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"The Autobiography of Malcolm X"

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The Autobiography of Malcolm X

by

Malcolm X

(with assistance from Alex Haley)



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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

This autobiography is set in America. Spanning a period of four decades, the book is a moving saga of America's most controversial Black Muslim leader- Malcolm X. He spends his boyhood in a small town in Michigan. He is imprisoned at the age of twenty. It is during his imprisonment that he.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major

Malcolm X - The hero of the novel. The book is about his life and times. Through his own experiences, he tells the reader what it is like to be a black. The racial discrimination that he faces since childhood is a reflection of the discrimination and harassment faced by thousands of blacks in the US.

Rev. Earl Little - Malcolm X's father. He is a priest in a Baptist church. Besides his work as a priest, he is also an active member of and organizer for the organization founded by Marcus Garvey. Earl Little and his family is constantly threatened and harassed by Ku Klux Klan members due to his activities as a member of Garvey's organization. Yet he continues to organize the blacks in and around his village, till the Klan members kill him.

Louise Little - Malcolm X's mother. She is a strong woman who tries to keep her family together after her husband's death. But the constant interference from the Welfare Department during the depression years breaks her will.

Ella Little - The tall, domineering and independent sister of Malcolm X. She is extremely fond of Malcolm and stands by him like a rock during the most difficult phases of his life.

Laura - The pretty black girl whom young Malcolm meets in Boston-his first date. She is heart broken when Malcolm leaves her for a white girl called Sophia. The rejection coupled with her own problems at home pushes her towards drugs and prostitution.....

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The Protagonist of the book is Malcolm X. He is narrating the story of his life to Alex Haley, with whose help the Autobiography is written. Malcolm X is already a.....

Antagonist - There is no one particular individual who can be called the Antagonist in the book. The book depicts Malcolm's struggle with the society he is living in. Therefore the antagonist in the.....

Climax - Since the book is a bunch of recollections from the Black leader Malcolm X's past, there is no one particular incident, or situation which can be called the climax. The turning point in author's life is perhaps when he decides to drop out of school in Lansing and visit his sister Ella in Boston.....

Outcome - The book ends rather abruptly in the chapter called 1965. For it is this year when Malcolm was brutally assassinated during a meeting. The last chapter refers to the time when Malcolm X returns.....

PLOT (Synopsis)

The book traces the life of Malcolm X from his childhood, his life in the streets of Harlem, the

transformation that occurs in the prison where he first comes in contact with the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and finally the break with the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X the protagonist is looking back into his past and narrating incidents to Alex Haley, who becomes his close friend and confidante during the course of writing the book.

The book can be broadly divided into four parts. The first part deals with his childhood in Lansing. Malcolm loses his father Rev. Earl Little when he is hardly four or five years old. Since his mother is unable to get a job anywhere due to his father's reputation (he was a member of Marcus Garvey's organization- U.N.I.A, feared and despised by the local white population), she is forced to turn to the Welfare Department for charity. Due to constant meddling of the Welfare Department into their private affairs, the family breaks up. While Malcolm is sent away to a foster family, his younger siblings are sent away to a close friend's who agree to take them in. His elder brother and sister continue to stay in their house. For young Malcolm, the break up of his family and his mother eventually losing

THEME (S)

Major

Racism in America - A major theme of the book is that face of America which only the blacks can see every day- the ugly face of Racism. And only the black Americans who experience it right from their birth, can express, what it is like to be discriminated in every sphere of life, only because.....

Minor

The Civil Rights Movement in America - The Autobiography of Malcolm X discusses the Civil Rights Movement at length. Malcolm did not look at the question of racial discrimination as an.....

MOOD

The Autobiography is a serious novel dealing with burning issues in the US during the 50s and the 60s. The book does not merely record the life and experiences of Malcolm X, but is a serious.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Author Information

Malcolm X (1925- 1965). Born as Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, he grew up to become the leader of a movement to unite black people all over the world. His father Rev. Earl Little was a priest and an active member of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A) founded by Marcus Garvey. In 1946, Malcolm X was sentenced to prison in Massachusetts for burglary. While in prison, he came across the teachings of the Nation of Islam and converted to Islam. The members of this organization.....

Literary Information

Malcolm X has written this Autobiography with the help of Alex Haley. Although, the entire book all have been written and arranged by Alex Haley, the content of the book has been narrated and edited by the black leader himself. Also, the book has been written in first person as though Malcolm X is.....

Historical Information

The Autobiography of Malcolm X gives the reader a lot of information on the socio-economic and cultural

life of the blacks in the US between the period 1925-1965. The book begins with the Ku Klux Klan men threatening Malcolm's mother, a few months before Malcolm was born. The Klan men leave a warning for Malcolm's father because of his involvement in Marcus Garvey's organization. The scene reflects the tension that existed between the blacks and whites in America then. The 1920s witnessed the growth of the movement founded by Marcus Garvey. Through his organization, the UNIA Garvey tried to develop racial pride among the blacks. He believed that the condition of blacks would not improve if

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

Chapter 1 - Nightmare

Summary

The first chapter begins with an incident that occurs a few months before Malcolm's birth. One night, his mother is alone at home, putting Malcolm's elder siblings to sleep. Some Ku Klux Klan member's ride up to the house and call out for Malcolm's father - Rev. Earl Little. Earl Little is a Baptist minister and a committed 'organizer' for the Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.), founded by Marcus Garvey. His mother, Louise Little opens the door and stands where the men can see her pregnant condition. Standing there, she informs the white -hooded men that her husband is away preaching in Milwaukee. The Klansmen warn her that if her husband continues to arouse the 'good' Negroes of their town (Omaha), he will pay for it with his life. Before the men gallop away into the dark night carrying flaring torches, they circle round the house shattering every windowpane in sight with their rifle butts. Malcolm learns about this incident from his mother some years later.

Malcolm is his father's seventh child. His father has three children from a previous marriage- Ella, Earl, and Mary. They all live in Boston. His marriage with Louise gives him a daughter and a son - Hilda and Philbert respectively. They are followed by Malcolm, who is born in an Omaha hospital. From Omaha the Little family shift to Milwaukee, where Malcolm's brother Reginald is born.

However, they do not stay for long at Milwaukee. This is because his father wants to find a place, where they can raise their own food and maybe build a business of his own. This desire to set up a business is due to the teachings of Marcus, which stress on black economic independence from the white man.

So the family shifts to Lansing in Michigan, where Earl Little buys a house and makes a living by doing freelance Christian preaching in the local Negro Baptist churches. Since his work requires him to be busy primarily on Sundays, during the week, he travels around spreading the ideas of Marcus Garvey. Here, once again a white racist group called the Black Legion harasses him. The members of this group wear black robes instead of white (the Ku Klux Klan members wore white robes and hoods). Soon after Malcolm's younger sister Yvonne is born, when Malcolm is barely four years old, another nightmarish incident occurs, which remains permanently etched in his memory. One night, the family wakes up amidst gun shots and smoke. It is their father who had shouted and shot at two white men, who were running away after having set their house on fire. Malcolm recalls standing out in the yard with his family that night, crying and yelling his head off, as the house is razed to the ground. The police arrived at the scene and stood watching as the fire raged on. After the fire, Malcolm recalls that his father was called to the police station and questioned about a permit for the pistol head used to fire shots at the men, who had set their house on fire. The police frequently visited their house looking for the gun. They were never able to find it for it was sewed up inside a pillow.

Earl Little managed to prevail on some of his friends to feed and clothe his family until he was able to a find a place of his own in the outskirts of East Lansing. But they could not stay here for long since they

were subjected to fresh threats and harassment. They shifted two miles out of town into the country. Earl Little built a house here with his own hands- a four room house. This is where Malcolm spent his childhood. His childhood memories consisted of constant friction between his parents. His father very often beat his mother in a fit of anger. His father was violent with the children too. However, Malcolm recalls that his father hardly ever hit him. This is because he was the lightest (in color) among the siblings at home. While the others were dark, he was the only one in the Little family, who was brown. Like all the other Afro-Americans, his father too had learnt to hate his own dark color and favor anyone who was lighter. Years later, Malcolm came to hate his brown color. For Malcolm had got the light color from his mother who was extremely fair and with her straight black hair she hardly looked like a black woman. Louise's father was a white man back in West Indies - her native place. Louise was too ashamed to mention or talk about him. Malcolm who as a child had always been proud of his light complexion, later came to hate every 'drop of that rapist's (his white grandfather) blood in him'

Notes

The first chapter reveals the characters of three very important people in Malcolm's life-namely, Earl Little, Louise Little and Marcus Garvey. The first two people-Malcolm's parents had a deep influence on him. Marcus Garvey has an effect, though indirectly through the Garvey movement, whose meetings Malcolm attended with his father. Both Earl Little and Louise Little were extremely brave and determined people. This, the reader can infer from the way the two face the threats of the Ku Klux Klan.

