



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: NIGHTMARE

As the autobiography begins, Malcolm X describes how his mother (Louise), pregnant with Malcolm himself, confronts a gang of Ku Klux Klan members who are looking to kill Malcolm's father, Earl Little. She bravely tells them he isn't home, and in response the Klansmen break every window in the house and then ride off.

Earl Little, a travelling preacher and a tall, outspoken black man from Georgia, is a vocal supporter of Marcus Garvey and his ideas of Pan-Africanism, or the belief that people of African descent all around the world should join together against the oppression of whites. Earl always believed he would die by violence, and indeed, Earl and four of his five brothers will die from violence. Here Malcolm interrupts to say that he feels that he, too, will die by violence.

Malcolm is born on May 19, 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska, the fourth of Louise Little's children. His older siblings Wilfred, Hilda, and Philbert were born in Philadelphia, while his younger brother Reginald was born in Milwaukee. Earl had three children from a previous marriage as well: Ella, Earl, and Mary, all living in Boston. Malcolm's mother Louise comes from Granada, and is a mixed-race woman who looks white; her white father, whom she never met, raped her mother.

After a brief stay in Milwaukee, the family moves to Lansing, Michigan, where Earl plans to open a store one day. However, his spreading of Marcus Garvey's beliefs attracts the negative attention of the Black Legion, a splinter group of the Ku Klux Klan. One night in 1929, which Malcolm calls the "nightmare night," the Black Legion sets their house on fire. Earl shoots his pistol at the arsonists and then directs the family out and to safety.

After this incident, Earl Little goes on to build the family a home outside of town with his own hands. This will be the house Malcolm remembers as his childhood home. The police and firefighters, meanwhile, do nothing about the attack, other than to question Earl about his pistol.

Even before he has entered the world, Malcolm is already forced to confront the realities of racist violence and hatred. His mother's example of bravery serves as a model for and foreshadows his future stances against racism.



In Earl Little, the reader gets a glimpse at the archetype after which Malcolm will unconsciously model himself. Malcolm will reflect his father's activism and fervent religious belief in his life's work, and will follow him into an equally violent death—a tragic prediction on Malcolm's part, and one that readers cannot help but see through the lens of his assassination (which occurred soon after the publication of his autobiography).



The identity of his white grandfather serves as a kind of "original sin" for Malcolm. Of all his siblings, Malcolm is the lightest one, which will bring him certain privileges in life, but it will also haunt him – a visible, intrinsic reminder of the horrors of racism and violence.



By calling it a "nightmare night," Malcolm underlines the psychological scarring left by this experience. And like nightmares, Malcolm will be forced to relive this experience when, as an adult, his own family's house is fire bombed. The Black Legion gets its name because they wear black hoods, instead of the white hoods of the usual KKK.



When the State, which is theoretically supposed to protect all citizens, fails to act, Earl takes their future literally into his own hands, a lesson for Malcolm in both self-reliance and the racism inherent to the American establishment.



Earl Little was a violent man, Malcolm says, often beating his wife (probably because of Louise's educated way of talking back) and the other children for breaking his rules. However, he never beat Malcolm, who attributes this to his lighter skin tone, which subconsciously gave him a more privileged status in his father's eyes.

Malcolm has memories of his father preaching in various churches, full of emotion as he led the service. However, Malcolm always had trouble believing in the Christian God, even as a child.

The black people who attend his father's services, Malcolm tells us, were and still are in "bad shape." By this he means that they were too interested in status symbols. The "leaders" of the community worked in white businesses as waiters and shoe shiners. Meanwhile, the majority of people were on welfare or starved. Malcolm's family lived better, however, thanks to their country home and garden.

The other image Malcolm has of his father Earl is of him leading meetings, spreading Marcus Garvey's philosophy. At these meetings, they would pass along literature and photographs of Garvey and his massive rallies. Seeing his father as the leader of these intelligent, down-to-earth meetings with their serious politics always made Malcolm more proud than when he saw him as a preacher. His leadership role, in Malcolm's eyes, confirmed that his father was a "tough man."

Meanwhile, his mother Louise had the enormous task of caring for the home and its eight children, often while arguing with their father about her dietary restrictions (she refused to eat pork and rabbit). Unlike Earl, she frequently beat Malcolm, and he suspects this was precisely because of his lighter skin; she unconsciously despised him because he resembled his rapist grandfather's skin tone. But Malcolm often escaped harsh punishment by crying loudly so as to alarm the neighbors and embarrass Louise.

At five, Malcolm began going to school with his other siblings. The schools were integrated, but nobody made a big deal about it. There weren't enough African Americans in the area for it to really matter or for there to be an alternative. And while he did receive racial slurs, Malcolm writes that they were not said "as an insult."

While Malcolm disapproves of his father's color bias, he also sympathizes with him. Earl cannot control this unconscious preference (the result of internalized racism) any more than Malcolm can control his own skin color.



Unlike the Nation of Islam later on, Malcolm portrays these Christians as too interested in spectacle, rather than true faith.



Malcolm's ongoing feud with "middle class Negroes" began at an early age. Rather than uniting to improve their lot, he sees these "leaders" as merely interested in a fraudulent notion of social status that caters entirely to whites.



