Martin Luther King Jr. Vs Malcolm X Essay, Research Paper

Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X

Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X grew up in different

environments. King was raised in a comfortable middle-class family

where education was stressed. On the other hand, Malcolm X came from

and underprivileged home. He was a self-taught man who received

little schooling and rose to greatness on his own intelligence and

determination. Martin Luther King was born into a family whose name

in Atlanta was well established. Despite segregation, Martin Luther

King’s parents ensured that their child was secure and happy.

Malcolm X was born on May 19, 1925 and was raised in a

completely different atmosphere than King, an atmosphere of fear and

anger where the seeds of bitterness were planted. The burning of his

house by the Klu Klux Klan resulted in the murder of his father. His

mother later suffered a nervous breakdown and his family was split up.

He was haunted by this early nightmare for most of his life. From

then on, he was driven by hatred and a desire for revenge.

The early backgrounds of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were

largely responsible for the distinct different responses to American

racism. Both men ultimately became towering icons of contemporary

African-American culture and had a great influence on black Americans.

However, King had a more positive attitude than Malcolm X, believing

that through peaceful demonstrations and arguments, blacks will be

able to someday achieve full equality with whites. Malcolm X’s

despair about life was reflected in his angry, pessimistic belief that

equality is impossible because whites have no moral conscience. King

basically adopted on an integrationalist philosophy, whereby he felt

that blacks and whites should be united and live together in peace.

Malcolm X, however, promoted nationalist and separatist doctrines.

For most of his life, he believed that only through revolution and

force could blacks attain their rightful place in society.

Both X and King spread their message through powerful,

hard-hitting speeches. Nevertheless, their intentions were delivered

in different styles and purposes.

“King was basically a peaceful leader who urged non-violence

to his followers. He travelled about the country giving speeches that

inspired black and white listeners to work together for racial

harmony.” (pg. 135, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Freedom Movement)

Malcolm X, for the most part, believed that non-violence and

integration was a trick by the whites to keep blacks in their places.

He was furious at white racism and encouraged his followers through

his speeches to rise up and protest against their white enemies.

After Malcolm X broke away from Elijah Mohammed, this change is

reflected in his more moderate speeches.

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King’s childhoods had powerful

influences on the men and their speeches. Malcolm X was brought up in

an atmosphere of violence. During his childhood, Malcolm X suffered

not only from abuse by whites, but also from domestic violence. His

father beat his mother and both of them abused their children. His

mother was forced to raise eight children during the depression.

After his mother had a mental breakdown, the children were all placed

in foster homes. Malcolm X’s resentment was increased as he suffered

through the ravages of integrated schooling. Although an intelligent

student who shared the dream of being a lawyer with Martin Luther

King, Malcolm X’s anger and disillusionment caused him to drop out of

school. He started to use cocaine and set up a burglary ring to

support his expensive habit. Malcolm X’s hostility and promotion of

violence as a way of getting change was well established in his

childhood.

Martin Luther King lived in an entirely different environment.

He was a smart student and skipped two grades before entering an ivy

league college at only the age of 15. He was the class valedictorian

with an A average. King paraded his graduation present in a new green

Chevrolet before his fellow graduates. He was raised in the perfect

environment where dreams and love were generated. King and X’s

childhoods are “a study in polarity.” (pg. 254, Reflecting Black)

Whereas, Malcolm X was raised in nightmarish conditions.

King’s home was almost dream-like. He was raised in a comfortable

middle-class home where strong values natured his sense of self-worth.

Sure, many have admired Malcolm X and Martin Luther King for

the way that they preached. “Both King and Malcolm X promoted

self-knowledge and respect for one’s history and culture as the basis

for unity.” (pg. 253, Reflecting Black.) Other than the fact that

they were similar in some ways, they also had many differences that

people admired, both in belief and speech.

Malcolm X, in many ways, was known to many as an extremist.

For most of the time that he spent as an Islamic minister, he preached

about separatism between blacks and whites. He also preached about

black nationalism, and as some would call it, “black supremacy,”

(reporter from Malcolm X movie).

Malcolm X had been misled all through his life. This can be

shown especially at the time when he broke away from the black Muslim

party, because he realised that they were misleading him by telling

him that separatism between blacks and whites is the only way to go.

They also misled him by telling him that separatism is a part of the

Islamic religion. Malcolm X’s life was known to many as a nightmare

because he was abused and haunted by both blacks and whites. Malcolm

X blamed many of the conditions that blacks in the United States lived

in on the whites. He also talked about how the white man still sees

the black man as a slave.

Martin Luther King appeared to many as calm and idealistic.

Many say his calmness came from his peaceful, middle-class life. For

instance, King preached about equality for blacks and whites. He also

preached about getting this equality through a non-violent way.

King’s popularity was more than any other black leader’s popularity.

“King urged blacks to win their rightful place in society by

gaining self-respect, high moral standards, hard work and leadership.

He also urged blacks to do this in a non-violent matter,” (pg. 255,

Reflecting Black)

The difference is in Malcolm X and Martin Luther King’s

backgrounds had a direct influence on their later viewpoints. As a

black youth, Malcolm X was rebellious and angry. He blamed the poor

social conditions that blacks lived in on the whites. “His past

ghetto life prepared him to reject non-violence and integration and to

accept a strong separatist philosophy as the basis for black

survival,” (Internet, Malcolm X anniversary).

