Alex Haley

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Essential Question: What contributions did Alex Haley make to American literature?

Alex Haley was born in Ithaca, N.Y. on August 11, 1921. When he was still young, his family moved to his mother's hometown of Henning, Tennessee. In Henning, Haley was surrounded by family members who often told stories about his ancestor's. These stories would later be the inspiration for his bestseller *Roots*.

From 1937 to 1939, Haley attended teacher's college in North Carolina before joining the Coast Guard. Haley spent his years in the Coast Guard improving his skills as a writer and in 1952 he was appointed chief journalist of the Coast Guard. The position was created just for him.

Haley published articles in a number of magazines including Playboy and Reader's Digest. This exposure led to his selection as the ghostwriter for Malcolm X's autobiography. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* became a bestseller and brought increased attention to Haley.

For years Haley had thought about the family stories he heard as a boy. He decided to research his family's history and to use that research as the basis for a book titled *Roots. Roots* was published in 1976 and became an international bestseller and Pulitzer Prize winner. In 1977, the miniseries based on the book became one of the most watched programs in American history. Haley's story of how he had traced his family back to a village in West Africa, inspired thousands of people, particularly African-Americans to research their own family history

While *Roots* was well received by the public, historians had grave reservations about the work. The book had been marketed as non-fiction, but historians found numerous errors in the story. Haley was also sued for plagiarism. Haley was accused of plagiarizing over 80 passages from a 1967 novel called *The African.* Haley claimed that he had not read the novel and that the passages were based on suggestions he had received from others. The lawsuit went to court, but Haley agreed to a settlement of $650,000 before the judge made his ruling.

Other criticisms followed. It was also revealed that many passages in *Roots* were written by Murray Fisher, Haley's editor at *Playboy*. One of the most moving and remarkable aspects of the novel was Haley's meeting with a west African griot, who claimed to know an oral history of Haley's ancestor Kunta Kinte. Upon further investigation it was revealed that the story was a fabrication created by Haley and the government of Gambia. The Gambian authorities realized the potential for tourism that the book would create and arranged for Haley to meet a griot who would tell him exactly what he wanted to hear. After these facts were revealed, Haley began to refer to *Roots* as "faction" , a mixture of fact and fiction.

Haley continued to write for the remainder of his life, but the criticisms of *Roots* continued to linger. Haley died in Seattle, Washington on February 10, 1992.

Source: Pace, Eric. "Alex Haley, 70, Author of 'Roots' Dies." *Nytimes.com*. The New York Times. 1992. Web. 27 July, 2014. < http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0811.html>

"Alex Haley." *Tennessee Encyclopedia and History and Culture* 1st edition. 1998. Print.

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Use the text to complete the matching exercise below.

_____Alex Haley was born in this state, but later moved to Tennessee.	A. Historians
_____What branch of the military did Haley serve in?	B. Malcolm X
_____Haley was a ghostwriter for this person's autobiography.	C. Seattle, Washington
_____This was the name of Haley's book that he published in 1976.	D. *Roots*
_____This group of people that found errors in Haley's story before he was sued for plagiarism.	E. Gambia
_____What country's government helped Haley come up with the story for *Roots*?	F. New York
_____Place where Haley died in 1992.	G. Coast Guard

Alex Haley Key

Use the text to complete the matching exercise below.

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Reflect on the text about Alex Haley in order to address the prompts below.

What can we learn from Alex Haley's publication of *Roots*? Why is academic integrity and historical accuracy important?

Do you think that the problem was that Haley manufactured the story or that he marketed it as nonfiction? Explain.

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Answers will vary.

Excerpt of *Roots* : Chapter One by Alex Haley

Standards: 5.69. U.S. 101

Early in the spring of 1750, in the village of Juffure, four days upriver from the coast of The Gambia, West Africa, a man-child was born to Omoro and Binta Kinte. Forcing forth from Binta's strong young body, he was as black as she was, flecked and slippery with Binta's blood, and he was bawling. The two wrinkled midwives, old Nyo Boto and the baby's Grandmother Yaisa, saw that it was a boy and laughed with joy. According to the forefathers, a boy firstborn presaged the special blessings of Allah not only upon the parents but also upon the parents' families; and there was the prideful knowledge that the name of Kinte would thus be both distinguished and perpetuated.