Here, Malcolm identifies the two traits he most admires in his father: his political activism and his strong masculinity. Not only should one engage in "serious" and intellectual political meetings, Malcolm believes, but one also should be courageous and defiant towards threats. These features will underlie his position in the Nation years later.



Louise appears to be a complex character, who on the one hand embodies the strict self-discipline Malcolm will later embrace in the Nation, but on the other hand unreasonably beats her son for something out of his control. Malcolm, meanwhile, demonstrates a shrewdness that will serve him well throughout life.



Racism is presented as simply a benign reality, not something always enacted out of malice. However, with such a small population of African Americans and the threat of violence always present, there is no plausible way for Malcolm to confront the issue, either.



One afternoon in 1931, Earl and Louise are fighting over whether or not she will cook a rabbit for dinner. After killing the rabbit and throwing it at her feet, Earl storms out of the house and heads for town. Louise, suddenly struck with a premonition that Earl will be killed, runs outside, calling after him. But he merely waves and walks on.

Louise finishes cooking dinner, but is on edge after her vision of Earl's death. When he doesn't come home, the family heads to bed, the children all aware of the tension. Malcolm awakes to the sounds of Louise screaming; Earl has been run over by a streetcar. The black community, however, whispers that this was not an accident, but rather murder by the Black Legion; not only was he run over, but he had first been badly beaten.

Malcolm doesn't remember much of the funeral, other than it happening outside of a church – a strange detail, considering that his father was a minister. Family friends come in and out of the house for a week, but then life begins to return to normal. However, the family has practically no income, after one of Earl's life insurance policies is deemed void. The insurance company justifies this by claiming he committed suicide.

Wilfred, sensing the impending hardship, quits school and begins to work in town. Hilda takes care of the younger kids. Philbert and Malcolm, meanwhile, fight each other and anyone else they meet, with Reginald tagging along. Louise tries to find work as a housemaid, and she finds several positions thanks to her light skin. However, when each new employer finds out she is not white after all, she is let go.

Around this time, Welfare agents begin to come frequently around the house, asking lots of questions. The family does begin to receive Welfare assistance, but it comes at the cost of these degrading meetings. Louise tries hard to not only provide for the family, but to do so in a way that she can be proud of. Unfortunately, her pride and the family's sustenance begin to unravel.

By 1934, the family is at its lowest point. The Depression is at its worst and no one in town has enough to eat. Meals for Louise's family might consist of old bread, cornmeal, or sometimes just dandelion greens, to the amusement of some cruel schoolchildren. Malcolm and Philbert begin to hunt for rabbits and frogs, which they then sell to white neighbors, who support them out of pity.

After the rabbit is killed and thrown at Louise's feet, she is struck by a vision, a sequence of events which mimics a kind of religious ritual. Yet Malcolm isn't sure what to make of his mother's intuition.



In both the children and in the black community at large, knowledge of oppression and violence is not something that can be spoken aloud; rather, it is something that is sensed or, at best, discussed behind closed doors. Meanwhile, the police choose to not pursue any investigation, settling for the more convenient answer.



Even in death, Earl cannot get justice. Rather than being ruled a murder, his death has been labeled a suicide, taking his family's only income away from them. In this way, his death not only goes unavenged, but it has been made into a fortuitous event for the (white-owned) insurance company.



Malcolm's childhood now exists in a state of suspension. On the one hand, he lives carefree and doesn't take on any of the responsibilities his older siblings do, but he will be affected by their shifting economic position nonetheless.



Louise finds herself in a lose-lose situation, a scenario which Malcolm will see repeatedly in others throughout the years. She needs help to survive, but in accepting that help, some intrinsic part of her self-worth does not survive.



Later in life, Malcolm will believe that every "white man is a devil." But here, when his family is at its lowest, he draws attention not only to how cruel whites can be, but also to how they can show compassion and pity.



The family, and especially Louise, begins to deteriorate psychologically. Malcolm, fed up with being labeled a Welfare recipient, starts to become criminally deviant and steal food. Alternatively, he will visit other families such as the Gohannases around dinner time, fishing for an invite to stay. His activities attract the attention of the town and the Welfare people, who begin trying to take him away from the rest of family.

Louise also begins to receive visits from Seventh-Day Adventists, a conservative but welcoming religious organization, and she takes the family to their meetings out in the country. Malcolm thinks they are extremely friendly, even if a little eccentric. The main attraction, however, is the plentiful food that accompanies each of their meetings. Malcolm observes that white people don't season their food the way black people do.

The Welfare people continue to come, looking to separate the family and to take Malcolm away in particular. As the pressures from running the home and dealing with the state increase, implications that Louise is going crazy begin to circulate. Her religious dietary restrictions, spurred on by the Adventists, further these comments, as she refuses to cook pork for the family, even if it is free and they have nothing else.

In an effort to make the family more secure, Louise begins to see a "dark man from Lansing" in 1935. She works hard to get him to marry her, but it would be an enormous burden for him to take responsibility for feeding eight stepchildren. After about a year, he finally walks away, a decision Malcolm understands. But he also understands his mother's attempts to save the family any way possible.

At this point, Louise really starts to lose control of her mental state, and the state agencies begins to seriously discuss sending Malcolm to live with the Gohannases, who have offered to take him in. He doesn't want to leave his siblings, whom he loves very much. But, he is finally taken away.

