

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**The Autobiography of Malcolm X
As Told to Alex Haley**

written by Leah Rodriguez

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The Autobiography of Malcolm X

Note to the Teacher

The Autobiography of Malcolm X details the activist's tumultuous life, from his youth and early adulthood, to his role as a national public speaker and advocator for black rights in the United States. In the process of telling his story, Malcolm X, in a collaborative effort with Alex Haley, broaches the essential question of what it means to be black in America. Before his departure from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X stood staunchly opposed to popular civil rights leaders who strove for integration, introducing concepts of black supremacy and Islam as the true religion of black people to a national audience. His travels in Africa and the Middle East profoundly altered his perceptions of race relations and served as guidance for his reformed teachings of black unity and self-respect, self-defense, and further emphasis of Pan-Africanism. During this process, he demanded attention and offered revolutionary ideas about race—ideas that, though uncomfortable and confrontational, forced people to accept responsibility for the past and prompted them to take charge of the future.

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, on May 19, 1925. His early life was marred by tragedy, poverty, and crime until his conversion to the Nation of Islam, the organization for which he became a national spokesman. As a powerful and persuasive speaker, Malcolm X garnered widespread attention for espousing the controversial beliefs of the group's leader, Elijah Muhammad. In 1964, he renounced his affiliation with the Nation of Islam, converted to Sunni Islam, and founded a new organization called Muslim Mosque, Inc. Three Nation of Islam members assassinated him on February 21, 1965, at the Audubon Ballroom in Manhattan. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was published posthumously.

Alex Haley was born in Ithaca, New York, on August 11, 1921. After twenty years in the U.S. Coast Guard, Haley turned to a writing career that produced interviews with notable people such as Miles Davis, Muhammad Ali, and Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad. Upon gaining approval from the latter, Haley began what would become two years of extensive interviews with Malcolm X, which lasted until his death in 1965. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*—Haley's first book—achieved significant acclaim, receiving the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award later that year. In 1976, Haley achieved notoriety again for his novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, which chronicles his heritage starting with the enslavement of Kunta Kinte. Until his death in 1992, Haley continued to produce work that dealt candidly with race and black American culture.

Throughout this Unit, Malcolm X is referred to as either *Malcolm* or *Malcolm X* in order to provide some variety. Usually, subjects in literature are called by their last names, but that usage would not work in this instance.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. demonstrate an understanding of Malcolm X's controversial ideologies and how they changed over time.
2. analyze the book's syntax and determine the ways with which Haley chose to use the following rhetorical devices and explain their significance:
 - Rhetorical question
 - Colloquialism
3. cite textual evidence that demonstrates how Malcolm X analyzes his past with an enlightened perspective.
4. explain the role of foreshadowing in Malcolm X's narrative, especially as it concerns the belief that he will die by violence.
5. identify, discuss, and analyze the philosophies of black nationalism and Pan-Africanism as presented in the book.
6. recognize and discuss the themes and techniques of autobiographical literature, including flashback, sequence of events, and first-person narration.
7. identify and explain the significance of the following symbols:
 - conked hair
 - eyeglasses
 - Icarus' wings
 - the number seven
 - the prayer rug
8. analyze the significance of Malcolm X's incarceration as a turning point in his life.
9. describe the changes Malcolm X went through over the course of his journey through Africa and the Middle East.
10. evaluate and discuss Malcolm X's initial hatred of white people and the "whitening" of society, using both textual evidence that describes his early life and the United States' racial climate at that time.
11. understand the key beliefs and practices of the Nation of Islam and Sunni Islam as described by Malcolm X and analyze how the two differ.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. The first chapter, titled “Nightmare,” begins with an incident that occurred before Malcolm X’s birth when the Ku Klux Klan surrounded the Little home looking for Malcolm’s father. Analyze the significance of this scene and explain why you think the authors chose to begin with it.
2. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was a joint project between Malcolm X and Alex Haley. Discuss why the book is called an “autobiography” if Alex Haley was responsible for writing it. How might it have been different if Malcolm X had written the book himself or collaborated with a different writer?
3. In Chapter One, Malcolm X says that his father “was raising the banner of black-race purity and exhorting the Negro masses to return to their ancestral African homeland—a cause which had made [Marcus] Garvey the most controversial black man on earth.” Discuss the effect this early exposure to Marcus Garvey’s teachings had on Malcolm’s later beliefs as an activist.
4. While in prison, Malcolm’s introduction to Elijah Muhammad’s teachings forces him to reflect on his own past experiences. Why do those experiences persuade him to join the Nation of Islam?
5. While recounting his early childhood, Malcolm X explains that his father favored him for his light skin while his mother seemed to dislike him for the same reason. Comment on the influence these experiences had on Malcolm’s early understandings of race and how he perceived his parents’ attitudes as a product of white influence.
6. One of the most appealing aspects of Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam is the belief that it is the “natural religion” for black people. Identify components of the religion that speak to the conditions of black men and women in post-slavery America.
7. Consider the following quotation: “The white man was fast losing his power to oppress and exploit the dark world...the dark world was starting to rise to rule the world again, as it had before...the white man’s world was on the way down, it was on the way out.” Explain the significance of “the dark world” vs. “the white world.”
8. In many ways, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* reads as a persuasive argument for his beliefs embedded in the narration of his life. Identify at least three instances with which the authors attempt to provide evidence for an argument or use persuasive rhetoric.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X

Chapter One: Nightmare

VOCABULARY

balk – to refuse

belligerent – angry; displays aggression

bootblacks – shoe shiners

cronies – [*slang*] friends

hernia – a medical condition that causes groin pain

ingratiated – pleased

jilted – wronged

lynching – a hanging

mulatto – a derogatory term for someone born of a black and white parent

parasitically – like a parasite; taking without giving something in return

1. Chapter One begins at a time before Malcolm's birth when his mother, Louise, is still pregnant with him. How does this moment of white supremacist violence set the tone for the rest of the book?

2. Analyze Malcolm's description of his mother. How does it contribute to his early perceptions of race?

3. What happens during the "nightmare night" of Malcolm's early childhood?

5. How does “Sammy the Pimp” determine the “‘unconscious, true personality’ of women”? Why does Malcolm wish he knew about it at the time?

6. What happens between Laura and her grandmother? How does Malcolm react?

7. Describe Malcolm’s relationship with Sophia. How does it reflect the community’s racial attitudes?

8. Why do you think Malcolm spends part of this chapter on his brief relationship with Laura?

9. What major event ends Chapter Four?

5. By the end of Chapter Eight, who is after Malcolm? How does he get away?

Chapter Nine: Caught

VOCABULARY

blueblood – a socialite

sordid – wretched

stymied – prevented from doing something

titillate – to excite

1. How does Malcolm describe himself at the beginning of Chapter Nine?

2. Describe the relationship between Malcolm and Sophia.

3. How does Malcolm build up his reputation among other hustlers in Roxbury?
