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The Autobiography of Malcolm X

Alex Haley

SMARTER BETTER *FASTER*

Contributors: Brian Phillips, Jeremy Zorn, Julie Blattberg

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SparkNotes Publishing
A Division of SparkNotes LLC
120 5th Ave, 8th Floor
New York, NY 10011

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 **CONTEXT**

Ostensibly, freedom for African-Americans came with the end of the Civil War in 1865, but the struggle to attain equality persisted well into the next century and continues today. Despite legal and political gains made during the period known as Reconstruction (1865–1877), freed slaves and their children suffered grave blows to their rights in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when the North ceased its supervision of the South and the United States Supreme Court, in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, ruled that segregation, in the form of "separate but equal" public facilities, was constitutional.

The African-American community rallied around several different, even contradictory, strategies to protest the political order in which they were discriminated against and even murdered because of the color of their skin. Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) encouraged blacks to gain political power by earning the respect of white people through hard work and humble conduct. W.E.B. DuBois (1868–1963) demanded political empowerment. Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) urged a return to Africa, contending that black people should rely upon their own unity and create their own means of empowerment, rather than working through white channels of power. Garvey influenced many African-Americans, among them Earl Little, Malcolm X's father, a preacher who spread Garvey's ideas in his small Michigan community. Throughout his childhood, Malcolm X, then known as Malcolm Little, was exposed by his father to the ideas of the defiant and fiercely nationalistic Garvey.

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Malcolm X acceded to international prominence himself. His were and continue to be contrasted with those of his contemporary, Martin Luther King, Jr., although Malcolm X's militancy continues to be misunderstood and overstated by many.

Malcolm X's demand for African-American unity and self-determination, both in his lifetime and in his autobiography, greatly influenced the debate over race in the United States. He is credited as a spiritual father of the Black Panther Party and the Black Power movement, both of which arose in the late 1960s, when the limitations of more moderate approaches became apparent. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* has changed the lives of many people, black and white, and shaped the perspectives of many more. Despite the changes that have occurred in the last quarter century, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* continues to be a relevant work. Its descriptions of the racism that troubles the United States are still accurate, as are its discussion of the issues of crime, desolation, and moral poverty that racism inevitably spawns.

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 **SUMMARY**

Malcolm X is born as Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska. The Midwest, during this period, is permeated by discrimination and racially-motivated violence that culminates with the murder of his father and the institutionalization of his mother. After living in a Michigan detention home and completing the eighth grade, Malcolm moves to Boston, Massachusetts, to live with his half-sister Ella.

In Boston he quickly becomes involved in the urban nightlife, and passes for much older than he is, wearing flashy clothes, gambling, drinking, doing drugs, and dating an older white woman, Sophia. Malcolm finds work on the railways, which takes him to New York, where he settles permanently as one of Harlem's hustlers. Malcolm's various jobs include running numbers, selling drugs, steering white people to black brothels, and committing armed robbery. When his life becomes too dangerous in Harlem, he retreats back to Boston, where he becomes a house burglar and is eventually arrested.

In prison, Malcolm transforms himself, converting to the brand of Islam promoted by the Nation of Islam, which has already converted a number of Malcolm's siblings. Inspired by the faith, Malcolm stops using drugs, reads voraciously, prays, studies English and Latin, and joins the prison debate team.

When he gets paroled, Malcolm moves in with his brother Wilfred and becomes very active in the Detroit temple of the Nation of Islam, receiving permission to drop his "white" last name for the symbolic "X." Malcolm X soon meets the Nation's leader, Elijah Muhammad, and rises quickly from the rank of temple assistant in Detroit to the Nation's first National Minister. Malcolm X becomes known throughout the United States, even outside of Muslim circles, as a fiery advocate for black unity and militancy. His power grows so much, however, that he is suspended from the Nation of Islam, whose higher-ups resent and fear him despite his allegiance to the cause.

Facing death threats and eviction from his home, Malcolm uses his fame to found his own organization, Muslim Mosque, Inc., which he envisions as being more politically active than the Nation of Islam. At this time, Malcolm visits the Middle East and Africa, where he discovers "true" Islam, which contrasts considerably with the version of Islam he has been taught and has been teaching. At the end of his life, Malcolm X is an international figure, welcomed by foreign leaders and committed to Islam as a religion that can better the racial problems of the United States. He is assassinated in 1965.

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NAMES

Ella—Ella is Malcolm’s half-sister on his father’s side. When he is an adolescent, she provides him with a model of female strength and black pride. She welcomes him into her home in Boston, and always supports him as much as she can.

Elijah Muhammad—The leader of the Nation of Islam, Muhammad changes Malcolm’s life forever by showing him increasing levels of trust, and granting him various ascending posts in the organization. As much as Muhammad enables Malcolm’s ascent, however, Malcolm enables Muhammad’s. This reciprocity of power ultimately makes Muhammad nervous, and leads him to betray Malcolm.

Betty X—When Betty joins the Nation of Islam in temple, there is no sign that Minister Malcolm X seeks a wife. Nonetheless, she agrees to his proposal from a Detroit payphone, endures his mind-boggling travel and work schedule, gives birth to six of his children, and witnesses his assassination.

Reginald—Malcolm feels responsible for his little brother, both during their childhood in Michigan and during their adolescence in Harlem. When Malcolm is in prison, Reginald converts him to the Nation of Islam, only to find himself expelled from the organization for illicit sexual relations. Malcolm rejects Reginald for the Nation, and later regrets doing so.

Alex Haley—Although hardly mentioned in the proper text of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, chronicler Haley appears as the narrator of the Epilogue, which explains how the text was composed, and describes the details of Malcolm X’s final days. In the Epilogue the reader receives the impression that Malcolm and Haley forged a friendship during the course of writing *The Autobiography*.

Sophia—During his hustler era, Malcolm dates Sophia for years, even though she is married to a white man. She represents the status afforded to any black man who dates an attractive white woman. Malcolm regards and treats her as an object.

Shorty—When Malcolm approaches Shorty in a Boston poolhall, Shorty takes him under his wing. Shorty is a musician who first leads and then follows Malcolm into the deepest levels of the urban underworld. He ultimately is arrested with Malcolm for burglary.

Laura—Laura is a squarely middle-class African-American girl who falls for Malcolm and adopts his vices. At the end of his life, Malcolm feels responsible for her fate, and feels great regret over the fact that she ruined her life.

Louise Little—Malcolm’s mother is a fair-skinned black woman who can pass for white, who has strong religious beliefs, and who favors Malcolm least of all her children. After particularly hard times during the Great Depression, she is institutionalized by the State and taken from her children.

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Earl Little—Malcolm's father is a preacher from Georgia who is killed by whites for preaching the militant doctrines of black nationalist Marcus Garvey. He favors Malcolm most of all his children.

Sammy the Pimp—Until Reginald arrives, Sammy the Pimp is Malcolm's only close friend during his hustling days in Harlem. Malcolm and Sammy commit burglaries together until they have a falling out over Malcolm's assault of one of Sammy's girlfriends.

West Indian Archie—West Indian Archie earns his formidable reputation as a numbers runner during the Harlem heyday of the 1920s and 1930s. He is an "old head" when Malcolm arrives in New York, but not so old that he cannot chase Malcolm out of town when the two of them disagree over a bet Malcolm has collected on.

Cassius Clay—The world-famous boxer provides a place for Malcolm to stay during the first days of Malcolm's estrangement from the Nation of Islam. Later, the two have a falling out.

Omar Azzam—The son of an Arabian author, Azzam takes care of Malcolm when Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca runs into bureaucratic difficulties.

Mahmoud Youssef Shawarbi—Shawarbi is a Muslim professor, temporarily in New York, who gives Malcolm the letter Malcolm needs to make his pilgrimage to Mecca. Shawarbi also sets Malcolm up with people in the Middle East to ensure that Malcolm has a smooth trip.

Wallace Muhammad—Wallace is the son of Elijah Muhammad with whom Malcolm feels the closest, and to whom Malcolm turns when he first begins to have his falling out with the Nation of Islam.

**SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS****"Nightmare" and "Mascot"****Summary**

One night, when Louise Little is pregnant with Malcolm, armed Ku Klux circle the home of Earl Little and his family. The Klansmen order Earl to come out, but he is away, preaching. Malcolm's mother tells them so, and the Klansmen leave without violence; but the encounter scares the family into leaving Omaha. They move first to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and then to Lansing, Michigan, where Malcolm grows up.

The first chapter provides basic information about the Little family. Malcolm's mother was born in Grenada, in the British West Indies, and is twenty-eight when Malcolm is born on May 19, 1925. She already has three children by Malcolm's father: Wilfred, Hilda, and Philbert. In Michigan, Louise and Earl will have four more children—Reginald, Yvonne, Wesley, and Robert—making Malcolm the fourth of eight children. Malcolm's mother is light-skinned, the daughter of a white man she has never met. She is capable of passing as white. Louise Little can read and has strong religious beliefs, particularly about diet. She is stricter with Malcolm than she is with her other children. Malcolm's father, Earl Little, is more lenient with him. Malcolm's father has three children from a previous marriage who live in Boston. Their names are Ella, Earl, and Mary. Malcolm's father was born in Reynolds Georgia, is over six feet tall, and is much darker than his wife. He is committed to spreading the ideas of Marcus Garvey, which is what attracted the interest of the Omaha Ku Klux Klan.

In Michigan, Earl Little finds an audience for his preaching and his propagation of Garvey's ideas. As in Omaha, Malcolm's father draws the attention of local whites, who revile him, burn down his house, and, finally, murder him when Malcolm is six. The crime is never investigated, and the insurance company calls it suicide and refuses to deliver on its policy.

With the death of Malcolm's father and the onset of the Great Depression, conditions worsen for the family. The Littles are finally forced to accept federal relief, which comes as a blow to their pride. Malcolm's mother becomes a Seventh Day Adventist and even more particular about diet, which seems insane in a time of such hardship. Welfare agents begin to take an interest in the family. Eventually, the state sends Malcolm's mother to a mental hospital in Kalamazoo and divides up the children, sending Malcolm to the Gohannas family, local friends of the Littles.

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Malcolm alludes to the victory of black boxer Joe Louis over white boxer James J. Braddock in 1937 to introduce the boxing that he and his brother Philbert do as young men. Malcolm soon picks up basketball after two disastrous losses in the ring. While living with the Gohannases, Malcolm is expelled from school for playing a prank on a teacher, and is sent to a detention home in nearby Mason, Michigan. The home is run by the Swerlins, a white couple who quickly take a liking to Malcolm. He helps around the house and is receptive and intelligent, which earns him the title of "good nigger." Malcolm is supposed to go to a reform school, but the Swerlins keep him at the detention home and send him to a normal junior high school. He even wins enough freedom to go out on Saturdays to Lansing's African-American downtown, where he receives his first exposure to nightlife. Still in his early teens, Malcolm already passes as an adult.

At school, Malcolm becomes a model student, and, as one of the few black students, is regarded as a novelty, what he calls a "pink poodle." Malcolm's teachers like him, but also make "nigger" jokes. At school dances, Malcolm is especially aware of his race, and feels as if he must stand by the wall, steer clear of white girls, and leave early to avoid trouble. Despite the racial tension, Malcolm feels relatively happy until he enters seventh grade. That year, Ella, his half-sister from Boston, comes for a visit. Malcolm, Ella, and the rest of the family visit Malcolm's mother, and Ella impresses Malcolm with her self-possession. She invites Malcolm to visit her in Boston, and he goes there for his summer vacation. In Boston, Malcolm sees a whole world of affluent middle-class and professional blacks, a black community with far greater dignity and independence than the one he knows in Michigan.

The next year, Malcolm's demeanor in school changes markedly. He bristles when people call him "nigger", is despondent, and refuses to answer when people ask him what is wrong. The Swerlins ask him to leave their home, which he does, moving in with a black family, but one from which he feels equally estranged. That year Malcolm's English teacher, who he generally likes, asks Malcolm what career he is considering. When Malcolm says "lawyer", the teacher tells him to be realistic and think about carpentry instead. After this comment, it is easy for Malcolm to move from Lansing to Boston after he finishes the eighth grade.

Analysis

Very early on in "Nightmare" we catch our first glimpse of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*'s most remarkable narrative tactic, which is to have the narrative voice switch suddenly from chronicling past actions to relating present opinions. At every turn of his life, Malcolm holds such strong opinions that it is inevitable that his worldview at the time of the book, which was written from 1963 through 1945 will permeate the events of the narrative. Thus, from the very beginning, we become acquainted with Malcolm both through his personal history and through the opinions this history inspires him to express. For instance, in describing

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his father's affiliation with the ideas of Marcus Garvey, Malcolm also describes his own feelings toward some present-day middle-class blacks. In gauging the book's authenticity, it may help to consider what goals Malcolm X might have had for the book, and contemplate how these goals might have affected his chronicling of actions that preceded them.

In both "Nightmare" and "Mascot" Malcolm X seems to downplay the Great Depression. The Depression is mentioned, but less than one might expect, especially in light of the fact that it was at least partly responsible for the poverty his family lived in. Similarly, World War II, which breaks out at the end of chapter four, passes without much comment. And the rest of the Civil Rights Movement, which *The Autobiography* is an integral part of, is also barely mentioned. One explanation for these seeming oversights is the fact that *The Autobiography* is about the actions of a single individual, which would be compromised and diminished if they were attributed to broader phenomena like "The Great Depression," "World War II," or "The Civil Rights Movement." The text concerns itself instead with human details to build its hero.

"Homeboy" and "Laura"

Summary

Malcolm arrives in Boston looking like a country bumpkin, without any sense of urban fashion. He lives with his half-sister Ella, and she encourages him to explore the city before tying himself down to a job. Very quickly, Malcolm sees the difference between the bustle and culture of Boston and that of Lansing. He also sees a difference between the lifestyle of the middle-class blacks who, like Ella, live in the neighborhood of Roxbury, and the lifestyle of "ghetto" blacks, who have less money and live further down the hill. Malcolm is drawn to the latter, objecting to the ways in which the "Hill Negroes" try to imitate white people and to glorify their menial jobs. In Roxbury, bank janitors claim to be in finance and domestic servants say "I'm with an *old* family," and Malcolm is not interested in such pretenses.

When Malcolm finally begins to look for a job, he is drawn to a particular pool hall, and to one employee there who has always greeted him amiably. Shorty, who turns out to be from Lansing as well, works at the hall racking balls and tending tables, but is also an aspiring saxophonist with contacts all over town. Shorty immediately takes Malcolm under his wing, giving him pocket money and arranging a job for him. At the Roseland State Ballroom, where all the big bands perform, Malcolm replaces the shoeshine boy, who has just won the local numbers racket. Later, when Shorty and Malcolm become better friends, Shorty admits how unfashionable he thought Malcolm looked when they met.

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Malcolm has seen the Roseland State Ballroom and is impressed by its size and reputation, but Ella wishes her half-brother would stick to the community of blacks she considers reputable. The outgoing shoeshine boy trains Malcolm in the basics of the job, which include tending the men's restroom, passing out towels, and selling condoms in addition to shining shoes. Malcolm soon learns that much of the job's income actually comes from selling alcohol and marijuana, and by working as an intermediary between black pimps and white customers. He is quickly immersed in the pleasures and vices of urban nightlife. Malcolm begins to shoot craps, to play cards and the numbers, to drink, to smoke, and to use drugs. Malcolm is only sixteen, but he can pass for twenty-one. With his earnings, Malcolm acquires his first zoot-suit. He also receives his first "conk", which straightens out his red hair and puts him at the height of fashion.

At parties, with the help of a little alcohol and marijuana, Malcolm overcomes his shyness and develops a great passion for dancing. He contrasts the dancing done in Michigan with the freedom and expression of the real Lindy-hopping that goes on at the Boston parties. Malcolm quits his Ballroom job, which keeps him so busy he has no time to dance. After quitting, Malcolm buys a second, flashier zoot-suit and makes his first appearance at the Roseland as a customer.

Ella is happy when Malcolm quits his job at the Roseland, and even happier when he works as a soda jerk at a store in the respectable black neighborhood. Malcolm hates the job, especially since the patrons he serves embody the phoniness he attributes to the black middle class. One patron, however, stands out from the others, and he slowly develops a friendship with her. Laura is a quiet, studious high school junior. At first, Laura always appears at the soda fountain with a book. Once their friendship develops, Malcolm confesses to Laura his old dream of becoming a lawyer, which she encourages. Still, Malcolm is not entirely at ease with the middle-class environment.