Malcolm shares a room with Big Boy, and they get along well. The boys would go hunting with Mr. Gohannas, and they would flush out rabbits. Malcolm figured out a way to get them for himself before the other hunters would have a chance, and they never caught on. He takes it as a lesson in how to be successful: if there's an established system, then it can be made to work in your favor.

The family essentially has nothing left to eat, and they've lost even their pride after being continually mocked and degraded. With nothing to lose, Malcolm begins to take a "devil may care" attitude—which then threatens the one thing he does still have, his family.



The Adventists represent an image for Malcolm of white people and race relations at their best. On the one hand, they are extremely friendly and welcoming. On the other, they are undeniably eccentric and have different tastes and customs from the black people Malcolm is used to—not better or worse, just different.



The Welfare agency continues to try and gain more and more control over the Littles' lives, a fact that Louise recognizes. Her resistance to relinquishing her dietary habits is therefore not only a question of religious zeal, but of resisting total control by the State, a resistance which is then labeled as "crazy."



Malcolm describes this figure as resembling his father, and by not giving him a name, and thereby casting his identity in shadow, Malcolm turns him into a ghostly resurrected version of his father. Then he forgives this "ghost" when it must pass on, as if Malcolm is moving on as well.



Louise, on the other hand, cannot handle losing her last hope. If this "ghost" man allows Malcolm to move on, it only pushes Louise further towards her breaking point.



The anecdote about the rabbits illustrates Malcolm's entrepreneurial instincts and his ease with deception. Later, when he runs "hustles" in New York and Boston, these skills will serve him well.



Malcolm continues to visit home, where his mother is mentally deteriorating. Finally, Louise breaks down and is sent to the State Mental Hospital. The children, meanwhile, are now fully under the protection and the watch of the state. Malcolm equates this state custody to the total control of black lives under the regime of slavery a century earlier.

Louise will be in that hospital for 27 years, and visiting her will cause emotional pain for Malcolm for years to come. He tries to talk with her, but she often doesn't recognize him, and he feels totally crushed by her lack of recognition. He avoids discussing her with anyone to avoid lashing out emotionally or violently, and eventually he stops going to see her altogether.

Wilfred and Hilda are allowed to stay on in their family's home, as they are nearly adults anyways; the rest of the children are sent to live with various families in the area. However, they manage to stay in touch and see each other often in Lansing.

Malcolm cannot help but notice the sinister parallel to slavery, when black children's lives were completely determined by white outsiders. Now, with one parent killed and the other carried away, the state entirely controls the futures of the Littles.



Malcolm's mother becomes a stand-in for the most sensitive part of his own psyche. Not only can he not bear to see her physically, but he cannot bear to even think about her or discuss her. More than anything else, her illness deeply wounds him.



Malcolm's siblings, despite being separated, do everything they can to maintain their unity, a unity which revolves around their childhood home.



CHAPTER 2: MASCOT

After Joe Louis knocks out James J. Braddock to become the Heavyweight World Champion, Philbert begins to gain an interest in boxing. He does well in his amateur fights, gaining the praise and respect of the community. Malcolm, seeing his brother's success, decides he should give it a try, too.

Malcolm's first fight is against Bill Peterson, a white boy. Bill is so scared of Malcolm that he decides to take the offensive, frequently knocking Malcolm down and easily beating him. Malcolm's reputation is completely destroyed within the black community, but worst of all, his adoring brother Reginald simply doesn't mention the fight at all. After training hard and going for a rematch against Bill, Malcolm loses almost immediately by knockout. Thankfully, he retires from fighting.

One day, while being punished for wearing a hat to class, Malcolm places a thumbtack on the teacher's chair, resulting in his expulsion from school. He isn't surprised, and even welcomes it; he imagines that now he will be free to do as he pleases, or perhaps work. But then he is dragged to court, where he is told he will go to a detention home and then to reform school.

Joe Louis's championship bout was a key moment in history for African American solidarity and pride nationwide, and Malcolm makes sure to note its impact on his life, as well.



Bill Peterson's fear comes out of racial stereotypes about the ferocity and strength of black men. Ironically, by beating Malcolm so badly, Bill proves that Malcolm, a young black boy, is just a regular kid and not an amazing fighter simply because of his race.



For just a second, the reader is fooled into believing the same fantasy that grips Malcolm: that he is free from school and free from authority. Then, we are dragged back into reality, a reality in which Malcolm is a minor and a ward of the state, and therefore under its care (or control).



Mr. Maynard Allen, a nice man from the Welfare Agency, accompanies Malcolm to the detention home and gives him advice on how to further himself. Mr. and Mrs. Swerlin run the detention home in nearby Mason, Michigan; they are kind people and treat Malcolm well. He has his own room and is allowed to eat with the Swerlins at the dining table. As a young black man, he is unaccustomed to being welcomed to dine with white people, except at the Adventist revivals.

His good behavior gets the Swerlins' approval, and they like Malcolm. At the same time, however, they seem to like him as a "mascot" or a pet, rather than as a thinking human being. They frequently talk about him while he is in the room as if he isn't there, or they make general racist observations about other black people in the area.