It was the hour before the first crowing of the cocks, and along with Nyo Boto and Grandma Yaisa's chatterings, the first sound the child heard was the muted, rhythmic bomp-a-bomp-a-bomp of wooden pestles as the other women of the village pounded couscous grain in their mortars, preparing the traditional breakfast of porridge that was cooked in earthen pots over a fire built among three rocks.

The thin blue smoke went curling up pungent and pleasant, over the small dusty village of round mud huts as the nasal wailing of Kajali Demba, the village alimamo, began, calling men to the first of the five daily prayers that had been offered up to Allah for as long as anyone living could remember Hastening from their beds of bamboo cane and cured hides into their rough cotton tunics, the men of the village filed briskly to the praying place, where the alimamo led the worship: "Allahu Akbar! Ashadu an lailahailala!" (God is great! I bear witness that there is only one God!) It was after this, as the men were returning toward their home compounds for breakfast, that Omoro rushed among them, beaming and excited, to tell them of his firstborn son. Congratulating him, all of the men echoed the omens of good fortune.

Each man, back in his own hut, accepted a calabash of porridge from his wife. Returning to their kitchens in the rear of the compound, the wives fed next their children, and finally themselves. When they had finished eating, the men took up their short, bent-handled hoes, whose wooden blades had been sheathed with metal by the village blacksmith, and set off for their day's work of preparing the land for farming of the groundnuts and the couscous and cotton that were the primary men's crops, as rice was that of the women, in this hot, lush savanna country of The Gambia.

By ancient custom, for the next seven days, there was but a single task with which Omoro would seriously occupy himself: the selection of a name for his firstborn son. It would have to be a name rich with history and with promise, for the people of his tribe—the Mandinkas—believed that a child would develop seven of the characteristics of whomever or whatever he was named for.

On behalf of himself and Binta, during this week of thinking, Omoro visited every household in Juffure, and invited each family to the naming ceremony of the newborn child, traditionally on the eighth day of his life. On that day, like his father and his father's father, this new son would become a member of the tribe.

When the eighth day arrived, the villagers gathered in the early morning before the hut of Omoro and Binta. On their heads, the women of both families brought calabash containers of ceremonial sour milk and sweet munko cakes of pounded rice and honey. Karamo Silla, the jaliba of the village, was there with his tan-tang drums; and the alimamo, and the arafang, Brima Cesay, who would some day be the child's teacher; and also Omoro's two brothers, Janneh and Saloum, who had journeyed from far away to attend the ceremony when the drumtalk news of their nephew's birth had reached them.

As Binta proudly held her new infant, a small patch of his first hair was shaved off, as was always done on this day, and all of the women exclaimed at how well formed the baby was. Then they quieted as the jaliba began to beat his drums. The alimamo said a prayer over the calabashes of sour milk and munko cakes, and as he prayed, each guest touched a calabash brim with his or her right hand, as a gesture of respect for the food. Then the alimamo turned to pray over the infant, entreating Allah to grant him long life, success in bringing credit and pride and many children to his family, to his village, to his tribe—and, finally, the strength and the spirit to deserve and to bring honor to the name he was about to receive.

Omoro then walked out before all of the assembled people of the village. Moving to his wife's side, he lifted up the infant and, as all watched, whispered three times into his son's ear the name he had chosen for him. It was the first time the name had ever been spoken as this child's name, for Omoro's people felt that each human being should be the first to know who he was.

The tan-tang drum resounded again; and now Omoro whispered the name into the ear of Binta, and Binta smiled with pride and pleasure. Then Omoro whispered the name to the arafang, who stood before the villagers.