Malcolm draws Laura into his lifestyle. Laura loves dancing, and Malcolm brings her to the Roseland. Laura is an excellent dancer, but she also has a protective grandmother, whom she lies to and fights with in order to go out dancing again. The second time Malcolm and Laura go dancing, they compete in the dance-off, winning over the crowd and even the bandleader, the famous Duke Ellington. Malcolm also attracts the attention of a white woman, Sophia, whom he dances with. Malcolm takes Laura home and then returns to the Ballroom, where he leaves with Sophia in her convertible.

Malcolm soon dumps Laura, and Sophia becomes his lover. Sophia has white boyfriends in addition to Malcolm, but Malcolm puts up with her philandering for the tremendous status that having a white girlfriend gives him. Since he is dating an attractive white woman who is not a prostitute, Malcolm becomes something of a celebrity at nightclubs and bars. Laura stops coming to the drugstore, and Malcolm eventually quits his job as a soda jerk. When Ella finds out about Sophia, she disapproves so much that Malcolm moves in with Shorty.

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To support himself, Malcolm takes work as a busboy at a restaurant. Then the United States enters World War II.

Over the next few years, Malcolm hears unfortunate stories about Laura. From various sources he hears about Laura's falling out with her grandmother, her introduction to drugs, and her stint as a prostitute. Malcolm blames himself, retrospectively, for having ruined Laura's life.

Analysis

Once Malcolm reaches Boston and begins living the nightlife, tantalizing details fill the chapters. Through Malcolm, we enter a world of sex, drugs, dancing, and gambling, but without any risk to ourselves. This feeling is enhanced by the historical distance, which gives a nostalgic touch to Malcolm X's descriptions of the era of big bands, zoot-suits, and war. For white readers, this entrance may be enhanced by racial difference. The titillating pleasures of these chapters raise the question of Malcolm X's, or Alex Haley's, goal in telling such stories. The dramatic movement of the text as a whole depends on our fully understanding the grim circumstances out of which Malcolm X emerged. But seeing these circumstances does not necessarily have to be as fun as the text makes it.

In guessing why the descriptions of the Boston underworld are so enticing, it helps to think of the tactics, described later in *The Autobiography*, by which the Nation of Islam converts and detoxifies drug addicts. The austere world of the Nation of Islam might appear too stern, even square, if it were not a very conscious choice. By showing us that he has tasted and touched and felt as much as a man can before he repents, Malcolm strengthens the moral authority of his conversion.

"Harlemite" and "Detroit Red"

Summary

Through a church friend of Ella's, Malcolm finds a job with the railroads, which is considered a prestigious job for African-Americans at the time. He is first employed in the train yards, loading dining cars, and then on the dining cars themselves, washing dishes on a Boston-Washington line. Finally, Malcolm achieves the position he has hoped for, selling sandwiches on a Boston-New York line.

Malcolm's first exposure to New York dazzles him, and he sees all of Harlem's famous sites: the Savoy Ballroom, the Apollo Theater, and Small's Paradise. At Small's, Malcolm is impressed by the conservatively dressed black men who speak in low tones. Everywhere else, he is impressed by the sheer scale of the city's wealth and energy. When he performs

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his duties well, Malcolm permanently replaces the former sandwich salesman and spends every other night in New York. He sleeps at the YMCA, and then at a rooming-house, but passes most of each layover either exploring the Harlem streets or dancing at the Savoy Ballroom. Malcolm also becomes a regular at Small's Paradise, a restaurant and bar where he drinks as he reverently watches the affluent hustlers coming and going.

On the train, Malcolm's success in selling sandwiches depends upon his putting on a show for white passengers. His performances begin to push the boundaries of acceptable, however, and he becomes increasingly rowdy, particularly when he is intoxicated. Eventually, Malcolm is fired.

At this point, Malcolm uses the miles he has earned as a railroad employee to visit Michigan, where he shows off his new style to his brothers and sisters, his mother, and the unnerved Swerlins. Malcolm also shows off before a crowd at a high school dance, displaying his New York moves and fashions. When Malcolm returns to New York, he finds work with another railroad line, this time to Florida, but is soon fired again.

At Small's Paradise, however, the owner offers Malcolm work as a day waiter, which he eagerly accepts. The bar and restaurant are run in accordance with a strict set of rules, but Malcolm is so thrilled to be learning the scene that he has no problem showing up on time and conducting himself with decorum. Malcolm makes a good impression on the customers and on his employers, and is schooled by both in various hustling techniques, in the etiquette of the Harlem underworld, and in the history of the neighborhood.

With the money from his tips, Malcolm begins to invest a lot of money in the numbers, as, it seems, does the rest of Harlem. He learns the names and faces of the young numbers runners, as well as those of the "old heads," old black gangsters left over from the 1920s and 1930s. Malcolm also meets an assortment of pimps, including Sammy the Pimp, who soon becomes his best friend and sole Harlem confidant.

With permanent employment, Malcolm moves to another rooming-house, this one run by prostitutes. Malcolm befriends the women and, during marijuana-fueled sessions with them, learns a wealth of information about the psychology of the sexes. Sophia, who has married a white man, visits Malcolm regularly. At first, she balks at the situation, but she soon befriends the prostitutes. At this time, Malcolm becomes known by the nickname "Detroit Red," which comes from the color of his hair, and the fact that nobody knows where Lansing, Michigan, is.

One day at Small's, Malcolm serves a lonely black soldier. Malcolm takes pity on the officer and offers him contact information for a prostitute. The soldier acts thankful and happy, but turns out to be an undercover military agent looking for just such an offer. Because Malcolm's record is otherwise clean, the police do not arrest him, but since he is now presumed to be under surveillance, he is fired and permanently banned from Small's.

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With the help of Sammy the Pimp, Malcolm begins to sell marijuana to New York's jazz musicians.

At first, the business is a success, but soon the local narcotics squad is on to Malcolm, and he begins to lose time and money trying to avoid them. Eventually, Malcolm has to move weekly to avoid being arrested on planted evidence. He becomes addicted to his own goods, and sometimes has to borrow money from Sammy just to eat. Sammy suggests that Malcolm use his old train-worker's ID to peddle marijuana itinerantly.

Once Malcolm is on the road, business picks up again, as Malcolm can procure drugs for the touring musicians whom he knows from New York. Malcolm also uses his ID to make a trip to Boston, where Shorty is trying to get his band off the ground. On this visit, Malcolm's rendezvous with Sophia is more discrete than it once was, partly because she is married and partly because of the increasing popular fear of interracial liaisons generated by the war, which has drained the country of white men. Malcolm himself is soon summoned by the draft board. By dressing extravagantly, however, and telling the Army psychiatrist that he wishes to lead southern blacks in murdering southern whites, Malcolm receives an exemption from the fighting.

"Hustler" and "Trapped"

Summary

The railroad company permanently blacklists Malcolm after he pulls a gun on a fellow gambler during a card game in the lower level of Grand Central Station in New York. The narcotics squad in Harlem knows Malcolm too well for him to resume his drug-dealing there, so he begins a series of robberies and stickups that lasts for the next half of the year. Malcolm also begins trafficking in guns and starts using harder drugs, primarily cocaine, to prepare for jobs and deal with the stress they cause him. Malcolm often works with Sammy. Malcolm never plans heists that are too extravagant, however, since he knows that that is how hustlers get caught.

Malcolm's brother Reginald comes to stay with Malcolm. This pleases Malcolm, who rents his first full-fledged apartment to ensure that he and his brother have a home. Malcolm also sets up Reginald with a "safe" hustle, in which Reginald pretends defective goods are stolen and sells them on the street for much more than what he pays. Reginald, who is sixteen, shows no interest in white women, and begins seeing a black woman who is almost thirty and who babies him.

Conditions in Harlem begin worsening. The city government shuts down the Savoy Ballroom, which Harlem residents suspect is a measure designed to stop single white women from dancing with black men. Two riots almost completely stop the flow of white tourists.

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Profits dry up for those who depend on the nightlife, and hustlers and prostitutes begin to take on legitimate work. Malcolm has a falling out with Sammy after Sammy pulls a gun on Malcolm for slapping one of Sammy's women. Eventually, Malcolm and Sammy are reconciled, but they no longer fully trust each other. Malcolm depends increasingly on Reginald, whom he describes as lazy but sensible. Reginald has quit his hustle, but is prospering with the help of his girlfriend.

