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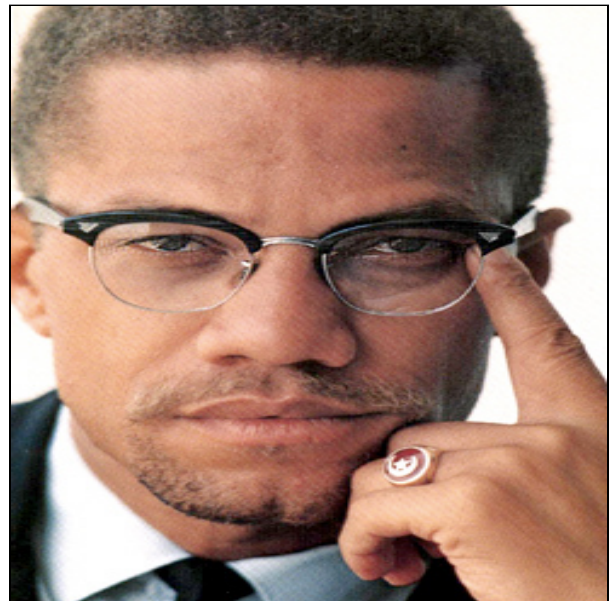
Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Malcolm X

By Barrett Smith  
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*Malcolm X was an African American Muslim minister and civil rights activist. His contributions to the Civil Rights Movement and the enthusiasm with which he pursued rights for African Americans continue to be admired today. In this informational text, Barrett Smith discusses Malcolm X's life and his various contributions to the Civil Rights Movement. As you read, take notes on what Malcolm X's goals were as an activist, and how his goals changed throughout his life.*

[1] Malcolm X was one of the most prominent, controversial, and influential leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. As a spokesperson for the Nation of Islam,<sup>1</sup> he spread their message of black pride, a free black nation, and the need for a revolution against racism to thousands. Through the best-selling book *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* and the 1992 Hollywood film *Malcolm X*, he became a cultural icon for his importance in the Civil Rights Movement.



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## Early Life

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, on May 19, 1925. His father was a Baptist minister who was known for speaking up about civil rights for African Americans. Because of his father's activism, the family received death threats from white supremacist<sup>2</sup> groups like the Ku Klux Klan<sup>3</sup> and the Black Legion.<sup>4</sup> They had to move twice before Malcolm turned four to hide from these groups. Despite their efforts to escape trouble, their house was burned down when Malcolm was four years old, and two years later his father's lifeless body was discovered lying on trolley tracks. The police ruled that both were accidents, but Malcolm and his family believed the Black Legion had murdered his father. Malcolm's mother suffered an emotional breakdown shortly after her husband's death and was placed in a mental institution. Malcolm and his siblings were split up into different foster homes and orphanages.

1. an African American political and religious organization
2. an advocate of the supremacy of a particular group, especially one determined by race or sex
3. one of the oldest and most infamous hate groups in America, known for promoting the belief that white people are superior to other races
4. a secret terrorist group that was originally a part of the Ku Klux Klan

Malcolm was one of a very small number of African American students at the high school he attended. He overcame this obstacle and his tragic past and excelled in school. He was, by then, already a charismatic<sup>5</sup> person and very good at speaking to people. These skills would serve him well in the future. His classmates voted him class president. But, in spite of his success, when Malcolm told his class that he wanted to be a lawyer, his teacher told him that his dream was unrealistic. He suggested that he think about carpentry, a job that he thought was more suited for a black man. Malcolm felt that there was no point in going to school if he could not work toward his dreams, and he dropped out the next year.

He went to live with his sister in Boston where he worked a number of different jobs, from shining shoes to working in a kitchen on a train. Through these jobs and nightlife on the streets, he was introduced to a world of crime. He was arrested in 1946 for robbery and sentenced to ten years in prison.

## Nation of Islam

- [5] While he was in prison, Malcolm decided to continue his education by reading a lot of books. His brother, Reginald, regularly visited and told him about a religious group called the Nation of Islam (NOI), headed by the spiritual leader, Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm started to study Elijah Muhammad's teachings. The NOI was a Muslim group, but they differed from traditional Muslim organizations because of their emphasis on black pride and empowerment.

After seven years, Malcolm was released from prison in 1952. By then, he was a devoted follower of the NOI and had changed his name from Malcolm Little, which he called his "slave" name, to Malcolm X. The "X" would represent the tribal name of his ancestors, lost over generations of African American slavery. Just like in high school, Malcolm was articulate and smart, and so he was appointed the national spokesperson of NOI. Malcolm worked hard, created a newspaper called *Muhammad Speaks*, and talked about the NOI on the radio and television. He also helped open new mosques for members of the NOI to worship in different cities around the country. Because of Malcolm's work, membership in the NOI increased from 500 people in 1952 to 30,000 people in 1963.

Malcolm became very famous, arguably even more famous than his teacher Elijah Muhammad. One of his most famous sayings is that black people would have a revolution "by any means necessary," which meant even violence. Though Malcolm did not agree with Martin Luther King, Jr. — another popular civil rights leader of the time — and his philosophy of nonviolence, he encouraged people only to use violence for self-defense. He did not think people should allow themselves to be attacked and killed for the sake of being respectable and keeping the peace.

