Assignment: Explain what social value, if any, you believe *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* has in the year 1986. In order to write such an essay you will need to determine what the most significant themes and lessons in Malcolm's life are, the significance attached to these themes and lessons in his autobiography, and the ways in which they have social value in contemporary America.

1. Although many readers respond to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as an overstated polemic, it is possible for us, as representatives of American society, to benefit from Malcolm's life story if we interpret it as a testimony of one man's experience with racism. By following Malcolm's account of his life in the ghetto where he experiences racism, we, the readers, can imagine ourselves in the same situation. We can also imagine ourselves as jurors in a trial. By viewing his life as a trial, we can see one man's attempt to escape the conviction of his color. His testimony is his life, a life through which he experiences racism, a racism that led him to a revelation that sentenced society, a sentence that would release society under the condition that it would attempt to correct its racial problem as a unity.

2. From any major trial that occurs in America a lesson can be learned. In other words, society can benefit from the outcome of a trial because the issue comes from within society itself. Two individuals or groups fight over universal issues such as sex discrimination or age discrimination. From each trial a possible truth, which is used to defend the victim, might become an element which could benefit society's understanding of the issue.

3. Malcolm X is a victim of society's crime, racism. The trial is his life, his experience, and the opposing clients, in the first stages of the trial, are the powerful figure of white superiority and the powerless figure of black inferiority. I say "first stages" because his trial continued for many years; it is not resolved in one day. Malcolm's resolution of his confrontation with racism in the early stages eventually leads him to Mecca, a place where Malcolm discovers a possible truth behind the cause of the universal problem, racism. This truth becomes, in his words, the "... testimony of some social value," the testimony of a life, of an experience which leads him to the basis of racism. The basis, society, the ill-planted seed, gives rise to the bruised fruit of racism. "Society produced and nourished a racist psychology, ... a psychology which brought out the lowest, most base part of human beings." This racist psychology caused "... the white man to
act evilly, even though he wasn't inherently evil."

(4) In the beginning, Malcolm does not realize that the cause is society's attitude affecting the people as a whole rather than one race dominating or controlling another. He believes "... the white man's society was responsible for the black man's condition." The white race, the mother, gives birth to the black race, the child. The mother conditions the child to act and think according to her prescribed beliefs. She becomes the child's superior, the authority who cannot make mistakes. If a mistake is made, the child becomes a scapegoat. As the child grows older, he becomes an imitation of his "superior." The white "mother" and the black "child" do not have the ability to become one because control and superiority are not elements of unity; they are always instruments of segregation.

(5) Segregation to Malcolm means control, something "... which is forced upon inferiors by superiors." The words, force and control, remind me of characteristics associated with the national defense, such as the army during a time of war. I picture a city that is inhabited by soldiers; the people of the city keep to themselves and the soldiers also keep to themselves. Although the soldiers are just as human as the natives, they will not integrate because the soldiers are a "force" which controls the area either to protect the people or to hold them captive. Similarly, Malcolm X feels integration is not a solution to racism because the black would not take on an identity of his own. Integration is only possible if inferior/superior complexes are dispelled.

(6) Just as the white superior influences the way the black inferior thinks, Muhammad, a religious leader, influences the way Malcolm perceives his status in the U.S. He learns that "the white man is the devil," and that the black people are expected to live in the hell the devil has created. Malcolm also believes that the two races can survive only if they are separated. Separation "... is done voluntarily, by two equals--for the good of both!" Could society exist in a divided state? If it could, would it become two subdivisions within a whole, or two separate societies?

(7) The solution to these questions offers considerable hope for society. After Malcolm disassociates himself from Muhammad, his book, his testimony, proves to have some social value. Malcolm proves that society can exist as a whole "... when there is no "superiority" complex, no "inferiority" complex--then voluntarily, people of the same kind will be drawn together by that which they have in common." His trip to Mecca allows him to see a brotherhood consisting of a mixture of grouped blacks, reds, yellows, and even whites. In this region, "white man" means "... complexion only secondarily, primarily it describes attitudes and actions!"

(8) Malcolm brings this attitude to America. He
discards his old attitude of the devil white man and his created hell. Malcolm begins to preach that "...it's the American political, economic, and social atmosphere that automatically nourishes a racist psychology in the white man." Just as the white "mother" influences the black "child," America's society influences the people to acknowledge the color difference.

(9) Society can benefit from Malcolm's discovery that racism is a created psychology affecting people as a whole, and it can be fought if the people work together, eliminating the necessity of a scapegoat. Without the need of a scapegoat, racism can be fought by human responsibility. If both blacks and whites fight the struggle of racism together they can correct America's problem. But this can only be done if "the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks . . ." create "...the consciousness of others to bring to an end to the racial nightmare and achieve our country and change the history of the world." Malcolm believes if racism could be removed in this manner,"...America could offer a society where rich and poor could truly live like human beings." Malcolm's testimony was a fable with a moral ending: separate but unified.