

Name: _____

Prison Studies

The author of this essay, Malcolm X, was a charismatic leader of the black power movement in the 1960's. When he was twenty years old, he was arrested for burglary and for carrying a firearm. Three years into his sentence, he was transferred to an experimental prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts, a facility with a large library.

- 1 Many who today hear me somewhere in person, or on television, or those who read something I've said, will think I went to school far beyond the eighth grade. This impression is due entirely to my prison studies.
- 2 It had really begun back in the Charlestown Prison, when Bimbi first made me feel envy of his stock of knowledge. Bimbi had always taken charge of any conversation he was in, and I had tried to emulate him. But every book I picked up had few sentences which didn't contain anywhere from one to nearly all the words that might as well have been in Chinese. When I just skipped those words, of course, I really ended up with little idea of what the book said. So I had come to Norfolk Prison Colony still going through only book-reading motions. Pretty soon, I would have quit even these motions, unless I had received the motivation that I did. So I got hold of a dictionary – to study, to learn some words. I was lucky enough to reason also that I should try to improve my penmanship. It was sad. I couldn't even write in a straight line. It was both ideas together that moved me to request, along with the dictionary, some notepads and pencils from the Norfolk Prison Colony school.
- 3 I spent two days just riffling uncertainly through the dictionary's pages. I'd never realized so many words existed! I didn't know which words I needed to learn. Finally, to start some kind of action, I began copying.
- 4 In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my notepad everything printed on that first page – down to the punctuation marks. I believe it took me a day. Then aloud, I read back, to myself, everything I'd written on the tablet. Over and over, aloud, to myself, I read my own handwriting.
- 5 I woke up the next morning, thinking about those words – immensely proud to realize that not only had I written so much at one time, but I'd written words that I never knew were in the world. Moreover, with a little effort, I also could remember what many of these words meant. I reviewed the words whose meanings I didn't remember. Funny thing, from the dictionary's first page right now, that "aardvark" springs to my mind. The dictionary had a picture of it, a long-tailed, long-eared, burrowing African mammal, which lives off termites caught by sticking out its tongue as an anteater does for ants.
- 6 I was so fascinated that I went on – I copied the dictionary's next page. And the same experience came when I studied that. With every succeeding page, I also learned of people and places and events from history. Actually the dictionary is like a miniature encyclopedia. Finally the dictionary's A section had filled a whole notepad – and I went on into the B's. That was the way I started copying what eventually became the entire dictionary. It went a lot faster after so much practice helped me to pick up handwriting speed. Between what I wrote on my notepad, and writing letters, during the rest of my time in prison I would guess I wrote a million words.
- 7 I suppose it was inevitable that as my word-base broadened, I could for the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying. Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge. Between Mr. Mohammad's teachings, my correspondence, my visitors – and my reading of books, months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life.
- 8 An inmate who was known to read a lot could check out more than the permitted maximum number of books. There was a sizable number of well-read inmates. Some were said by many to be practically walking encyclopedias. No university would ask any student to devour literature as I did when this new world opened to me, of being able to read and *understand*. When I had progressed to really serious reading, every night at about ten p.m. I would be outraged with the "lights out." It always seemed to catch me right in the middle of something engrossing.

- 9 Fortunately, right outside my door was a corridor light that cast a glow into my room. The glow was enough to read by, once my eyes adjusted to it. So when “lights out” came, I would sit on the floor where I could continue reading in that glow.
- 10 At one-hour intervals the night guards paced past every room. Each time I heard the approaching footsteps, I jumped into bed and feigned sleep. And as soon as the guard passed, I got back out of bed onto the floor area of that light-glow, where I would read for another fifty-eight minutes – until the guard approached again. That went on until three or four every morning. Three or four hours of sleep a night was enough for me. Often in the years in the streets I had slept less than that.
- 11 I have often reflected upon the new vistas that reading opened for me. I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life. As I see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive. I certainly wasn’t seeking any degree, the way a college confers a status symbol upon its students. My homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness, and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America. You will never catch me with a free fifteen minutes in which I’m not studying something I feel might be able to help the black man.
- 12 Every time I catch a plane, I have with me a book that I want to read – and that’s a lot of books these days. I could spend the rest of my life reading, just satisfying my curiosity – because you can hardly mention anything I’m not curious about. Prison enabled me to study far more intensively than I would have if my life had gone differently. Where else could I have attacked my ignorance by being able to study sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day? I don’t think anybody ever got more out of going to prison than I did.