## Break with the NOI

In 1963, Malcolm found out that Elijah Muhammad had fathered children from outside his marriage. Malcolm had loyally followed all of Elijah Muhammad's teachings, and felt disappointed and betrayed by Elijah Muhammad's actions. The tensions in his relationship with Elijah Muhammed were growing. Shortly after this, Malcolm X got a lot of attention for an insensitive comment he made about President Kennedy's assassination.

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5. **Charismatic** (*adjective*) the ability to attract the attention and admiration of others

Elijah Muhammad “silenced” Malcolm for 90 days. This was the last straw for Malcolm. He decided to leave the NOI and start his own group called Muslim Mosque, Inc.

That same year, he went on a long trip through North Africa and the Middle East and made a pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>6</sup> He met a lot of different people on his trip and learned a lot about Islam and the fight against colonialism. He was able to connect his fight for civil rights back home with a global struggle. He embraced socialism and pan-Africanism<sup>7</sup> and converted to Sunni Islam. He changed his name again to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. He also met a lot of white people that he considered brothers and allies in the fight for civil rights, and he returned to the United States with a different attitude. Now he was more hopeful about the future and believed that racial integration<sup>8</sup> was possible.

## Death & Legacy

[10] Malcolm was unable to make much progress in fighting for his new beliefs because the NOI targeted him for assassination. His home was firebombed with his four daughters inside, but luckily they were able to escape unharmed. They tried again that same year, and on Feb. 21, 1965, three gunmen rushed on stage while Malcolm was giving a speech and shot him 15 times. 1500 people attended his funeral, and his friends took the shovels away from gravediggers to honor him by burying him themselves.

Right after his death, the media ignored Malcolm’s recent change of beliefs and his contributions to the Civil Rights Movement. They portrayed him as a violent troublemaker who hated white society. Later that year, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* was published, and people started to understand the racism Malcolm lived through in America, his spiritual journey, and his importance to the Civil Rights Movement. Malcolm X was one of the most well-known leaders of his time who spread the message of black pride and a revolution against racism.

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6. a religious journey to Mecca, the most holy city for Muslims
  7. the idea or advocacy for the political alliance or union of all African nations
  8. the bringing together of people of different races

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies one of the central ideas of the text?
  - A. Malcolm X's violent approach to combating racism made him largely unpopular with both black and white Americans.
  - B. Malcolm X provided a powerful voice to the Civil Rights Movement, but was never able to accept Martin Luther King, Jr.'s goal of racial integration.
  - C. Malcolm X's positive contributions to the Civil Rights Movement continue to be overshadowed by his promotion of violence today.
  - D. Malcolm X's passionate beliefs and support of violence when necessary made him a controversial figure for many people during the Civil Rights Movement, despite his many contributions.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "Because of Malcolm's work, membership in the NOI increased from 500 people in 1952 to 30,000 people in 1963." (Paragraph 6)
  - B. "One of his most famous sayings is that black people would have a revolution 'by any means necessary,' which meant even violence." (Paragraph 7)
  - C. "He also met a lot of white people that he considered brothers and allies in the fight for civil rights, and he returned to the United States with a different attitude." (Paragraph 9)
  - D. "Malcolm was unable to make much progress in fighting for his new beliefs because the NOI targeted him for assassination." (Paragraph 10)
  
3. PART A: How did Malcolm's views on civil rights change throughout his life?
  - A. Malcolm X's beliefs shifted to be more accepting of the opinions and help of white civil rights activists.
  - B. Malcolm X's beliefs became more driven by violence as he continued to encounter death threats for his activism.
  - C. Malcolm X's beliefs focused exceedingly on separatism toward the end of his life, as he didn't believe white and black people could live peacefully together.
  - D. Malcolm X's beliefs shifted to focus on nonviolent forms of protests, as he grew more inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr.
  
4. PART B: Which section from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "He met a lot of different people on his trip and learned a lot about Islam and the fight against colonialism." (Paragraph 9)
  - B. "He also met a lot of white people that he considered brothers and allies in the fight for civil rights, and he returned to the United States with a different attitude." (Paragraph 9)
  - C. "His home was firebombed with his four daughters inside, but luckily they were able to escape unharmed." (Paragraph 10)
  - D. "They portrayed him as a violent troublemaker who hated white society." (Paragraph 11)

5. What early experiences contributed to Malcolm X's views on civil rights?

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. How did Malcolm X overcome the obstacles of his early life and become an influential figure in the Civil Rights Movement? What traits do you think he must have possessed to succeed despite the adversity he faced? Describe a time when you overcame a difficult experience. How were you affected by it?
2. How was Malcolm X able to create change during the Civil Rights Movement? What kind of change do you think he created? How are his contributions still important today? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
3. Why do you think many people felt compelled to follow Malcolm X and support his ideas? What leadership qualities did he possess? What compels you to follow a leader?
4. How did Malcolm X's legacy immediately following his death compare to how we view him today? Why do you think Malcolm X's legacy changed with time? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.