Islam obey the Mosaic laws concerning the eating of pork and other meats. They forbid divorce, fornication, and sexual conduct outside marriage. Drugs and alcohol are also forbidden. The more he reads about their rules, conduct, and beliefs, the more he is convinced that the one true God is Allah and the white man is the devil. Like other converts, he immediately changes his name: he replaces Little with the symbolic letter X, severing himself from an identity imposed by the white slave owner. A new man, Malcolm X, dedicates both his spiritual and physical energies to following the strict conduct dictated by Islam as he becomes a full-time minister of the Nation of Islam.

In the final section of *The Autobiography*, spiritually wounded by Elijah Muhammad's moral laxity and a growing split between him and the leader he had viewed as Allah's unassailable earthly minister, Malcolm makes his own pilgrimage to Mecca. There he experiences a life-altering epiphany (a moment of revelation or sudden understanding). He is surrounded by people of all colors, speaking various languages. Despite the crowds, there is harmony, a quiet sharing of food and space, peace, and tranquility. "America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem," he writes home. "I learned that pilgrims from every land□ every color, and class, and rank; high officials and the beggar alike□all snored in the same language." The Black Muslim Malcolm X is transformed by his pilgrimage to Mecca into El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz□a true Islam who makes a side trip to Africa before returning to the United States. His voice at the end of the autobiography is resigned and urgent, fiery and peaceful, as he remembers the violent deaths of his father and five of his father's six brothers. He knows that he too will die by violence, but as he has with earlier events in his life, he accepts what will come as the will of Allah. He is not afraid to



die. Urgent about continuing Allah's plans for him in his earthly life, he like Shakespeare, holds up ' 'a mirror to reflect, to show, the history of unspeakable crimes" that one race has committed against another.

In the final analysis, the power of this compelling autobiography results not so much from the harsh facts that Malcolm discloses but from the point of view, the voice, and structure that Malcolm and Alex Haley give to the narrative. The narrator's emotion ranges from unflinching anger toward prejudiced whites, to bitterness resulting from the death and destruction of family members, to an awestruck wonder at the power of love Malcolm experienced on his pilgrimage to Mecca. Throughout his life, Malcolm never stops learning, nor does he ultimately close his mind to ideas that challenge long-held beliefs. Instead, even as his own death looms over him in the hectic last days of his life, he takes the time to write his own spiritual autobiography, to leave the rest of the world the certainty that true wisdom resides in faith.

Source: Lois Carson, Critical Essay on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.



Critical Essay #3

Ozersky is a cultural historian and author. In this essay, he discusses how Malcolm X's growth as a person during the writing of his autobiography enriches it as a work of literature.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X is one of the most famous books America has produced. It stands beside the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and other classics. The figure of Malcolm X, the fiery Black Muslim leader, is charismatic and memorable. And since much, if not all, that is known about Malcolm X comes from the, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, it's only natural to assume that Malcolm X, his autobiography, and people's image of him are all essentially the same. But this would be a mistake. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* features hidden depths and false bottoms; the book informs its readers about the man as he changes, grows larger and wiser.

Narrated to Alex Haley over a three year period, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* came at a key stretch in Malcolm's life. The book clearly owes much to Haley's skill as an editor. As Haley makes clear in his lengthy epilogue, working with Malcolm X required great delicacy. Haley could not tell Malcolm how to tell his own story, but neither could he merely transcribe what Malcolm said, especially since, midway through the project, Malcolm's world was turned upside down.

At its inception, the book was meant to be a testament to the goodness and redemptive power of the Nation of Islam and its leader, a man never referred to other than as "The Honorable Elijah Muhammad." So scrupulously devoted to Muhammad was Malcolm X that his writing skirts the border of propaganda. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was frankly conceived as a way to proselytize for the Nation of Islam. In fact, the dedication originally planned for the book read:

This book I dedicate to The Honorable Elijah Muhammad, who found me here in America in the muck and mire of the filthiest civilization and society on the earth, and pulled me out, cleaned me up, and stood me on my feet, and made me the man I am today.

By the time the book was being written, however, Malcolm had broken with the Black Muslims. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad had turned out not to be so honorable as Malcolm had thought: Muhammad had apparently committed adultery with several members of The Nation, and, Malcolm believed, now sought to destroy Malcolm because of his growing popularity.