By Malcolm X (adapted)

Selected Response Items

For each of the following, circle the letter of the correct or BEST answer.

1. In the context in which it is found, what is the meaning of the word “engrossing” from paragraph 8?
 - a. Disgusting
 - b. Maddening
 - c. Surprising
 - d. Thrilling
2. Which of the following at first influenced the author’s desire to read?
 - a. He envied Bimbi’s knowledge
 - b. He hadn’t finished the eighth grade
 - c. He was bored
 - d. He was forced to by prison authorities
3. Which of the following is the BEST example of effective diction?
 - a. Devour (paragraph 8)
 - b. Fascinated (paragraph 6)
 - c. Feigned (paragraph 10)
 - d. Understand (paragraph 8)
4. Which of the following is true about the final line of the essay?
 - a. It is ironic
 - b. It is metaphoric
 - c. It is sarcastic
 - d. It is symbolic
5. *I woke up the next morning . . .* (paragraph 5) Which of the following best describes the function of this phrase?
 - a. It creates atmosphere
 - b. It creates coherence
 - c. It creates internal conflict
 - d. It creates setting

6. Which of the following excerpts contains an example of parallel structure?
- It was sad. I couldn't even write in a straight line.* (paragraph 2)
 - In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my notepad everything printed on that first page – down to the punctuation marks.* (paragraph 4)
 - Finally the dictionary's A section had filled a whole notepad – and I want on to the B's.* (paragraph 6)
 - You will never catch me with a free fifteen minutes in which I am not studying something I feel might be able to help the black man.* (paragraph 11)
7. Based on the context in which it is found, what is the meaning of the word “*vistas*” in paragraph 11?
- Difficulties
 - Landscape
 - Outlook
 - Sights
8. Which of the following is NOT an example of figurative expression?
- “*attacked my ignorance*” (paragraph 12)
 - “*a corridor light that cast a glow into my room*” (paragraph 9)
 - “*deafness, dumbness and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America*” (paragraph 11)
 - “*walking encyclopedias*” (paragraph 8)
9. What type of essay is this?
- Descriptive
 - Expository
 - Fictional Narrative
 - Personal Narrative
10. Which of the following best describes the author’s tone?
- Agitated and impatient
 - Earnest and passionate
 - Haughty and proud
 - Respectful and restrained

Write Notes on the Essay:

- What are TWO ways in which unity is achieved in this essay? Use arrows and notes on the paper itself to show unity.
- Identify, with arrows and by writing in the margins, TWO types of emphatic devices in paragraph 5 of the essay.

Construct answers to the following using full sentences and paragraphs. COMPLETE THESE IN YOUR EXERCISE BOOK.

11. What was the author’s purpose in writing this essay?

Notes:

12. Identify any TWO methods of development employed in this essay (one example of each), and explain how each of your examples is effective in the essay.

Notes:

VISUALS

- Refer to Visual #1 (*Prisoners Exercising*) for questions 1 through 5.
- Refer to Visual #2 for question 21.
- Please do not mark on the sheets with the visuals and hand them in at the end of class.

Selected Response Items

Circle the letter of the correct or **BEST** response.

13. Which of the following is the focal point in **Visual #1**?
 - a. the group of men on the right
 - b. the man turned toward the viewer.
 - c. the void in the circle.
 - d. the window on the back wall.
14. Which of the following terms **BEST** describes the attitude of the three men in the right corner of **Visual #1**?
 - a. amused
 - b. anxious
 - c. indifferent
 - d. interested
15. Which of the following **BEST** describes the effect of the brick walls **Visual #1**?
 - a. composition
 - b. harmony
 - c. movement
 - d. texture
16. The white bird-like images which appear in the top left-hand corner of the back wall creates which of the following in **Visual #1**?
 - a. background
 - b. balance
 - c. line
 - d. symbol
17. What atmosphere is created in **Visual #1**? In your answer, make **TWO** specific references to the visual. You can jot note your answer right here in this page.

Constructed Response Item: ANSWER THE FOLLOWING IN YOUR EXERCISE BOOK.

18. Compare and/or contrast the two attitudes expressed about literacy in the essay *Prison Studies* and **VISUAL #2**. Support your answer with **TWO** specific references to each selection.

Notes:
