

---

## Breaking Down the Symbolism in Malcolm X's Life

Creating symbolism in literature adds depth and meaning to any story. Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* displays an abundance of symbols that offer insight into the life of Malcolm X himself. Often, the symbols that Haley uses demonstrate the adjustments that Malcolm X went through during his development: they show his metamorphosis from a person whom the world viewed as unimportant, to the controversial, but influential civil rights leader. Haley first demonstrates how important, yet dangerous, status in a society can be for a minority. The author then explores how the simple hair straightening process called "conk" tied Malcolm X to the Caucasian world. Finally, Haley points out the significance of eyeglasses, watches, and suitcases and how they played a pivotal role in Malcolm X's life.

Symbolism in literature allows the reader an insightful perspective into a character's life. The symbolism in Haley's autobiography provides a look directly into how specific items in Malcolm X's life shaped him as a man, and brought him through the transformations that made him into the powerful advocate of black rights that he became. As a child, Malcolm did not have a lot of material possessions and often felt disconnected from his peers. Therefore, when he moved into the city, he did not squander any time and began acquiring all the materialistic items he felt he needed to establish his status. When touching on the reasoning behind his acquisitive mindset, he concludes, "Like hundreds of thousands of country-bred Negroes who had come to the Northern black ghetto before me, and have come since, I'd also acquired all the other fashionable ghetto adornments - the zoot suits and conk that I have described, liquor, cigarettes, then reefers - all to erase my embarrassing background" (Haley 71). He found that the status that his conspicuous consumption provided, coupled with the power that he felt he had over his own life, was a symbol of having overcome a shameful childhood. His procurement of paraphernalia symbolized a self-worth that he found in the status that the items provided him. Malcolm X then refers to the problems that he saw other people facing as well, revealing that "These ghetto teenagers see the hell caught by their parents struggling in the prejudiced, intolerant white man's world. The ghetto teenagers make up their own minds, they would rather be like the hustlers whom they see dressed "sharp" and flashing money and displaying no respect for anybody or anything. So the ghetto youth become attracted to the hustler worlds of dope, thievery, prostitution, and general crime and immorality" (Haley 332). For African Americans, having the ability to gain status, no matter how, in a Caucasian-dominated society provided a sense of respect and self-worth that they craved but had been told they would be unable to attain. Through the Nation of Islam, however, Malcolm X gained a sense of self-worth that did not depend on his worldly appurtenances.

Hairstyle also has the capability to convey a great deal about a person. Malcolm X's shift in hairstyles revealed a lot in connection with not only how he perceived himself, but also how he viewed the entire African American race. He began wearing his hair in a hairstyle known as "conk", which comes from a hair-straightening gel made from lye. Often, the process involved with "conk" leaves chemical burns on the heads of the people who use it. This harsh technique allowed African Americans to achieve hairstyles that resembled those worn by Caucasians. Reflecting back on the implications of wearing a hairstyle that made him appear more "white," Malcolm X acknowledges that, "This was my first really big step toward self-degradation. When I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man's hair. I had

---

joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are “inferior” – and white people “superior”” (Haley 69). He regarded this then-popular African American hairstyle as implying that the only way black people could achieve beauty is if they resembled white people. Yet Malcolm X also acknowledges the symbolism of his hair after joining the Nation of Islam. Referring to the hairstyle that he and his brothers had rejected, he says, “They had just banished from their lives forever that phony, lye-conked, metallic-looking hair [...]. It grieves me that I don’t care where you go, you see this symbol of ignorance and self-hate on so many Negroes’ heads” (Haley 278). Wearing a “conk” brought him from the sensitivity of feeling unnoticeable to a feeling of belonging. On the other hand, it also forced him to the realization of his own internalized racism. Once he joined the Nation of Islam, which taught him that being black made him better than other people, for no other reason than the color of his skin, he found the desire to discard the hair that tied him to the viewpoint that black is only beautiful if it resembles white.

Such transformations are apparent in other contexts, as Malcolm X left prison a different man than he entered in. Going into confinement, he appeared to be a man without real ambition, who was only concerned with superficial status. In spite of his prison sentence, he emerged a new man filled with the determination to take control of his life. Leaving prison, Malcolm purchased three things. First, he acquired eyeglasses. Recounting why they were suddenly a necessity he discloses, “I had come to prison with 20/20 vision. But when I got sent back to Charlestown, I had read so much by the lights-out glow in my room at the Norfolk Prison Colony that I had astigmatism and the first pair of the eyeglasses that I have worn ever since” (Haley 209). While in prison, he found a hunger for reading, and a thirst for knowledge. His eyeglasses epitomize his devotion to learning. Secondly, he procured a watch. Growing up he never needed a watch because he did not have a reason to manage his time. In contrast, when he left prison and joined the Nation of Islam, he established a direction for his life, and found himself beginning to live by his watch. He mentions, “You won’t find anybody more time-conscious than I am. I live by my watch, keeping appointments. Even when I’m using my car, I drive by my watch, not my speedometer. Time is more important to me than distance” (Haley 211). Time in his life symbolizes the new-found purpose he had discovered. Lastly, he purchased two suitcases. After joining the Nation of Islam, Malcolm became a man in high demand. He needed to be able to travel at a moment’s notice. He reveals, “I travel so much now that my wife keeps alternate suitcases packed so that, when necessary, I can just grab one” (Haley 211). Packed suitcases symbolize his commitment and willingness to do anything required for the Nation of Islam. Eyeglasses, watches, and suitcases appear to be straightforward accessories that most people own. Although this may be true, those accessories are the only material goods that Malcolm ever acknowledges at length after his conversion to the Nation of Islam. Those three belongings symbolize the shifts in his life, before, during, and after prison.

Throughout each stage of existence that Malcolm X describes, there are multiple symbols that make themselves evident. Haley shows how status played a major role in developing Malcolm’s self-worth, explaining how the “conk” hairstyle tied him to the white world and showed him his own internalized racism. The writer also demonstrates how eyeglasses, a watch, and suitcases played a major role in Malcolm’s final transformation into a tremendous leader. All of these symbols work together through the captivating tale of his life, and illustrate what helped to shape him as a man. All things considered, Haley reveals just how critical symbols are not only in Malcolm X’s life, but also in everyone’s lives, ultimately challenging his readers to reflect on their own lives in an attempt to discover personal symbols. The movement leader’s life possessed challenges and setbacks; nevertheless, he discovered who he wanted

---

to be and rose to the challenge of defining both his beliefs and himself as an individual.

gradesfixer.com