The same determination helps Louise keep her family together after her husband's shocking death and through the difficult Depression years. Malcolm admits that he had inherited his mother's instinctive feelings (to anticipate events) along with her light color and hair. From the chapter, the reader can conclude that the Little family though forced to break up due to financial problems was very close and loving. This is evident from the fact that the siblings kept in touch with each other, wrote to each other, and found time to meet their ailing mother at Kalamazoo.

These close family ties help Malcolm to tide over the most difficult phase of his life-his imprisonment (as we will see later in the book).

Another aspect that is highlighted in the chapter is the color prejudice. Not only were the whites extremely prejudiced against the blacks then; the blacks themselves believed that anything white or close to white is divine. This is evident from Malcolm's own father's attitude towards him who was the lightest (in color) among the siblings. Malcolm says that his father was never harsh or violent with him, although.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

Character Analyses

Malcolm X

Malcolm X is the narrator and protagonist of the book. In the book, Malcolm narrates the story of his life from childhood to his youth as a hustler in Harlem and later to when he became Minister Malcolm X.

The accounts of his childhood, his youth, and his life in the prison and later his life as the fiery spokesperson of the Nation are given in detail.

Malcolm comes across as an honest, out spoken and courageous person who due to his

Rev. Earl Little

Malcolm X's father, Rev. Earl Little is a preacher. He is an active member and organizer of Marcus Garvey's UNIA. He was a tall black Negro from Georgia. Due to his work in the universal Negro improvement Association, he was constantly threatened by the Ku Klux Klan. Undeterred by

Laura

She is the pretty high school girl, who falls in love with young Malcolm in Boston. She overcomes stiff opposition at home to be with Malcolm. Laura goes out 'Lindy hopping' with Malcolm. According to Malcolm, she was a very graceful dancer. And they both made a perfect pair on the dancing floor.

Laura is portrayed as a shy sensitive yet determined young girl. Her determination is evident in the manner in which she rebels against her grandmother, at home. Her grandmother, a very conservative and deeply religious woman, had brought Laura up after her parents' death. Although Laura knew that her grandma would never accept Malcolm with his bright colored 'zoot' suits and slang.....

Louise Little

Louise Little is Malcolm's mother. Her childhood was spent in the West Indies. She was light – skinned with straight black hair. Malcolm had inherited his light color from her.

However, she wasn't proud of her light skin as it reminded her of her grandfather (probably illegitimate) who was a white. Unlike her husband, she was extremely strict with Malcolm. Though she and her husband had several disagreements, she was extremely devoted to him and stood by him through the most difficult moments. Like her husband, she too was brave and determined. This is evident.....

Reginald Little

Malcolm's younger brother Reginald is portrayed as a sensitive person, who works as an 'instrument' in leading Malcolm on the path of Allah. It is through Reginald, that Malcolm first understands the teachings of the Nation.

Since childhood, Reginald always looks up to his elder brother Malcolm. Among all his siblings, Malcolm always had a special place is the bond between the two, that even when Malcolm became the notorious 'Detroit Red' – the drug peddler and hustler, Reginald still kept in touch with him. Reginald was.....

PLOT (Structure)

The Autobiography of Malcolm X is a series of reminiscences that Malcolm X narrates to his friend Alex Haley. In the book, the black leader looks back into his childhood, his adolescent years and his experiences on the streets of Harlem, New York. As he narrates and reconstructs his past, he also expresses his views on matters that concern the present. Throughout the book, the author is.....

THEME (S)

Major

Racism in America - "...In the black streets of America/ they kill the dream of America..." These lines from the well-known Afro- American singer, Tracy Chapman's album reveals that face of America which only the blacks can see every day- the ugly face of Racism. And only the black Americans who experience

it right from their birth, can express, what it is like to be discriminated in every sphere of life, only because of one's color. Tracy Chapman expressed it through a song, while

Minor

The Civil Rights Movement in America. - *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* discusses the Civil Rights Movement at length. The '50s and the '60s saw the Civil Rights Movement in America gathering momentum. The high point of this Movement was the March to Washington in 1963, which ended with the famous speech made by Rev. Martin Luther King jr.: "I have a Dream..." Malcolm X looks at.....

OTHER ELEMENTS

Style

The Book is a powerful and moving story depicting the life and times of perhaps the most controversial black leader in American history. The force or power in the novel lies, not just in the vivid

QUESTIONS

1. Analyze Malcolm X's character as it is revealed in the book.
2. Explain briefly the work of Nation of Islam in inculcating racial pride among blacks.....

End of Sample MonkeyNotes for "The Autobiography of Malcolm X"