Malcolm goes to Lansing often to visit his siblings. While his brothers want to go out with some of the local girls their age, Malcolm isn't much interested. Instead, he heads for the "Negro" bars, where he hangs around listening to the jazz music playing and watching the young people dance.

Malcolm keeps waiting to be sent to reform school, but Mrs. Swerlin keeps pulling strings to allow him to stay at their home. Eventually, Malcolm goes back to school at the local middle school. Like in the Swerlins' home, he is well accepted and popular, thanks to him being the only black student in class.

Mrs. Swerlin helps Malcolm to get his first job washing dishes in a local restaurant so that he can have some spending money. He enjoys his work and takes great pride in making his own money. His first purchase is a green suit and some sweets for his classmates, both of which make him very proud.

Malcolm joins the basketball team at his middle school. He experiences some prejudice in the way other teams would talk about him, but he isn't really bothered by it. At the local dances after games he avoids the white girls, knowing they are off-limits. These things are never said; rather, he senses the social norms restricting him.

Some of the white boys Malcolm's age try and push him to "go for" some of the other white girls. If he were to do so, then the boys would have leverage over the girls, forcing them to accept their own advances. They assume that he instinctually knows more about sex than they do. And while Malcolm does in fact flirt with some of these girls, he does so quietly, and it never goes anywhere.

While Malcolm does not give the name of his teacher or the judge serving at the court, he takes great care to name and describe Mr. Maynard Allen and the Swerlins as kind and supportive people. While the court appears as a shadowy and impersonal institution, Mr. Allen and the Swerlins bring some humanity back into Malcolm's life.



As a "mascot," Malcolm may be extremely well behaved and polite and even smart; however, he never has others' respect as an equal human being – a prejudice they seemingly don't even realize they carry.



Throughout the book, Malcolm is taken to be older than he really is, thanks to a tall frame, his mature character, and perhaps an unconscious bias many people have to judge black boys as older than they are.



As the only black student, Malcolm is something rare and therefore precious. He is certainly being "tokenized" by his white peers, but in the process enjoys a special kind of popularity and attention.



Working his own job and earning spending money gives Malcolm a sense of independence, which will be a key component of his character as he continues to grow.



Here, Malcolm's limitations as simply a "mascot" rather than an equal come out. He is allowed to play on the basketball team, but when it comes to social settings, he knows almost instinctively that he is not really welcome.



Malcolm's refusal of the white boys' suggestions is largely driven by an instinct of self-protection (recognizing the potential violence he could face if he did try to date a white girl). He also rejects their belief in his innate knowledge about sex, which is based on racial stereotypes of black men as more primitive.



On the other hand, Malcolm has seen plenty of race-mixing in Lansing. Late at night, white men would pick up black prostitutes walking certain streets and white women would go to meet black men waiting at a particular bridge. These arrangements were largely based on myths about black sexual prowess. Nevertheless, they were quite common and very little fuss was made about it.

Things continue to go well for Malcolm. One day, his class takes a vote, and they declare him class president. Malcolm is extremely proud of this accomplishment; only later does he see it as a futile attempt to integrate into white society. He has been elected president as a “mascot,” not as a peer.

Malcolm manages to visit his siblings in Lansing nearly every weekend. Hilda and Wilfred still live in the old house, while Reginald and the others are with various families in Lansing. Malcolm likes to give the younger ones some pocket money from the money he makes washing dishes.

One day Ella, Malcolm’s half-sister, writes to the family and decides to come from Boston to visit. A strong, dark-skinned woman who is proud of her appearance, she impresses Malcolm with her no-nonsense and self-made businesswoman persona. She gives him a sense of pride in being part of the Little family, which has several successful members in the North and South. Ella suggests they all go to visit Louise together, and the visit goes surprisingly well.

In 1940, Malcolm catches a Greyhound bus while wearing his green suit. He’s headed to Boston, where he’ll stay with Ella for the summer. He soon falls in love with the thriving black culture in Roxbury, from the jazz music on the jukeboxes to the smell of “down-home black cooking” wafting from the restaurants. After trying to write home, he discovers that he can’t find the words to express how wonderful it is here.

After his time in Roxbury, something changes in Malcolm. Upon returning to Mason, he discovers that he is no longer comfortable there, where he is constantly surrounded by white people, unlike in the mostly-black community of Roxbury. He begins to react negatively to people using the n-word and is uneasy at being treated differently.

Here, we see the same stereotypes and preconceptions that his peers had about Malcolm’s supposed sexual prowess being played out by adults. As these myths were practically considered fact, no one says anything about this casual but exploitative race mixing.



Not only is Malcolm singled out by being the only black student in the class; now, he is installed as the President, an honorable yet isolated position.



The Littles work hard throughout their lives to remain in contact with and support one another. Even with their parents gone, they maintain their ties to each other as a crucial source of support in their often chaotic lives.



Ella is the first black woman Malcolm knows who is proud to be dark-skinned. She does not hide from her race, but rather revels in it. This pride, along with her independence, attracts Malcolm; he comes to see her as an early role model of black pride.



Roxbury quickly floods Malcolm’s senses with smells, sounds, and sights, to the point where he can no longer describe them. Confronted with so much information, he cannot process this new world that enchants him, but he is clearly delighted to find a place that embraces black culture so wholeheartedly.