He even believed at one time that whites were agents of the

devil. As a result, “Malcolm X recommended a separatist and

nationalist strategy for black survival,” (pg. 57, Malcolm X: The man

and his times)

He believed that only through violence would conditions

change. He saw no evidence that white society had any moral conscience

and promoted the role of the angry black against racist America.

King’s philosophies presented a sharp contrast to those of

Malcolm X. He believed that through hard work, strong leadership, and

non-violent tactics, blacks could achieve full equality with whites.

His belief in non-violence even extended to a woman who nearly killed

him. He was reported as saying, “don’t persecute her, get her

healed,” (pg. 52, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Freedom Movement).

Near the end of their lives, Martin Luther King and Malcolm

X’s beliefs became more similar. Malcolm X corrected himself after

his break with the black Muslim movement. He now emphasised unity and

change through black pride and respect for oneself rather than through

hate and revenge. King, on the other hand, became somewhat angry at

the lack of progress made on equality. He started promoting

non-violent sabotage, which including blocking the normal functioning

of government. At one time, Malcolm X actually wanted “to join forces

with King and the progressive elements of the Civil Rights Movement,”

(pg. 262, Malcolm X: The man and his times).

To many, King and Malcolm X were heroes of the Civil Rights

Movement. However, many have also seen that King was more

pessimistic, while Malcolm X was more optimistic about separatism for

most of his life. Some have said that later on in their lives, they

had taken the opposite roles and changed.

The speeches of King and X reflected both men’s visions on

improving America. Both men believed that if blacks were to attain

freedom, they first needed to achieve self-respect. However, Malcolm

X’s speeches were delivered in a revolutionary tone which could incite

his listeners to hatred of white America. Malcolm X used direct and

to the point language which could be understood by all levels of

society. “He had mastery in language and could project his ideas,”

(Internet, Remember Malcolm X)

This creativity in language helped build the Black Muslim

Movement in the United States. In his “Definition of a Revolution”

speech, delivered in November 1963, Malcolm X openly justifies

violence as a way of gaining equality. “And if it is right for

America to draft us and teach us how to be violent in defence of the

country, then isn’t it right for you and me to do whatever is

necessary to defend our own people right here in this country,” (pg.

253, Malcolm X: The man and his times).

He encouraged blacks to hate white America and to revolt

against them. “Revolution is bloody, revolution is hostile,

revolution knows no compromise, revolution overturns and destroys

everything that gets in its way,” (pg. 255, Malcolm X: The man and

his times).

In his speech “God’s Judgement of White America”, delivered on

December 1, 1963, Malcolm X again promoted his separatist philosophy.

“America must set aside some separate territory here in the Western

Hemisphere where the two races can live apart from each other, since

we certainly don’t get along peacefully while we are here together,”

(pg. 287, Malcolm X: The man and his times)

After Malcolm X’s pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964, he reappraised

white America and modified somewhat his racist and anti-white beliefs.

This change is reflected in his “Communication and Reality” spoken to

the American Domestic Peace Corps.

“I am against any form of racism. We are all against racism.

I believe in Allah. I believe in the brotherhood of man, all men,

but I do not believe in the brotherhood with anybody who does not want

brotherhood with me,” (pg. 289, Malcolm X: The man and his times)

Martin Luther King was an equally strong speaker. However,

most of his speeches were given to encourage white and black people to

work together for racial harmony. He especially wanted to teach

impressionable black youth that equality could be gained through

non-violent methods. These ideals are reflected in his famous “I have

a dream” speech, where King addressed to over 250 000 people. In this

speech, King urges black people to never forget their dreams. King

preaches that in the eyes of God, the blacks are as good as any other

race and should be treated as equals.

“I have a dream that one day every valley will be exalted,

every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be

made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight, and the

glory of the lord shall be revealed, and all shall see it together,” (

Internet, Martin Luther King’s I Have a Dream speech)

Unlike Malcolm X, King does not incite his followers to riot

and hate, but encourages his followers to remember that all people are

God’s children and that hopefully one day all American can join

together to sing “My country tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty, of

thee I sing…”

King’s eventual disillusionment became because of the lack of

success the blacks were making in America. This discomfort is

reflected in his “A time to break the silence” speech. In this

speech, he openly condemns American involvement in the Vietnam war.

He preaches that America should solve its own racial and social

problems before sending vulnerable young men, especially black men, to

fight other country’s battles.

“So we have been respectfully forced with the cruel irony of

watching Negroes and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die

together for a nation that has been unable to sit them together in the

same schools,” (Internet, A time to break the silence speech)

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King are both remembered as

leaders who fought for a difference in black America. Both tried to

bring hope to blacks in the United States. They also tried to instil

within blacks power and strength so they could rise above all the

hatred that surrounded them, but both of them had very different ways

of promoting their message. Malcolm X had a much more extremist

approach. Many say that this approach came from his neglectful

childhood and early adulthood. King had a much more calm approach.

Some have said that this non-violent approach came from his safe,

middle-class environment. Even though they were different in

addressing their messages about black respect and pride, they both had

the same goal in mind. That goal was to achieve equality between all

races.