

Who was Malcolm X?

1. Malcolm Little was born in Omaha, Nebraska on May 19, 1925. He was assassinated in Harlem on February 21, 1965. During those forty years, Malcolm X became one of the most controversial leaders in the African American community in the United States. He has been called a racist and a revolutionary. Since his death, his life and his struggles have become symbols for "Black pride" and the struggle for racial justice. Many people read his "Autobiography" and collections of his speeches to get insights into his ideas and to shape their own ideas about United States society and how it can be changed. Read the quotes from his speeches and the passages from his "Autobiography" and try to answer the following questions:

1- Who was Malcolm X?

2- What did Malcolm X believe and teach?

3- Do Malcolm X's ideas have meaning today? Why or why not?

2. What did Malcolm X believe and teach? Some of Malcolm X's ideas are considered very controversial. What do you think? Why? These quotations are reprinted from "Malcolm X, In Our Own Image", ed. Joe Wood (St. Martin's Press, NY 1992).

- "By any means necessary."
- "You don't stick a knife in a man's back nine inches and then pull it out six inches and say you're making progress."
- "No matter how much respect, no matter how much recognition, whites show towards me, as far as I'm concerned, as long as it is not shown to every one of our people in this country, it doesn't exist for me."
- "One of the first things I think young people, especially nowadays, should learn is how to see for yourself and listen for yourself and think for yourself."
- "There's new thinking coming in. There's new strategy coming in. It'll be Molotov cocktails this month, hand grenades next month, and something else next month. It'll be ballots, or it'll be bullets. It'll be liberty, or it will be death."
- "There can be no black-white unity until there is first some black unity. There can be no worker's solidarity until there is first some racial solidarity. We cannot think of uniting with others, until after we have first united among ourselves."

3. Who was Malcolm X? This can be a difficult question to answer. Most people do not remain the "same" for their entire life. The answer is even more complex because people interpret the events in Malcolm X's life differently depending on their views of American society. Read these passages from "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" (Grove Press, NY, 1966), and then offer your answer to the question.

A. Malcolm X writes about his childhood in Michigan as Malcolm Little, pp. 35-36.

"Somehow, I happened to be alone in the classroom with Mr. Ostrowski, my English teacher (in 8th grade)...I had gotten some of my best marks under him, and he had always made me feel that he liked me...He told me, "Malcolm, you ought to be thinking about a career. Have you been giving it thought."....I told him, "Well, yes, sir, I've been thinking I'd like to be a lawyer."...He kind of half smiled and said, "Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me, now. We all like you, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer--that's no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be. You're good with your hands, making things...Why don't you plan on carpentry."

B. Malcolm writes about being a teenager in Boston and New York where he was known as Detroit Red, pp.108-110, 149-152.

"I was a true hustler--uneducated, unskilled at anything honorable, and I considered myself nervy and cunning enough to live by my wits, exploiting any prey that presented itself. I would risk just about anything."

"I carried a hardly noticeable little flat, blue-steel .25 automatic. But for working, I carried a .32, a .38 or a .45....Between jobs, staying high on narcotics kept me from getting nervous."

"The cops found the apartment loaded with evidence--fur coats, some jewelry, other small stuff--plus the tools of our trade...and my small arsenal of guns."

"I can't remember any of my prison numbers. That seems surprising, even after the dozen years since I have been out of prison. Because your number in prison became part of you. You never heard your name, only your number....Any person who claims to have deep feelings for other human beings should think a long, long time before he votes to have other men kept behind bars--caged...Behind bars, a man never reforms. He will never forget. He never will get completely over the memory of the bars."

C. While in prison, Malcolm X became a minister in the Nation of Islam p. 197

"Elijah Muhammad spoke of how, in this wilderness of North America, for centuries the "blue-eyed devil white man" had brainwashed the "so-called Negro." He told us how, as one result, the Black man in America was "mentally, morally and spiritually dead." Elijah Muhammad spoke of how the Black man was the Original Man, who had been kidnapped from his homeland and stripped of his language, his culture, his family structure, his family name, until the Black man in America did not even realize who he was. He told us, he showed us, how his teachings of the true knowledge of ourselves would lift up the Black man from the bottom of the white man's society and place the Black man back where he had begun, at the top of civilization."

D. In 1964, Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam. He founded a new organization and he took a new name, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, pp. 315 and 375-376.

"It was a big order-- the organization that I was creating in my mind, one which would help to challenge the American Black man to gain his human rights, and to cure his mental, spiritual, economic and political sickness....It would embrace all faiths of Black men....I mean nothing against any sincere whites when I say that as members of black organizations, generally whites' very presence subtly renders the black organization less effective. Even the best white members will slow down the Negroes' discovery of what they need to do, and particularly of what they can do--for themselves."