When he returns to Mason, Malcolm finally begins to process his time in Roxbury. All that life and culture he experienced was black life and culture, something seemingly missing in Mason.



Nonetheless, Malcolm stays on top of his studies and is at the top of the class. One day Mr. Ostrowski, his teacher, finds a moment to pull him aside, asking what he wants to be. After replying “a lawyer,” Mr. Ostrowski tells Malcolm he should set his sights more realistically, such as towards carpentry. Malcolm can clearly feel the double standard towards him, despite being one of the smartest students in class – perhaps the smartest student.

Malcolm’s ensuing unease is perceived by others as a form of rebellion or acting out. Mrs. Swerlin and Mr. Allen speak to him in the living room, trying to figure out “what’s wrong.” When he doesn’t explain himself, Mrs. Swerlin tells him he will be sent to the Lyons’ house. She can’t understand what’s changed about him, and he can’t verbalize it, either.

Finally, Malcolm decides it’s time to get out of Mason, and he writes to Ella. She helps him arrange to come and live with her in Boston, and he heads out as soon as he finishes the 8th grade. He reflects that if he hadn’t have left at that time, then he probably would have never left Lansing in his whole life.

CHAPTER 3: “HOMEBY”

Malcolm arrives in Roxbury in his mint green, high-water suit, completely out of fashion and clearly from the countryside. Even Ella is embarrassed by him; but, he notes, his funny appearance will later be a fond memory.

Ella is an extremely accommodating host. She fixes Malcolm a room and feeds him heaps of delicious food, which he thoroughly enjoys. She has recently split with her latest husband, but she seems entirely unfazed.

On Ella’s advice, Malcolm sets out to explore and get to know Boston. He first walks around her neighborhood, which the residents refer to as “the Hill” or “the Four Hundred.” The locals there look down on the poorer black people in the “town” area of Roxbury, and Malcolm is amazed at their behavior. He mistakenly believes they are more successful than the others, but eventually learns that their snobbery is mostly unfounded.

One major marker of class is those who own their own homes, a group which is further subdivided between native New Englanders and Southern and West Indian migrants. The “Four Hundred” people refer to each other as “professionals” even if they are just working as janitors or bootblacks in professional, white offices – a self-delusion Malcolm cannot stand.

Until now, as a popular kid and the class president, Malcolm has more or less believed himself to be the equal of his classmates. But now, when he knows that he is objectively smarter than them, he is told he is not smart enough (or able) to pursue his dreams, an injustice which strikes at his very core.



At this time, Malcolm doesn’t steal and isn’t rude or disrespectful. His crime, so to speak, is simply to no longer be content with the inequality and dehumanization of forever being a “mascot.”



Though he’s not quite sure why, Malcolm knows that he needs to get out of Mason. He heads to the one place he knows that electrified him and caused a shift in his sense of self, and that’s Roxbury.



Throughout the book, Malcolm will contrast poor blacks from the country and city as being quite different in their ways of thinking, and this is also more light-heartedly reflected in their attire.



Malcolm admires his half-sister’s boldness. In everything from her cooking style to her marital relations, she is unapologetic about being herself.



Within the very layout of the city, Malcolm can see how a particular group of African Americans separate themselves off from others based on economic class. This attitude of superiority is also a reflection of the attitudes of whites towards poorer blacks.



The term “professional” acts as an instance of tragic irony, in which the audience (and the other neighbors) knows that they are not real professionals, but the people themselves are caught up in their own delusion.



Malcolm then starts to venture into the rest of Boston. He sees historical monuments, Boston University and Harvard University, and the main train stations. He takes in the sights of all the big restaurants and stores and movie theaters. Malcolm is particularly attracted by the Roseland State Ballroom, where all the major acts come to perform.

Once his sightseeing time is over, Malcolm starts to spend more and more time in the “ghetto” part of Roxbury, attracted by its excitement. Ella grows concerned, trying to convince him to meet the other kids his age in the area, but Malcolm sees himself as much older than them. Besides, he feels much more at ease in the town area than on the Hill.

Malcolm is entranced by all the cool cats who stand around in their fancy suits and with their hair “conked” (chemically relaxed to lie straight). He is overwhelmed by all the slang and gambling rackets going on around him.

Deciding it’s time to get a job (a.k.a a “slave”), Malcolm goes into a poolroom to talk to someone he’s heard of called Shorty. The two soon learn they’re both from Lansing, and Shorty enthusiastically promises to take Malcolm under his wing. He starts to point out who’s who in the pool room, like the drug dealers, pimps, and gamblers. Shorty starts to spread the word to everyone that Malcolm is look for a “slave,” and they promise to look out for openings.

Shorty talks about himself, as well. He shows Malcolm his saxophone and tells him that he “plays the numbers” (the lottery) every day, hoping to hit the jackpot and win enough money to put a jazz band together. He also confesses to having an attraction to white prostitutes. Shorty then gives Malcolm a couple dollars and promises to call.

By the time Malcolm gets home, Shorty has already left a message with Ella that a position as a shoe shine boy has opened at the Roseland State Ballroom. In awe at the idea of being near so many famous musicians, Malcolm rushes out.