This betrayal is the central revelation in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. When Haley and Malcolm sat down to write this memoir, it was designed as a conversion narrative, an ancient genre with precedents as far back as *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. The narrator would describe his sinful early days, his awakening at rock bottom, and finish on a triumphal note by describing his career as an apostle and reformed sinner. That



was the plan; but somewhere along the way the plan was abandoned. Haley asked Malcolm not to revise the early chapters, in which he wrote so glowingly of "The Honorable Elijah Muhammad," the "this little, sweet, gentle man." To make changes, Haley said, would be to "telegraph" to the reader what lay ahead. So although Malcolm periodically acknowledges that friction develops later with him, one never gets a sense of it while reading the description of Malcolm's redemption in prison. On the contrary, those chapters are written with the evangelical zeal of a man remembering the central event in his life: his conversion to Islam, or at least the Black Muslims' version of it.

Malcolm X's reputation today is that of a charismatic extremist, a bold, take-no-prisoners truth teller out to liberate his race ' 'by any means necessary.' ' This is the man who narrates the early part of the book. In the middle chapters, in which Malcolm preaches about "white devils," expounding on the evils of the white man, Malcolm seems to fit this stereotype. But in the chapters, ' 'Out" and ' 'Mecca," the supremely self-assured narrator begins to change. His once-unshakable faith in The Honorable Elijah Muhammad is destroyed. He goes to the holy city of Mecca and discovers that his vision of Islam has been narrow and parochial. He does not even know the common prayers recited by Muslims around the world; he is physically incapable of assuming the position Muslims do in prayer. "Western ankles won't do what Muslim ankles have done for a lifetime," Malcolm writes. "When my guide was down in a posture, I tried everything I could to get down as he was, but there I was, sticking up."

The narrative in these chapters echoes Malcolm' s initial conversion, as described in the book's middle chapters. Then, for example, Malcolm writes of the difficulty of bending his knees to pray:

Picking a lock to rob someone's house was the only way my knees had ever been bent before. I had to force myself to bend my knees. And waves of shame and embarrassment would force me back up.

The subsequent remark echoes this one.

In his epiphany in Mecca, Malcolm learns of "sincere and true brotherhood," regardless of skin color. Until this point, the narrative is infused with Malcolm's absolute conviction about racism□an intensely compelling quality of his, one that partially accounts for his force as a speaker. Every page of the *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* prior to this point focuses on one central truth: the evil of white racism as "an incurable cancer." The early chapters describe Malcolm's folly and blindness, his wickedness and self-destructive path. The chapters in prison then describe the clouds parting, revealing the truth which is later confirmed by the experience at Mecca. Perhaps, if Malcolm X had been assassinated in 1963 instead of 1965, the book would have been self-contained, a testament to that particular truth. Because of all that happened to him in those two years, however, the book was changed forever, and the last pages, in which Malcolm presciently writes of his own imminent death, have a special poignancy because of his power to change and grow.



This is not to say that Malcolm's views at the end of the *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* are right or wrong, any more so than his views as a minister of the Nation of Islam, or for that matter his views as Detroit Red, the street hustler. In a sense□ and in this is surely something Malcolm X would have deplored□the actual content of the author's convictions really isn't that important. It's possible to read, and even revere, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* without necessarily having any interest or investment in the problem of race. In all probability, the book will continue to matter long after the historical circumstances surrounding Malcolm X and the 1960s have faded into history.

Source: Josh Ozersky, Critical Essay on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002



Topics for Further Study

The Autobiography of Malcolm X is a book that was "told to" Alex Haley and published after Malcolm X's death in 1965. After finishing the book, conduct independent research on Malcolm X and his life, not using his autobiography. Do you find any important incidents that are missing from the book or things that others remember in a different way? Create a chart that shows your findings.

Investigate what was taking place in the United States and around the world from the late 1920s until the mid-1960s. Create a time line that shows some important events for each decade and place them alongside important events from the autobiography.

Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, and Martin Luther King, Jr., were important African-American leaders during the 1950s and 1960s. Who are the important black leaders today? List three, and tell why you chose them.

Learn about the history of Islam and different forms of the religion practiced at different times and in different areas of the world. Make a chart showing the major forms of Islam, their important differences, and where they are practiced.

What do you think the rest of Malcolm X's life would have been like if he had not been murdered? Use what you know about him, and about the plans he had when he died, to write a one-page summary of what he might have done if he had lived to be an old man. Also, tell what the impact of his activities might have been.



Compare and Contrast

1960s: In 1962, the Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution is proposed and, by 1964, is passed as law. One of its primary features is a ban on poll taxes in federal elections, giving the poor and many African Americans increased ability to vote. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act is passed, temporarily suspending literacy tests intended to restrict voting by African Americans and other minorities. Thanks to these two pieces of legislation, by the end of the decade there are 1,469 African-American elected officials in the United States, according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

Today: Currently, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies reports that there are nearly nine thousand African-American elected officials in the United States.

1960s: Malcolm X claims that there are approximately four hundred thousand members of the Nation of Islam in the United States.

Today: Nearly forty years after Malcolm X's assassination, there are an estimated one hundred thousand Nation of Islam members.

1960s: In 1963, the "I Have a Dream" speech by Martin Luther King Jr. galvanizes nearly 250,000 participants in the March on Washington to support pending civil rights legislation.

Today: Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan headlines the 1995 Million Man March on the Mall in Washington, D.C., that asks participating men to recommit to their families, their communities, and their personal responsibility.



What Do I Read Next?

One Day When I Was Lost: A Scenario Based on Alex Haley's "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" is a 1973 screenplay by James Baldwin.

With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together is the 1998 autobiography of Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. This married couple recalls their fifty years of life together and their experiences on stage and screen starting in the 1940s. As well, they remember their years of political activism and the famous figures, including Malcolm X and Sidney Poitier, they befriended.

In his hugely successful book, *Roots: Saga of an American Family*, first published in 1976, Alex Haley retells the stories his grandmother told him about his family's past generations going back to the young African relative brought to America as a slave. The book spawned a television mini-series and earned the 1976 National Book Award and a 1977 Lillian Smith Book Award.

Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, originally published in 1928, is the story of two young black men who have different reactions to the colorful street life of Harlem during the 1920s.

Alice Walker's 1976 book, *Meridian: A Novel*, tells the story of Meridian, a high school dropout and single mother who learns about herself as she becomes a daring civil rights worker.



Further Study

Archer, Jules, *They Had a Dream: The Civil Rights Struggle from Frederick Douglass to Marcus Garvey to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X*, Puffin, 1993.

This book comprises the biographies of four of the most prominent civil rights leaders in American history. It covers their mistakes and weaknesses as well as their strengths.

Branch, Taylor, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*, Touchstone Books, 1988.

Parting the Waters is first in a series written by Taylor Branch about Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement in the United States.

Collier-Thomas, Bettye, and V. P. Franklin, *My Soul Is a Witness: A Chronology of the Civil Rights Era, 1954-1965*, Henry Holt and Co., Inc., 1999.

This book is a survey of the people, organizations, and events that comprised the American civil rights movement, with a day-to-day chronology.

Esposito, John L., *Islam: The Straight Path*, Oxford University Press, 1988.

Esposito gives an overview of the Islamic faith in this book, including its origins and history. It gives an historical context in which to understand the diversity of Islam today.

Evanzz, Karl, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad*, Pantheon Books, 1999.

The Messenger is a biography of the famed Nation of Islam leader, Elijah Muhammad, exposing his faults and contradictions.

Media Adaptations

The Autobiography of Malcolm X was primary source material for 1992's *Malcolm X*, directed by Spike Lee and starring Denzel Washington as Malcolm X, Angela Bassett as Betty Shabazz, and Al Freeman Jr. as Elijah Muhammad. Spike Lee and Arnold Perl wrote the screenplay, which was produced by Forty Acres and a Mule Film works. The movie was nominated for Academy Awards in the categories of best leading actor for Washington and best costume design.

James Baldwin adapted portions of the autobiography for a screenplay published by Dial in 1973, entitled *One Day When I Was Lost: A Scenario Based on Alex Haley's 'Autobiography of Malcolm X.'*

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on



□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NCfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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