Malcolm begins to work for the numbers racket. For six months he transports betting slips, and after that he works in a gambling parlor. Malcolm himself plays the numbers more and more heavily, placing bets with West Indian Archie, one of Harlem's "old heads." West Indian Archie has made his reputation by never having to write down any of the bets he takes. He has an ability to remember long lists of numbers.

After his tenure at the gambling parlor, Malcolm works for a madam, "steering" white people from downtown to the various places where their elaborate sexual fantasies can be fulfilled. Malcolm steers rich old white men who wish to be whipped by young black women and bored rich white housewives who wish to be taken by young black men. In 1945, Malcolm is suspected in the robbery of a craps game run by Italian racketeers. He begins to feel a heightened level of tension walking the streets of Harlem. After the steering job, Malcolm works for a Jewish businessman who renovates bars and sells them to speculators. Malcolm's job is to import bootlegged liquor from Long Island. He likes the work and his boss, but his boss disappears mysteriously after a scandal involving the bootlegging.

Malcolm hits a low point when West Indian Archie accuses him of collecting winnings on a bet he had not actually placed. Malcolm insists he has remembered correctly, and, according to the code of the street, neither can back down. West Indian Archie gives Malcolm until the next day to return the money. Malcolm gets high on opium, Benzedrine, marijuana, and cocaine, delivers some drugs downtown, passes out on the bed of the client, and wakes up long after the deadline. He returns to Harlem and goes out on a date, which ends up at a bar where he runs into West Indian Archie. West Indian Archie humiliates Malcolm but does not shoot him, and a confrontation is still pending. The next day Malcolm punches a young hustler in the face, is almost stabbed, and is searched by the cops, who know about West Indian Archie and expect Malcolm to be armed. Now the cops, the Italian racketeers, the hustler Malcolm has just punched, and West Indian Archie are all out for Malcolm's blood, and he feels more threatened than he has before. Just as Malcolm thinks he is going to be shot, he is picked up by Shorty, whom Sammy has called. Shorty gets Malcolm out of New York.

Analysis

The phenomenon of the numbers becomes particularly important in these chapters. Malcolm explains the numbers briefly, but an elaboration may be helpful. From the end of the 1800s

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until the 1970s, African-American neighborhoods throughout the United States devoted enormous amounts of money to this form of gambling. The numbers racket in Harlem was the largest in the country, but was only one of thousands. In the 1960s, the numbers industry in Harlem comprised an estimated sixty percent of the neighborhood's financial transactions.

When playing the numbers, a bettor tried to guess the number of the day, which was usually derived from some incorruptible public source, such as the total daily volume of the New York Stock Exchange. Players made their bets and collected on them at "policy stations", which were often just corner stores. Playing the numbers had a spiritual side, too, as evidenced by the advent of "dream books." These reference guides allowed bettors to derive numbers from dreams and from random events in their daily lives.

When state-run lotteries were established in the 1970s and 1980s, numbers rackets dried up in many places. The lotteries often injured these areas, sucking out the immense amounts of money once spent on betting. Although the numbers games were also a form of gambling, they also served, in the middle of the century, to keep black money black.

"Caught" and "Satan"

Summary

In Boston, Shorty and Ella marvel at the transformed Malcolm, now edgy and foulmouthed from hustling. Malcolm takes a few weeks to unwind from the tension of his situation in Harlem, at first only sleeping, smoking marijuana joints, and playing records. Malcolm begins to do cocaine again, and begins talking excessively to Shorty and Sophia about future plans.

Malcolm remains close to Sophia, depending on her for money, and wondering at how much abuse she takes. Sophia's husband is often on the road on business, and Malcolm sees a lot of her. Shorty is smitten with Sophia, and begins seeing Sophia's seventeen-year-old sister.

Malcolm decides to find a new hustle. In Roxbury, Malcolm is known as ruthless and trigger-happy. He decides to make his money through burglary, and raises the capital by playing stud poker with Sophia's money. Malcolm is partly driven by his desire to see his old friend Shorty no longer be destitute. Shorty agrees to join the burglary team, and he and Malcolm take on a third partner, a local black-Italian man named Rudy, who is familiar with Boston's rich white households. Malcolm and Shorty also include Sophia and her sister, who can canvas white neighborhoods without arousing suspicion.

Usually, the women visit a home as pollsters or salespeople and entice the housewife to give a tour. They describe what they see to the men, who return at night. Shorty and

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Malcolm do the actual burglary, while Rudy mans the get-away car. Only Malcolm keeps contact with their fence, who owns a warehouse elsewhere in the city.

Many of Malcolm's problems come from his cocaine use. While wired on the drug, Malcolm feels fearless and audacious. One day, he sees Sophia and her sister in a black bar with a white man who is a friend of Sophia's husband. Malcolm saunters over and addresses the women intimately. Malcolm thereby blows Sophia's cover, and is later hunted by the friend and then by the husband himself.

When Malcolm is finally arrested, his conviction is as much about his relationship with a white woman as it is about his burglary. The two women and Shorty are also arrested, although Rudy gets away. Malcolm notes that the police cross-examine him on the origin and nature of his relationships with the women, instead of on the ostensible crime.

The court sentences Malcolm and Shorty to ten years in prison, and the women to five. Malcolm is not yet twenty-one. He is sent to Charlestown State Prison, where his first days are a blur of drug withdrawal, solitary confinement, and rage. Malcolm's cellblock mates nickname him Satan, and his brothers and sisters write him letters encouraging reform through religion. In Charlestown, Malcolm meets an inmate named Bimbi, who often addresses groups of prisoners and even guards. Bimbi speaks about various topics, including human behavior and American history, and encourages Malcolm to use the prison's correspondence courses and library. Malcolm reviews the rules of English and makes an effort to learn Latin.

In 1948, Malcolm transfers to another prison in Concord, Massachusetts, where he receives a letter from Reginald instructing him to abstain from pork and cigarettes. Malcolm trusts his brother and is intrigued, so he obeys. His refusal to eat pork causes an uproar and makes Malcolm feel proud. Shortly thereafter, Malcolm is transferred again to the Norfolk Prison Colony through arrangements made by Ella. With its flush toilets, liberal visitor policies, and barless, private rooms, Norfolk compares very favorably to the other two prisons.

At Norfolk, Reginald visits Malcolm and reveals that he has, along with Malcolm's other siblings in Michigan, joined the Nation of Islam and gained a new perspective on race relations in the United States. Repeating what he has learned from the Nation's leader, a man named Elijah Muhammad, Reginald tells Malcolm that all wisdom is with Allah and that white people are devils. On his first visit, Reginald does not say very much, but what he does say affects Malcolm profoundly. Malcolm is even more affected when Reginald returns and talks for two hours about how the white man has brainwashed the black man. Reginald tells Malcolm a story about the scientific generation of the white race by black people, a story that Malcolm looks back on with derision, but that moves him greatly at that time.

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Analysis

Both at the end of "Caught" and at the beginning of "Satan", Malcolm emphasizes that he and Shorty were convicted more for the crime of sleeping with white women than for committing burglary, hinting at the long and complex history of American's sexual politics. Until the end of the Civil War, white male slave traders and slave owners had absolute sexual dominion over black women and children. They could rape them at will, but this absolute freedom was mirrored by the absolute prohibition of sexual relations between black men and white women. There was nothing more taboo, in the eyes of white society, than this, and the mere accusation of it often resulted in the murder of the suspected male.

After the Civil War and the end of slavery, sex between white men and black women decreased, but white anxiety over sex between white women and black men persevered, and even increased. In 1863, two Democrats coined the racist term "miscegenation", meaning "interracial sex", in a campaign pamphlet in an effort to scare the public into voting against Abraham Lincoln by spreading the rumor that his liberal politics would push nation into the realm of rampant interracial sex. In the 1883 case *Pace v. Alabama*, the United States Supreme Court banned interracial marriage, a ruling it did not overturn until *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967.

Thus, when Malcolm and Shorty had white girlfriends in the 1940s, it was still considered a crime by white society, more so even than burglary. In *Black Boy*, the autobiography of Richard Wright, Wright hypothesizes that racist whites actually encourage, or at the very least tolerate, certain forms of criminal activity perpetrated by blacks. In contrast to sex with a white woman, Wright argues, which could in some way affirm the equality or humanity of a black male, a non-sexual crime like burglary justifies white prejudice. There is satisfaction in having your low opinion confirmed again and again. We see these dynamics at work in the sentencing of Shorty and Malcolm, who receive sentences of ten years for crimes worth sentences of two.

