

MARTIN LUTHER KING AND MALCOLM X

Ra Joy

[Assignment: Write an essay that compares two objects, experiences, or persons. Define special terms, use suitable figures of speech, incorporate anecdotes, examples, and description. Finally, relate the things compared to an underlying truth about personal or social values.]

(1) Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were two of the most charismatic and influential black leaders to ever live. Both men dedicated their lives to the advancement of their race, both men contemplated different ways to empower the poor, and both men were murdered before completing their goals. Since their deaths in the sixties (King in 1968 and X in 1965), King has received far more recognition than X. He is one of the few black men mentioned in American history books, and is the only black man to be honored with a national holiday. But now, as we enter the nineties, there is a renewed interest in the life and legacy of Malcolm X. A generation of young people, some born a decade after his death, has resurrected the image of Malcolm and has chosen him as its leader and role model. T-shirts, hats, and buttons with Malcolm's image and sayings can be found in practically every black neighborhood in America. The publishers of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* are reporting a sales increase of 75%. Malcolm is definitely a hot commodity, but why? Why is Malcolm X chosen as a leader for the nineties and not King? To answer this question, we must examine the differences between the two men.

(2) The first difference between the two leaders is their backgrounds. King, who was a minister, is seen as someone who was always under the umbrella of Christianity. He is viewed as someone who always knew right from wrong, and acted accordingly. Malcolm, on the other hand, didn't grow up *quite* the same way. Before he was known to the world as Malcolm X, he spent a fraction of his life as "Detroit Red"--a small-time pimp, player, and hustler who worked the mean streets of Harlem. No, there was no umbrella of Christianity that protected Malcolm. Instead of a cross he preferred a pistol. Unlike King, who could be found in church, Malcolm spent his Sunday afternoons trying to earn a dollar on cold New York corners. Malcolm participated in a wide variety of criminal activities, including an armed robbery that sent him to prison at the age of twenty-one. At this point in his life Malcolm was not exactly the best of role models for African-American youth. This difference in backgrounds is a major factor why it is X and not King who is being looked upon as a leader for the nineties. Young blacks today can relate more to Malcolm than they can to Martin. A great number of African-Americans are getting caught up in the nation's criminal justice system just as Malcolm did. In the nation's capital, 42% of its young black men are in the Justice System (15% in jail, 21% on probation or parole, and 6% awaiting trial or being sought for arrest). Malcolm had been in the same shoes as many of these people; he knew what it was like to live a life amidst deprivation and violence. He made the mistake of turning to crime as a way out and later realized there are other alternatives. The black youth of today feel close ties to Malcolm X because he *was* who they *are* and he *became* what they *can become*.

(3) Another difference between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King is their beliefs regarding violence. Martin Luther King detested violence in any way, shape, or form. During the civil rights movement, King encouraged, as did Ghandi in India, peaceful non-violent protests (sit-ins, boycotts, and marches). If you were to slap Martin Luther King, he would probably turn the other cheek, but if you were to slap Malcolm X, you had better run! Although Malcolm X did not advocate violence, he supported it as a means of self-defense, whether it be defending yourself against physical attack or institutionalized racist actions. The black youth of today find X's philosophy more practical and realistic, especially considering how violence has become commonplace within the black community. Due to the magnitude of violent episodes against blacks within the last year, it's no wonder that many have incorporated the "by any means necessary" attitude Malcolm favored.

(4) A third example of where King and X did not see eye to eye is on the issue of integration. King was in strong opposition to segregation. He had a "dream" that one day black children and white children could hold hands. If that was a dream then Malcolm X had a nightmare. Malcolm stressed cultural awareness and staying within one's community, economically and socially. King worked hard to see that black children had the right to attend all white schools for a better opportunity to function in "white America." X preferred that black people stay in touch with their own culture and learn to function in "black America." The issue of integration is one that will provide heated discussion when ever raised, because however cherished a goal for some blacks and whites, integration has not worked. In almost all "integrated" institutions, blacks and whites are still segregated. They don't sit together in the cafeterias, they don't talk in lounges, and they do not attend the same social events. Although practically all of today's young African-Americans find themselves in so called "integrated" institutions, they are becoming culturally self-aware and affirming a pride in their heritage. Whether it be in class or independently, black youth are following the advice of Malcolm X, and are finding out who they are and finding strength in their own community.

(5) Malcolm X and Martin Luther King--although they didn't always agree on issues, they remained on the same "team" with similar goals. In researching the differences between the two greats, we begin to understand why Malcolm X's legacy is so attractive to young people of the nineties. He will serve as a leader for not only today, but also tomorrow.