"The first child of Omoro and Binta Kinte is named Kunta!" cried Brima Cesay.

As everyone knew, it was the middle name of the child's late grandfather, Kairaba Kunta Kinte, who had come from his native Mauretania into The Gambia, where he had saved the people of Juffure from a famine, married Grandma Yaisa, and then served Juffure honorably till his death as the village's holy man.

One by one, the arafang recited the names of the Mauretanian forefathers of whom the baby's grandfather, old Kairaba Kinte, had often told. The names, which were great and many, went back more than two hundred rains. Then the jaliba pounded on his tan-tang and all of the people exclaimed their admiration and respect at such a distinguished lineage.

Out under the moon and the stars, alone with his son that eighth night, Omoro completed the naming ritual. Carrying little Kunta in his strong arms, he walked to the edge of the village, lifted his baby up with his face to the heavens, and said softly, “Fend kiling dorong leh warrata ka iteh tee.” (Behold—the only thing greater than yourself.)

Source: Haley, Alex. *Roots. Rootsthebook.com.* Vanguard Press, 2007. Web. 23 July 2014. <http://www.rootsthebook.com/excerpt.html>

“Learning to Read” excerpt from The Autobiography of Malcolm X

Born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925, Malcolm X was one of the most articulate and powerful leaders of black America during the 1960s. A street hustler convicted of robbery in 1946, he spent seven years in prison, where he educated himself and became a disciple of Elijah Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam. In the days of the civil rights movement, Malcolm X emerged as the leading spokesman for black separatism, a philosophy that urged black Americans to cut political, social, and economic ties with the white community. After a pilgrimage to Mecca, the capital of the Muslim world, in 1964, he became an orthodox Muslim, adopted the Muslim name El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, and distanced himself from the teachings of the black Muslims. He was assassinated in 1965. In the following excerpt from his autobiography, coauthored with Alex Haley and published the year of his death, Malcolm X describes his self-education.

I became increasingly frustrated at not being able to express what I wanted to convey in letters that I wrote, especially those to Mr. Elijah Muhammad. In the street, I had been the most articulate hustler out there. I had commanded attention when I said something. But now, trying to write simple English, I not only wasn’t articulate, I wasn’t even functional. How would I sound writing in slang—something such as, “Look, daddy, let me pull your coat about a cat…”

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.

It really began back in the Charlestown Prison, when Bimbi first made me feel envy of his stock of knowledge. Bimbi had always taken charge of any conversations he was in, and I tried to emulate him. But every book I picked up had few sentences which didn’t contain anywhere from one to nearly all of 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.

I saw that the best thing I could do was get 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 a dictionary along with some tablets and pencils from the Norfolk Prison school.

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, just to start some kind of action, I began copying.

In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet 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.

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 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.

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 tablet—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 in my tablet, and writing letters, during the rest of my time in prison I would guess I wrote a million words.

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, 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. Muhammad'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.

As you can imagine, especially in a prison where there was heavy emphasis on rehabilitation, an inmate was smiled upon if he demonstrated an unusually intense interest in books. There was a sizable number of well-read inmates, especially the popular debaters. Some of them were practically walking encyclopedias.

Book after book showed me how the white man had brought upon the world's black, brown, red, and yellow peoples every variety of suffering. I saw how since the sixteenth century, the so-called "Christian trader" began to ply the seas in his lust for Asian and African empires, plunder, and power. I saw how the white man never has gone among the non-white peoples bearing the Cross in the true manner and spirit of Christ's teachings—meek, humble, and Christlike…

I have often reflected upon the new vistas that reading opened to 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 is afflicting the black race in America.

Not long ago, an English writer telephoned me from London, asking questions. One was, "What's your alma mater?" I told him, "Books."

Source: X, Malcolm and Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X.* 1965. *Deltacollege.edu*

Delta College, 2014. Web. 23 July, 2014.
<http://www.deltacollege.edu/emp/pwall/documents/LearningtoRead.pdf>