"Saved" and "Savior"

Summary

With Reginald's encouragement, Malcolm drafts a letter to Elijah Muhammad. He is so nervous that he writes the letter over and over. That night in bed Malcolm has a vision of a man whom he later identifies as Elijah Muhammad's mentor, Wallace D. Fard. A few days later, Malcolm receives from Elijah Muhammad a typed reply, encouraging him to reflect on his imprisonment as a product of the conditions created for black people by white society. Elijah Muhammad also sends five dollars.

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Malcolm receives letters from his family as well, which tell him to pray. Reluctantly, he begins praying, although the truths of Elijah Muhammad are much easier for him to accept intellectually than spiritually. Increasingly moved by the world-view promoted by the Nation of Islam, Malcolm begins to read extensively. He finds numerous books in the prison library that confirm the violence done to non-white people by white people, including ones about the colonial presence of Europeans in Africa and China, and about the history of slavery in America. Malcolm also reads from literature, philosophy, and the natural sciences. Eventually he begins to read after hours by the light of the prison corridor, often until very late at night, subsisting on very little sleep. With the knowledge he gains by reading, and the vocabulary he gains by hand-copying an entire dictionary, Malcolm finds the confidence to join the prison debating program, where he speaks out against the "blue-eyed devils", expounds on some of the tenets of the Nation of Islam, and develops a taste for public speaking.

In the course of visits from Reginald, Malcolm senses that his brother is becoming estranged from the Nation of Islam. Soon Malcolm learns that Reginald has been suspended for having improper relations with the secretary of the New York temple, an especially egregious offense in a sect that demands that its members follow strict codes of behavior. Malcolm writes Elijah Muhammad defending his brother and contesting the suspension, but when Elijah Muhammad sends an unbending response, Malcolm chooses the religion over his brother. Reginald deteriorates both in appearance and composure, eventually proselytizing insanely on the streets of Roxbury and claiming to be Allah. Ultimately, Reginald is institutionalized.

In 1951 Malcolm is transferred back to Charlestown, ostensibly for medical reasons, but probably because he has become too outspoken and controversial for Norfolk. In the spring of 1952, Malcolm receives word that he will be paroled, but this does not actually happen until August, when he is released into the custody of his brother Wilfred.

Although dubious of Islam, Ella approves of Malcolm's return to Michigan, where the police do not have it in for him. In Detroit, Malcolm instantly appreciates the warmth, love, and order of Wilfred's household, where the ablutions, greetings, and prayers of Islam are rigorously followed. Conversely, Malcolm despises his employment at a furniture store, and with his newly heightened consciousness instantly recognizes the exploitation inherent in white people selling junk furniture to poor black people.

Malcolm attends his first Nation of Islam temple meeting, where he is exhilarated by the solidarity, cleanliness, and austerity of those gathered. The Sunday before Labor Day, the members of the Detroit temple drive to Chicago, where Malcolm catches his first glance of Elijah Muhammad. Elijah Muhammad publicly likens Malcolm to Job, inviting everyone to watch the strength of his faith now that the safety of prison is gone. That night, after the meeting, all of the Detroit members are invited to Elijah Muhammad's home, where they eat and spend the night. At dinner, Malcolm asks Elijah Muhammad about recruitment

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techniques, as he is eager to work to attract new members in Detroit. Elijah Muhammad advises that Malcolm try to attract the young.

Back in Detroit, Malcolm seems at first to have little luck, convincing only a few neighborhood youth to visit the temple. Over several months, however, membership triples. During this period, Malcolm is granted his "X", a letter to represent the unknown African name he would have had if his ancestors not been kidnapped and enslaved. Malcolm begins to speak at temple meetings and gains confidence as an orator. He is surprised, humbled, and flattered when Elijah Muhammad appoints him as the assistant minister at the Detroit temple.

Malcolm also switches jobs twice, ending up at the Ford Motor Company, where he works for the Lincoln-Mercury division. At his first job, Malcolm receives a visit from an FBI agent investigating possible draft-dodging. Malcolm explains that he thought his ex-convict status rendered him ineligible. He is sent to the draft board, where he fills out a form, marking "conscientious objector", and tells the white board members that he will not fight in Korea to defend the United States. He never is bothered again.

Malcolm also becomes increasingly familiar with Elijah Muhammad, getting to know his family, including his mother, who tells Malcolm the story of Elijah Muhammad's life. She tells Malcolm that Muhammad was born in Georgia in 1897. He was small of stature but bold, especially in terms of issues of race. He mitigated fights between his siblings and was frank but non-confrontational with white employers. He married in his early twenties and began having children. In 1931 in Detroit, Muhammad met Wallace D. Fard, a peddler and self-proclaimed prophet who began the work that Elijah Muhammad would continue. By the time Fard disappeared in 1934, Elijah Muhammad was at the helm of the Nation of Islam. Death threats from jealous rivals, however, caused Elijah Muhammad to move himself and his family from city to city for seven years. He spent time in prison, supposedly for draft evasion, although he was in fact too old to serve. Only in the 1940s did he reclaim his position as the head of the Nation of Islam.

Analysis

"Saved" and "Savior" chronicle the years in prison and those immediately after that mark Malcolm's about-face. All the intelligence, passion, and will that Malcolm used to direct toward his immediate well-being are now turned toward the outside world.

Although Elijah Muhammad becomes, at this time, a major character in the *The Autobiography* and a great force in Malcolm's life, the nature of his relationship with Malcolm does not seem particularly personal. For example, based on Malcolm's descriptions it is much easier to envision Ella than it is to imagine Muhammad. The degree to which Muhammad remains a hazy character is the degree to which Malcolm's conversion is truly religious. By

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believing so strongly in a figure he knows so little about, Malcolm revolutionizes his own personality.

"Minister Malcolm X" and "Black Muslims"

Summary

Elijah Muhammad needs ministers for his growing nation, so Malcolm X quits his job at the Ford Motor Company and begins the extensive training. At this time Malcolm fully develops his rhetorical style. When Malcolm is ready, Elijah Muhammad sends him to Boston to aid in the founding of a temple there. Malcolm visits his old haunts and tests his new faith on Shorty, who loves white women and pork too much to be convinced. Ella is amazed at Malcolm, and although she does not convert, she is happy to see he has changed.

Once the Boston temple is up and running, Elijah Muhammad sends Malcolm to Philadelphia. Then, early in the summer of 1954, Muhammad appoints Malcolm to the small New York Temple. As in Boston, Malcolm seeks out his old crowd. He discovers that Sammy the Pimp is dead and that West Indian Archie is weak with illness. At his reunion with West Indian Archie, Malcolm clears up the bad blood between them but leaves sorrowfully, aware that the old hustler is too near death to convert. Malcolm is frustrated by the unresponsiveness of blacks to his initial teachings, but he continues, and the temple grows. Malcolm and his followers print fliers and develop techniques for drawing blacks from Nationalist rallies and churches. Malcolm has so much luck winning over Christians that he refines his speaking style with them in mind, emphasizing the complicity of Christianity in the subordination of his race.

In 1955, Malcolm helps found a temple in Atlanta, Georgia, while new temples open in smaller East Coast cities as well. By 1965, there are sizable temples in Chicago, Detroit, and New York. Malcolm is so busy that the Nation buys him a car to use for his travel between cities. Almost everything Malcolm owns belongs to the Nation of Islam.

In 1956, a woman named Betty joins the New York temple. For ten years, Malcolm has been celibate and fully devoted to his work. He hardly courts Betty at all, but he approves of her from a distance. Malcolm introduces Betty to an approving Elijah Muhammad, and then proposes marriage abruptly from a payphone in Detroit. They settle in Queens, New York, and have four children while Malcolm is alive. In 1958, Ella converts to the religion of her half-siblings. In that same year, the Nation of Islam bursts into the public eye when one of its members is the victim of police brutality. The elite Fruit of Islam lead a mass demonstration, standing ominously before the precinct house where the bleeding victim is being held, and then before the hospital to which Malcolm has demanded he be taken. Later the Nation of Islam wins \$70,000 in a lawsuit against the city.

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The real surge of publicity comes in 1959, however, when an academic publishes a book about the Nation of Islam, and a television show with Mike Wallace features footage of the Nation of Islam, and of Malcolm X speaking. The program is called "The Hate that Hate Produced", and the book is called "The Black Muslims in America", and both titles enrage Malcolm, who realizes that the media spins everything for shock value.

Malcolm also reviles other Civil Rights Movement leaders, and, without specifically mentioning Martin Luther King, Jr., he reviles "those 'integration'-mad Negroes" and "Uncle Tom's." At first, Elijah Muhammad discourages any disparagement of other black leaders, but when attacks on the Nation become too abundant, he lets Malcolm vent his feelings publicly.

Malcolm mentions that, in 1957, he had founded *Muhammad Speaks*, the Nation of Islam's newspaper, after visiting the black-run *Herald Dispatch* in Los Angeles. In the fall of 1959, Malcolm travels as an emissary to places where leaders are becoming interested in the Nation of Islam project: Egypt, Arabia, Sudan, Nigeria, and Ghana.

After the Mike Wallace show airs and the book is released, mainstream publications like *Life* and *Time* all feature articles about the Nation of Islam. The surge of interest changes Malcolm's life. He spends hours a day on the telephone defending the Nation, and attacking his interviewers with countercharges, clarifications, and assertions of bias. Increasingly, organizations invite Malcolm to represent Elijah Muhammad on panels and lecture circuits.

By 1960, Nation of Islam membership has grown to the point where mass rallies can be held. The Fruit of Islam provide security at these events, and Elijah Muhammad provides the main attraction. At first no white people are admitted, but eventually the white press, and then anyone with curiosity, is allowed.

The size and militancy of the Nation attracts the attention of the FBI and the police, which begin infiltrating rallies and tapping the telephones of higher-ups, including Malcolm X. Part of this government interest comes from the high proportion of Nation of Islam members who are or were in prison. Convicts embrace the Nation because their prison experiences have conditioned them both to take an especially grim view of white society and to excel at the discipline and austerity that the codes of the Nation demand. At this time, the Nation also succeeds in reforming drug addicts by using former addicts to do it.

At rallies, Elijah Muhammad often speaks passionately for two hours. This has a bad effect on his health. On the recommendation of Muhammad's doctors, the Nation buys him a home in Arizona, where he begins to spend most of the year. The geographical distance, his diminished health, and the growing administrative demands of the nation lead Malcolm to make a greater number of decisions without passing them by Muhammad. Muhammad seems to approve of this autonomy, but Malcolm foreshadows that his distance from his mentor will become more than just geographical and logistic.

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Commentary

"Minister Malcolm X" tracks Malcolm's ascent to the top of the Nation of Islam, and "Black Muslims," along with the later chapter "Icarus," describes his activities there. Of the nineteen chapters of the text, these three contain the Malcolm X closest to the image that was usually remembered until twenty years after his death. This is the Malcolm purely committed to the Nation of Islam, who transformed the Nation of Islam from 400 to 40,000 members, and who never flinched when indicting white people universally. If our conception of Malcolm X has changed, it is for one primary reason. So many current interpretations of *The Autobiography* and of Malcolm X himself tout the image of Malcolm as dogmatic firebrand that it has come to dominate his legacy. He is now viewed as a dogmatic firebrand, an aimless criminal turned staunch militant. As Malcolm himself expresses at the end of the book, this image of the dogmatic firebrand was remembered throughout the course of his lifetime, and continues to linger.

"Icarus" and "Out"

Summary

By 1963 both the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X are inundated with publicity. Malcolm receives a tremendous volume of mail, much of it from white people, and a surprisingly small amount of it is antagonistic. In the summer of 1963, Malcolm X is rated the second most sought-after lecturer by universities, just below Barry Goldwater. Malcolm makes frequent appearances at the best universities, and savors both the confrontations such occasions entail and the education he receives from them. Malcolm experiences especially intense emotions when he speaks at Harvard, just a few blocks from the apartment he worked from as a burglar, and pledges to himself never to forget that all his success comes from Allah.

Although Elijah Muhammad still approves of most of Malcolm's activities, he disapproves of the university lecture circuit. By this time, too, Malcolm has heard that other members of the Nation also disapprove of his activities. People frequently accuse him of taking over the organization. These murmurs first reached Malcolm's ears in 1961, when Elijah Muhammad's bronchial condition worsened, and Malcolm began taken on greater responsibility. By 1962, Malcolm noticed that his name was appearing less and less in *Muhammad Speaks*, the newspaper he himself had founded. Now, in 1963, Malcolm begins turning down publicity opportunities in *Life* and *Newsweek*, hoping to mitigate the jealousy. He has always noticed the increasingly chilly receptions he receives at the headquarters in Chicago, but now he is no longer convinced that Elijah Muhammad is not part of the negativity.

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Elijah Muhammad faces a paternity suit from two temple secretaries he has had affairs with. These court cases confirm rumors of Muhammad's philandering that Malcolm has been ignoring, and they further complicate his relationship to the Nation of Islam. At first, Malcolm pretends that he does not know about the allegations, and changes his temple teachings to skirt the issue of the moral code. Eventually, however, he feels like a fool for feigning ignorance of what is commonly known. To deal with the issue, Malcolm first approaches Wallace Muhammad, one of Elijah Muhammad's sons, and then approaches Elijah Muhammad himself. Muhammad compares himself to the great men of scripture, whose accomplishments outweigh their occasional transgressions. Malcolm accepts this and assumes that a confession, followed by this explanation, will be set before the Nation.

Instead, relations worsen between Malcolm and the Nation of Islam. When President John F. Kennedy is assassinated, Malcolm X breaks an order by Elijah Muhammad that no minister comment, calling the murder in Dallas a case of "the chickens coming home to roost". To distance the Nation from such a controversial stance, Muhammad silences Malcolm for a ninety-day period. Malcolm soon realizes, however, that the Kennedy quote is merely an excuse for the Nation to cast him off, which they have been plotting for some time. Malcolm X is deeply shocked and amazed that he has been betrayed by Elijah Muhammad, describing it as a sudden divorce after twelve years of beautiful marriage.

Rumors of a death warrant become real one of Malcolm's assistants at the New York temple confesses that the Nation has ordered him to kill Malcolm. To distance himself from the Nation of Islam and absorb the shock of the divorce, Malcolm accepts the invitation of boxer Cassius Clay for Malcolm and his family to stay in Florida while Clay prepares for his fight against Sonny Liston. This is a welcome vacation. The sight of Clay, who has Islamic leanings, beating a fighter who is physically stronger through a combination of will, cleverness, and training strengthens Malcolm's faith in Allah. Clay announces his Muslim affiliation after the fight, taking the name Muhammad Ali.

Once Malcolm accepts his estrangement from the Nation of Islam, he thinks about how he can continue to serve the political and economic interests of black people. He takes stock of his celebrity and decides to found his own organization in Harlem, which he calls "Muslim Mosque, Inc." Malcolm holds the first meeting in a rented ballroom and receives a heartening amount of publicity and support. Malcolm envisions the organization as less exclusive and more proactive than the Nation of Islam, and more directly concerned with the channels of politics and with the development of black economic independence. Before things really get going, however, Malcolm decides that it is time for him to make his pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca. Having been cut off from his sole source of income, the Nation of Islam, Malcolm asks Ella for money for the trip, and she obliges.

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Analysis

More than once, Malcolm X likens his falling out with Elijah Muhammad to the end of a romantic relationship. This metaphor, especially in light of its repetition, conflicts with Malcolm's negative view of intimacy throughout the rest of the text. He has very little good to say about women and disclaims any interest in romantic love, establishing an almost purely rational view of his own wife.

Questions that arise from this conflict between Malcolm's views on actual marriage and his choice of metaphor include: what experiences have led Malcolm to feel as he does about women? What draws him to an analogy at odds with these feelings? How do his views of women reconcile with his views of racial equality? And how entirely do we trust his presentation of his views?

Malcolm X is not the only black civil rights leader apparently guilty of chauvinism. At the time of the Civil Rights Movement, a common justification was that African-Americans should sort out the complexities of gender politics after they had won the war of race. Many women believed this as strongly as the men. And clearly, in the case of the Nation of Islam, gender inequality appeared to be part of the actual solution.

"Mecca, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, 1965"

Summary

Malcolm explains that every Muslim is expected, if possible, to make a pilgrimage, or *Hajj*, to the holy city of Mecca, in Saudi Arabia. Malcolm has no trouble receiving financial backing from Ella, who has dropped out of the Nation of Islam, is studying with orthodox Boston Muslims, and has started a school where Arabic is taught.

When Malcolm applies for a Hajj visa, he learns that his status as a Muslim must be approved by Mahmoud Youssef Shawarbi, a Muslim professor, author, and UN advisor currently residing in New York. Shawarbi readily writes Malcolm a letter of approval and passes on a book about Islam sent to Malcolm by an author in Saudi Arabia. Shawarbi also gives Malcolm the telephone number of his son, who studies in Cairo, and the telephone number of Omar Azzam, the son of the book's author, who lives in Jedda, the town from which the pilgrimages begin.

Malcolm leaves the country quietly, avoiding publicity, and has a good flight to Frankfurt Germany, chatting all the while with his seatmates. In Frankfurt, Malcolm is impressed by the friendliness of storeowners, and is recognized by a white American student, who is thrilled to see him. Malcolm spends another layover in Cairo, this one for two days of sightseeing. He visits Shawarbi's son, and sees enough of the city to be impressed by its

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level of industrialization. From the beginning of the trip he is struck by the Arab world's apparent color-blindness.

Malcolm's travels run smoothly until he reaches the airport in Jeddah, where officials confiscate his passport and tell him a high court must establish whether or not he is a true Muslim. He retreats to a crowded airport dormitory, where he spends many anxious hours. Despite Malcolm's anxiety, he reflects on the various languages, colors, and customs of all the Muslims around him. Malcolm practices the prayer rituals, shares food with his dormitory mates, is stared at, tries to overcome the language barrier, and is mistaken for the boxer Muhammad Ali, who is now famous throughout the Islamic world.

Finally, Malcolm remembers that he has the telephone number of Omar Azzam, whom he calls. Azzam brings Malcolm to the Jeddah Palace Hotel, where Azzam's father, the author of the book on Islam, moves into his son's home and gives his suite to Malcolm. From now on Malcolm travels in style. He enjoys fine food and conversation with Jeddah's elite, is treated hospitably by the court, and is lent a car by prince Faisal himself, to make the Hajj to Mecca.

Malcolm describes his amazement at Mecca as a kind of numbness. The crowds overwhelm him, as does the feeling of spiritual unity, and the sight of Muslims circling the black stone house of Ka'ba within the Great Mosque. Malcolm participates in this ritual himself, guided by his Mutawaf. He also runs seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwa and ascends Mount Arafat, both of which are essential parts of the Hajj. All of the time he feels very strongly the unity of the Islamic world and its colorblindness under Allah. At the end of the Hajj, Malcolm writes many letters home, all of which express Malcolm's changed perspective on the racial problems in the United States. Having met white people on this trip who are untainted by racism, Malcolm locates America's problems in the white attitude generated by four hundred years of white violence against blacks. He sees in Islam a solution. Malcolm signs all of his letters as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, which becomes his official name, although the world continues to refer to him as Malcolm X.

Before Malcolm returns to the United States, he learns that leaders and intellectuals of non-white nations take a great interest in the plight of American blacks. Malcolm meets Prince Faisal himself, who is friendly but who gently scolds Malcolm for propagating a bogus faith in America. Malcolm says he has seen true Islam now, and promises to change. From Jeddah, Malcolm flies to Beirut, then to Nigeria, and then to Ghana, prolonging his trip to the weeks of the spring of 1964. At each stop, he speaks to students and faculty of the local university and is graciously received. People hold dinners in his honor, students hug him, and sovereigns admit him before them. On two occasions, audience members physically chase from the lecture hall individuals who dare to stand up and defend white America. Whenever he is asked why he split from Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm avoids any derisive words about his former mentor.

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In Ghana, a high commissioner gives Malcolm ceremonial robes, the widow of W.E.B. DuBois entertains him, and a colony of African-American expatriates coordinate event after event for him. In May, Malcolm flies to Liberia, to Senegal, and then to Morocco. Finally, he flies home. In New York, a crowd of fifty to sixty reporters greets his airplane and besieges Malcolm with questions that imply a connection between him and the violence that is erupting across the country. The failure of the press to acknowledge his new outlook frustrates Malcolm, but he immediately launches into his seasoned rhetoric.

The final chapter of *The Autobiography* establishes Malcolm's general outlook at the end of his life, and is vague about actual events. In Harlem, Malcolm holds meetings of his new organization, emphasizing its inclusiveness of people of any faith, but continuing to exclude whites from membership. Malcolm will accept white help and white interest now, but he clings to the belief that black people must unify first. After some time in the States, Malcolm returns for another eighteen weeks to Africa and the Middle East, meeting with many world leaders. The American presidential election occurs while he is away, but Malcolm does not consider either of the candidates, Barry Goldwater and Lyndon Johnson, to be particularly good for black people.

In the end, Malcolm confesses to feeling stifled in his new endeavors by his old reputation. He predicts for himself a violent death, and doubts that he will live to see the publication of *The Autobiography*.

Analysis

The Autobiography of Malcolm X ends with Malcolm making nearly as great a change as the one he underwent in prison. During his pilgrimage to Mecca, and his subsequent stops in Africa and the Middle East, Malcolm witnesses what seems to be the colorblindness of the Islamic world. When he has untainted encounters with fair-complexioned Muslims, he reevaluates the connections drawn by Elijah Muhammad between white skin and evil disposition, and quickly assumes a more sociological view of the problems in the United States.

This concluding phase of Malcolm's ideological life can be compared to that of Martin Luther King, Jr., who also turned toward another set of methods toward the end of his life. King originally used non-violence to effect legal change in the American South. The older King contemplated socialism as a tool to restructure the American economy, especially in the urban North, and spoke vigorously against the Vietnam War. That Malcolm X became more moderate and that King became more radical suggests the partial reconciliation between them might have become complete had they both lived. The assassination of each was tragic not only unto itself, but also in terms of the potential relationship it prevented.

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Epilogue

Summary

The epilogue differs from the other chapters of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* because it is told from Alex Haley's point of view. Similarities of tone, however, minimize that difference, and indicate that there is a good deal of Haley in Malcolm's voice in earlier chapters.

Haley first hears about the Nation of Islam in San Francisco in 1959, and first meets Malcolm X in New York in 1960. He writes two articles on Malcolm X and one on Elijah Muhammad before a publisher proposes to Haley the idea of a biography. Having won the trust of Malcolm and Elijah Muhammad with the earlier pieces, Haley gets them both to agree to the project.

It takes a long time for Haley to win the trust of Malcolm, who suspects all reporters, including black ones, of serving white America. At the beginning Malcolm is cautious and punctilious about the contracts. Slowly, after numerous interview sessions in Haley's Greenwich Village writing studio, Malcolm opens up. Haley begins work on the book shortly before Malcolm's falling out with Elijah Muhammad, and the epilogue traces the last two years of Malcolm's life from Haley's point of view. Haley emphasizes the tension and violence surrounding Malcolm's final days, and describes in detail the death threats and close encounters that preceded Malcolm's assassination. On February 21, 1965, Malcolm is gunned down by three audience members at a lecture at the Audubon Ballroom, which he has been renting to use for his new organization. Three suspects, all with Muslim affiliations, are later arrested and convicted, but comments that Malcolm made in his final days suggest that somebody more powerful than the Nation of Islam may have had a hand in the killing.

Haley describes Malcolm's funeral, which is attended by thousands of blacks, whites, Muslims, and non-Muslims, and where the funeral rites are performed by, among others, a sheikh from Mecca. The sheikh ends with a description of the Islamic view of life after the Day of Judgment, thereby hinting at Malcolm's residence in paradise.

Analysis

The epilogue ends *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, but it is a good place to begin consideration of it, as it raises the issue of how the book was composed, and by whom. Alex Haley is perhaps the most famous African-American non-fiction author of the twentieth century, but his career is riddled with allegations of plagiarism. His later work, *Roots*, which purports to trace the generations of his own family from Africa to the present day, was made into a television program viewed by millions, but has been dismissed by some critics as a

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sham. *Roots* led to two lawsuits over alleged plagiarism, and most people would agree that Haley's methods were, at the very least, sloppy. Even people view the book's composition without stigma consider it as much a work as an autobiography.

The most virulent of Haley's critics call him charlatan, and their charges apply to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as well as to *Roots*. Whether *The Autobiography* was largely re-written by a white editor or simply touched up, matters little, however, to the many people it has profoundly touched. Such claims and counterclaims should not divert attention from a straight reading of the text. Although some critics object to overlook a breach of academic integrity simply because the cause is progressive, while others argue it is a shame to attack a book that has done so much good.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. How does Malcolm X's view of white people change over the course of his life? Consider the different phases of Malcolm's life.

In responding to this question, we have to remember that Malcolm's entire life is told from the point of view he had reached at his life's end. Assuming that Malcolm was as honest as possible, however, we can say the following. From childhood, Malcolm X's father and mother teach Malcolm not to take abuse from white people, and although he is briefly happy while staying with the Swerlins, his despondency throughout the eighth grade, shows that being their "mascot" does not make him happy. When Malcolm moves to Boston, his sole significant contact with white people is Sophia, whom he never acknowledges as anything more than an object. Once he leaves Boston, therefore, Malcolm treats white people as they have always treated him: inhumanly.

By the time Malcolm reaches prison, this impulse has been so reinforced by his experiences that it takes little for him to accept the teachings of Elijah Muhammad that the white man is the devil. When Malcolm reviews the white people he has known, he can only think of one, his Jewish boss, who treated him with any decency at all. From this moment of conversion until his falling out with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm adopts the party line that all whites are devils. On his trip to Mecca, however, Malcolm meets unprejudiced Muslims of fair complexion, and reconsiders the views he has held for so many years against whites. Nonetheless, although Malcolm comes to see white people as the product of circumstances rather than inherent evil, he maintains his belief in the equality and unity of black people first and foremost.

2. Malcolm X's view of woman can often be chauvinistic, if not downright misogynistic. Can this be reconciled with his legacy as a leader?

3. If Malcolm X had lived to see the development of Muslim Mosque, Inc., what might that development have looked like?

4. Write an imaginary dialogue between Malcolm X, based on the ideas he presents in The Autobiography of Malcolm X, and another political leader of your choice.

5. What, in Malcolm's experiences, drew him to activism more militant than that the non-violent approach of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s?

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6. *How do the lessons and skills of Malcolm X's life on the street show up in his demeanor as a political leader?*

 **REVIEW AND RESOURCES****Review Quiz**

- Where was Malcolm X born?*
 - Omaha, Nebraska
 - Milwaukee, Wisconsin
 - Lansing, Michigan
 - Boston, Massachusetts
- Why did white people murder Earl Little?*
 - He owed them money
 - He slept with a white woman
 - He was spreading the ideas of Marcus Garvey
 - He was a Muslim
- Who runs the detention home Malcolm is placed in?*
 - The Gohannases
 - The Swerlins
 - The Lyons
 - The Fords
- In eighth grade, what does Malcolm declare he wishes to become?*
 - A doctor
 - A teacher
 - A preacher
 - A lawyer
- Who does Malcolm first meet in Boston after Ella?*
 - Sammy the Pimp
 - West Indian Archie
 - Shorty
 - Sophia

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6. *Where does Malcolm land his first job in Boston?*
 - A. The Savoy Ballroom
 - B. The Roseland State Ballroom
 - C. Small's Paradise
 - D. The Apollo Theater

7. *Who is raising Laura?*
 - A. The Swerlins
 - B. Her mother
 - C. Her half-sister
 - D. Her grandmother

8. *Why does Malcolm leave Laura?*
 - A. She is too wild
 - B. He starts dating a white woman
 - C. She doesn't like dancing
 - D. Ella prohibits it

9. *Why does Malcolm first get a railroad job?*
 - A. He hopes to see New York
 - B. He wants to avoid the draft
 - C. He is determined to earn the respect of white people
 - D. He plans on selling reefers to traveling musicians

10. *What is Malcolm's first job in New York?*
 - A. Drug dealer
 - B. Day-waiter at Small's Paradise
 - C. Shoeshine boy at the Savoy Ballroom
 - D. Pimp

11. *In Harlem, what name does Malcolm become known by?*
 - A. Lansing Slim
 - B. Little the Pimp
 - C. Detroit Red
 - D. Satan

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12. *To avoid the narcotics squad, what does Malcolm do first?*
- A. Move his business down a few blocks
 - B. Sell reefers on the railroad
 - C. Change his hours
 - D. Sell through the mail
13. *What does West Indian Archie accuse Malcolm of?*
- A. Selling bad dope
 - B. Sleeping with his girlfriend
 - C. Collecting on a number he didn't bet
 - D. Violating the codes of the Nation of Islam
14. *Back in Boston, how does Malcolm decide to support himself?*
- A. By dealing drugs
 - B. By gambling
 - C. Through burglary
 - D. By attending college
15. *At Charlestown State Prison, what do the other inmates call Malcolm?*
- A. X
 - B. Satan
 - C. Detroit Red
 - D. Little
16. *Who converts Malcolm to Islam?*
- A. Elijah Muhammad
 - B. Ella
 - C. Philbert
 - D. Reginald
17. *When he is released from prison, where does Malcolm move to?*
- A. Boston
 - B. New York
 - C. Detroit
 - D. Chicago

18. *Where does Malcolm first see Elijah Muhammad?*
- A. In a vision
 - B. At a dinner at Wilfred's house
 - C. At a rally in New York
 - D. At a meeting in Chicago
19. *What is Malcolm's first official post in the Nation of Islam?*
- A. The assistant minister at the Detroit temple
 - B. The first National Minister
 - C. The founder of the Boston temple
 - D. The head minister of the New York temple
20. *Who is Malcolm X's future wife?*
- A. A white woman
 - B. A minister at the Boston temple
 - C. A teacher at the New York temple
 - D. A jazz singer
21. *The Nation of Islam first appears on Network Television in a program called what?*
- A. "The Hate that Hate Produced"
 - B. "The Black Muslims in America"
 - C. "Violence and Negroes"
 - D. "Self-Determination and Equal Rights for Blacks"
22. *What is Malcolm shocked to learn that Elijah Muhammad has done?*
- A. Embezzled funds
 - B. Committed adultery
 - C. Broken the prohibition on alcohol
 - D. Spoken to the white media
23. *After breaking with the Nation of Islam, what organization does Malcolm X found?*
- A. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference
 - B. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
 - C. Muslim Mosque, Inc.
 - D. The Universal Negro Improvement Association

24. *On his pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm is mistaken for whom?*

- A. Muhammad Ali
- B. Alex Haley
- C. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- D. Sonny Liston

25. *At the end of his life, what does Malcolm believe?*

- A. He will live to a ripe old age
- B. People will remember him for his change in viewpoint
- C. He will die a violent death
- D. He will reconcile with the Nation of Islam

Answer Key:

1: A	8: B	15: B	22: B
2: C	9: A	16: D	23: C
3: B	10: B	17: C	24: A
4: D	11: C	18: D	25: C
5: C	12: A	19: A	
6: B	13: C	20: C	
7: D	14: C	21: A	

Further Reading

Appiah, Kwame Anthony and Gates, Jr., Henry Louis, ed. *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Experience*. New York: Perseus Books Group, 1999.

Clarke, John Hendrik, ed. *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*. New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1990.

Goldman, Peter. *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979.



OVERALL ANALYSIS AND THEMES

The contradictions and conundrums surrounding *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* are reflective of the confusion of our attempts to understand Malcolm X himself. The very fact that his words can be found on the curricula of many high schools and college reflects a contradiction. How could the story of one of the century's most passionate iconoclasts, and one of white America's most caustic critics, have so quickly been appropriated by the cultural mainstream? How can a book about the same man be cited by nationally prominent black political leaders and fringe cultural ones? An important thing to remember while reading this text is that the world of the printed page is very different from that of real experience, and that learning one does not necessarily mean learning anything about the other. Perhaps so many college courses include *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is because books are so much less threatening than people. Placing the book on curricula is seen as an easy solution to the problems of race, a substitute for the much harder task of grappling with these problems on our own.

On the other hand, the sheer number of people who reference *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* speaks to its power as a text. Even here, however, it is difficult to ascertain how to read the text. It is in part a political statement, but it is not particularly dogmatic. And the book is obviously a work of literature as well. While carving its own niche in the history of American letters, it follows the traditions of African-American Literature. From the narratives of Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), who escaped from ignorance and slavery in the south to education and abolitionism in the north, to the autobiography of Richard Wright (1908–1960), who found in the socialism of the North a possible remedy for the ills of racial inequality in the south, there is a history of books by African-American authors that tell the stories of men and women who made themselves in a society that only stood against them.

Questions to consider as you read include: how are things different from the way they were when the book was written? How can a book affect one politically? How would Malcolm X, if he had lived, respond to the commercialization of his image? How is his image used by the institutions that teach about him?

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