Malcolm arrives at the ballroom, asking for the shoe shine boy, whose name is Freddie. After taking a quick peak at the beautiful ballroom, he heads upstairs. Freddie, who has just won some money and so will be moving on from his job shoe shining, agrees to show Malcolm the trade so he can take over at the next dance.

This more expansive trip through Boston shows all of the glamor and wealth of a big city, but it also implicitly marks these areas as off-limits to African Americans, who instead stay within Roxbury.



Malcolm sees himself as older and so do his peers. This is partially due to his physical stature, but also because of his more mature way of carrying himself. These qualities will make him a natural leader throughout his life.



For a small-town boy, the hustle and bustle of the big city life is enchanting, and Malcolm similarly attempts to enchant his readers with his descriptions.



As will happen many times throughout his life, Malcolm encounters someone with whom he immediately forms a bond and who agrees to help him through this new phase in his life. In this case, Shorty is his early teacher in learning about the Roxbury environment. The slang term “slave” is brutally ironic considering the past of black enslavement in America, and the way that economic and institutional racism continues that history of oppression.



For Malcolm, Shorty’s love for jazz and white women are connected. Many African American musicians survive mostly through performing for white audiences, who then also fetishize those black musicians.



The new position as shoe shine boy is a metaphorical “first step.” For Ella, it’s a step in the wrong direction, but not according to Malcolm and Shorty.



Freddie represents exactly what Malcolm would like to achieve. He’s been a successful hustler, and now with a little luck, he’s moving on to better things.



With precision, Freddie lays out the tools of the trade on his stand, and begins to show Malcolm how it's done. He also teaches Malcolm his first real "hustle": if Malcolm runs to the guys leaving the bathroom and hands them a towel, Freddie says, they'll be embarrassed about not washing their hands and give him a tip. The other trick is to "Uncle Tom" (or act in a stereotypically subservient way) to the white customers, who will then tip more.

In between practicing on Freddie's shoes, Malcolm goes off to watch the dancing. He is enchanted by all of the white patrons, dressed up and carrying large bundles of cash, and by hearing all the Benny Goodman songs performed live.

After cleaning up the ballroom and while driving Malcolm home, Freddie clues him in on the main "hustles" for a shoe shine boy. He should start to buy condoms and then sell them for profit at the end of the dances, and once he's experienced, he can move on to selling liquor and marijuana reefers.

After a few weeks, Malcolm runs into Freddie downtown, and they laugh together. Malcolm has come to realize that the "side hustles" are actually the main source of income. In addition, he's started to pass on the phone numbers of black prostitutes (for a tip) to white men.

While most of the events are white only, Roseland's also brings in black bands for the black community. On these nights, the ballroom is packed, and many of the musicians come to have their shoes shined, including Duke Ellington and Count Basie. Malcolm recounts the time Johnny Hodges forgot to pay him.

At the black dances, the dancers are much more improvisational and loose than the dancers at the all-white events (this may have been influenced by the large amount of alcohol snuck in to the black dances). In the last hour, the band yells "Showtime!" and only the best dancers stay on the floor to compete. With the lights shining and the hall rocking, Malcolm feels electrified.

Around this time, Malcolm starts to hang out socially with Shorty and his friends, where they play craps, drink, smoke, and tell jokes late into the night. He starts to grow his hair out so that he can "conk" it, and Shorty tells him to buy his first zoot suit (an especially baggy style of suit).

Malcolm emphasizes to the reader how much skill is involved in even a seemingly simple task like being a successful shoe-shiner. Every step involves impressing or flattering the white customers in a conscious effort to make them tip more.



Even though Malcolm will participate in the African American events here, the wealth and splendor of these white patrons creates a stark contrast to his own life.



As with many things Malcolm will learn about, being a shoe shine boy is not what it appears; instead, there is a complex system operating in the background.



In Malcolm's life, sex between whites and blacks will often be a complicated and exploitative relationship. This is his first of many encounters with that world.



Malcolm's relationships with famous musicians may seem glamorous, but they also imply something else: at the end of the day, African American shoe shiners and musicians both are still simply employees for white people.



Malcolm's genuine love of dancing, music, and the joyous atmosphere of the dance hall complicates the image of him as an austere Muslim preacher. The reader is forced to see Malcolm as a more dynamic character.



Malcolm then contrasts his positive memories with others that he is now ashamed of. As an older man, drugs, alcohol, and conks all represent a degradation of his self-worth.



At a local neighborhood store and on Shorty's recommendation, Malcolm gets measured for a sky blue zoot suit that he buys on credit (a practice that Earl Little always condemned). The store manager helps him complete the look with a thin leather belt with his initial L on it, a hat with a feather, and a long gold-chain watch.

While Ella doesn't approve of Malcolm's new attire, she accepts it as inevitable, given the style of the times and his group of friends. Malcolm gets photos taken of himself in his new attire, and sends one copy to his siblings, gives one to Ella, and one to Shorty, who is noticeably moved by the gesture.

Finally, Malcolm's hair is long enough to be **conked** for the first time. He and Shorty go to the drugstore to buy the ingredients for a do-it-yourself conk, and then head to Shorty's apartment. Shorty mixes the concoction, telling Malcolm that the lye will burn his scalp badly, but that it's necessary to make his hair stay straight.

At first the chemicals just feel warm, but then Malcolm begins to feel like his head is on fire. After withstanding as long as he can, Malcolm rushes to wash out the lye. Shorty helps him to get all of the relaxant out, dries him off, and shows him his brand new **conk**. Malcolm's reddish hair now lies straight across his head.

Malcolm is in love with his new hair and vows to never go without a **conk** again. He reflects later that this was his first "step towards self-degradation," as he attempted to look white by enduring so much pain just to have straight hair. He observes that both lower class black men and upper class entertainers conk their hair, and he admires those who have chosen not to do so. Malcolm sees it as a symbol of shame, both for himself and for others who get conks.

CHAPTER 4: LAURA

After spending time going to parties and hanging out with the "hipsters" and the "cool cats," Malcolm has learned to talk and to dress like them. He's also learned to drink and smoke and gamble; but the one thing he hasn't learned is to dance. At some point, though, with the liquor flowing and the music playing, Malcolm starts to get the hang of the lindy-hop. After that, he lets loose and falls in love with dancing, something he claims all black people can naturally do.

Malcolm's description of his trip to the tailor and his new suit is tongue-in-cheek. To him, what sounded and looked great at the time now just seems ridiculous.



Shorty and Ella are the two most important people in Malcolm's life now. Even though their opinions may differ, Malcolm values them both.



This is an important step for Malcolm to take into fitting into the local community of hustlers. But hustlers are always fighting for cash, and Malcolm's DIY conk testifies to that life of struggle and hardship.



The process is a very literal baptism by "fire." After enduring as much as he can and passing through the flames, Malcolm (who fittingly has naturally red hair) emerges as a new man.



In his strongest language yet, Malcolm attacks one of the symbols of how racism has dug deep into the African American psychology of the time. He offers himself as an example of someone who has also been affected by those illusions, showing that he understands other victims as well.



Looking back, Malcolm may not approve of his time spent gambling and drinking. But he cannot and does not attempt to hide his love for dancing, which seems to spring from inside of him. This ability to dance serves as a positive symbol of racial pride for him.



When the time comes for another dance for black people at Roseland's, Malcolm quits his job so that he can join the others on the dance floor. Ella is pleased he quit, and Shorty says he knew Malcolm would outgrow being a shoe shiner. Malcolm heads back to the tailor's shop to get a new zoot suit, which he chooses very carefully and purchases on credit. Then, with a fresh **conk**, he heads down to the Ballroom right as everyone starts to arrive. Heads are turning his way as he makes his way through the room.

Once on the dance floor, Malcolm starts grabbing partners from every direction, pulling girls out to dance with him. Everyone can dance well and they are all grinning at each other, having the time of their lives. Malcolm has so much fun that he never misses another lindy-hopping night at Roseland's while living in Boston.

Ella, thrilled that Malcolm no longer shines shoes, finds him a job as a soda fountain clerk in a drugstore in her neighborhood. Malcolm can't stand the people on this side of town, but he respects Ella and decides to take the job. The locals come into the drugstore, putting on airs and pretending to be rich, when everyone knows they don't really have money or work professional jobs. After working all day, Malcolm escapes back into town to go lindy-hop and forgets all about the Hill.

One day, Malcolm "hits the numbers" and wins sixty dollars. He almost decides to quit the drugstore's soda fountain counter, but he and Shorty end up blowing the money having a great time instead.

A girl named Laura lives near the drugstore and comes in regularly to have a banana split. After seeing her for weeks and weeks, always reading a book and acting very friendly, Malcolm decides she's different from the others on the Hill. One day, Malcolm strikes up a conversation with her, and finds out she's an honors student living with her grandmother. Laura's grandmother is a very strict, religious woman.

Malcolm enjoys talking with Laura, and he admires that she wants to go to college. Her studies remind him of his own love for school, and it makes him sad that he couldn't continue his education. Nonetheless, their affection for each other continues to grow.

Malcolm is no longer a fresh arrival from Michigan. Now, he has experience working a "slave," he's on to his second zoot suit and conk, and he's headed to the dance. Malcolm is perceived as an adult in the crowd, and an attractive one.



The dancers on the floor move from one partner to the next and experience joy together. While this may not be a political movement, it is an important example for Malcolm of African Americans coming together in community.



Malcolm begins to live a double life, torn between the attractions of the town and his responsibilities to Ella and his new job on the Hill. The "fake" community of wealthy black patrons contrasts to his nightlife, made up of the more honest community of dancers and hustlers in town.



Malcolm doesn't manage to catch a big break, just a small bit of luck to have a good time.



Like his friends in town, Laura seems to be a much more honest and genuine person than the other customers. As both sincere and educated, she symbolizes the best of both worlds, which is exactly the kind of life Malcolm will one day try to live.



Malcolm the narrator reflects on Malcolm the character looking back on dropping out of school. This "double reflecting" emphasizes the impossibility of his going back to school even in the "future."



Malcolm keeps Laura away from Shorty, and keeps Shorty away from Laura, thinking that because they come from such different worlds, they wouldn't understand one another. However, Laura mentions that she loves to dance, and so Malcolm asks her to go see Count Basie with him that weekend. While at first saying no because of her grandmother, Laura lies to her about a school function and agrees to come.

The night of the dance, Malcolm brings Laura to Ella's house so he can change into his blue zoot suit. Ella immediately falls head over heels for Laura, a well-educated and upper-class girl. Malcolm, meanwhile, gets only Ella's disapproving glare because of his attire.

Laura is filled with excitement about the lindy-hop. She and Malcolm share a taxi and then go inside the ballroom, where Malcolm greets everyone in the room. Then they start to dance. Halfway through the number, Malcolm notices that Laura is perhaps the most responsive partner he's ever had. With just the slightest touch, she goes where he leads with a "ballet style." With light footwork, they zoom around the dance floor.

Years later, Malcolm says, his friend Sammy the Pimp tells him that if he looks closely at a woman on the dance floor, "what she truly is" will bubble to the surface on her face. Malcolm wonders whether Sammy, with this supposed ability, could have foreseen the hard turns Laura's life would take.

When it comes time for the "Showtime!" competition, the dancers on the floor start to thin out, and Malcolm is approached by a lindy-hopper with a reputation of being high-energy and hard to keep up with. Malcolm and the girl dance around the floor to the great approval of the crowd. Laura, however, says very little afterward, and maintains her distance for the next week.

One day Laura comes into the drugstore, wild with excitement and asking Malcolm to take her to see Duke Ellington. Malcolm agrees, and goes to her house to pick her up—but he is met by Laura's grandmother, who is extremely hostile to him. Laura and her grandmother then have a screaming match about Laura going out, and finally Laura leaves the house in tears with Malcolm.

Laura's lie to her Grandmother is magnified to the level of original sin. For Malcolm, this turning away from her grandmother's strict religious and social views is Laura's first step onto a darker path.



A stark contrast is formed between Laura, a very presentable girl, and Malcolm, who looks like every other hustler. Ella's judgment exacerbates this class difference.



Malcolm refers to Laura as having a "ballet style" and as being very light. His choice of words emphasizes her class upbringing (only wealthier girls would know ballet) and her relative innocence, as ballet dancers are usually very young and light.



Malcolm buys into old sexist norms that portray women as more "natural" beings that reveal their true selves when lost in passion, and what Laura truly "is" is something much darker and more primal than a college girl.



Although she never says it, Laura is either jealous of the other dancer's skill or is offended that Malcolm went to dance with her. Either way, Laura keeps to herself as she makes her next decision.



Like Malcolm, Laura is walking step by step away from life on the Hill and closer towards life in the town. Her tears symbolize the difficulty of that break and the hardships awaiting her.



After the warmup rounds of dancing, Laura tells Malcolm she wants to compete. While he is skeptical about her ability to maintain her energy, she changes into her sneakers and they begin. Her “ballet style” of feather-light steps and his reputation gain them the attention of the very astute crowd. As Laura’s stamina starts to fade, Malcolm carries her to the sidelines to the applause of the crowd and with a salute from Duke Ellington himself.

In an effort to outdo Malcolm’s last partner, Laura rises to the occasion to compete against the other dancers. And while she does wonderfully, she ultimately falls victim to the grueling conditions, a foreshadowing of her eventual fall into drugs and prostitution.



As people in the crowd are congratulating Laura, Malcolm catches the eye of a beautiful, tall, blonde woman named Sophia. As dating white women was then a status symbol in black America, Malcolm is immediately struck by her obvious interest in him, almost instantly forgetting about Laura. After he takes Sophia to the floor for a dance, he agrees to take Laura home and then come back to meet Sophia.

While Laura is still trying to recover from the dance, Malcolm has already moved on to Sophia. While Laura may have been a superior dancer, Sophia has one thing Laura can never have – white skin.



When Malcolm returns, Sophia is waiting for him outside. She drives them in her convertible to a side road outside of Boston, before turning off the engine. For the next few months, Malcolm and Sophia go out several times a week together, making quite a statement throughout Roxbury. Sophia’s beauty, wealth, and whiteness increase Malcolm’s status in Roxbury so that he goes from being a young upstart to a respected man in the neighborhood. He’s now known as “Red.”

Malcolm and Sophia’s relationship focuses around what each of them can gain from the other, not on love. Sophia has an attraction to black men and culture, whereas Malcolm can gain socially and economically from the relationship.



Laura never comes back to the drugstore after this. When Malcolm sees her again, years later, she has abandoned her plans for college and fallen into drinking, drugs, and then prostitution to fund it all. Throughout his life, Malcolm will feel responsible for her fall.

Laura’s tragic fall has been foreshadowed throughout the chapter. Now, Malcolm simply sums up the course of her life, as if this part would inevitably follow, which says a lot about his views on “immorality.”



Ella soon finds out about Sophia and makes her disapproval very clear. Malcolm then moves in with Shorty on Sophia’s dime and finds a new job as a bus boy. Shortly thereafter, World War II reaches America at Pearl Harbor.

Malcolm can no longer live a double life, caught between the Hill and the town—so he chooses to move out of Ella’s home and embrace his new life.



CHAPTER 5: HARLEMITE

Through a friend of Ella’s, Malcolm lands a job working for the railroad, due to the war causing a labor shortage. Having always wanted to visit New York City, Malcolm jumps at the chance to work for the route traveling to and from the Big Apple.

While Malcolm may no longer live with Ella and she may no longer approve of his lifestyle, he will continue to benefit from her kindness and connections throughout his life.

