

A Comparison of the Lives of Emiliano Zapata and Malcolm X

Levels: 9-12

Subjects: ELL, history, reading

Objectives: Learners will be introduced to biographical details of these two important twentieth century leaders. This is a jigsaw reading activity. Learners will work in pairs, reading different biographical texts, and then compare and contrast the content. It will address:

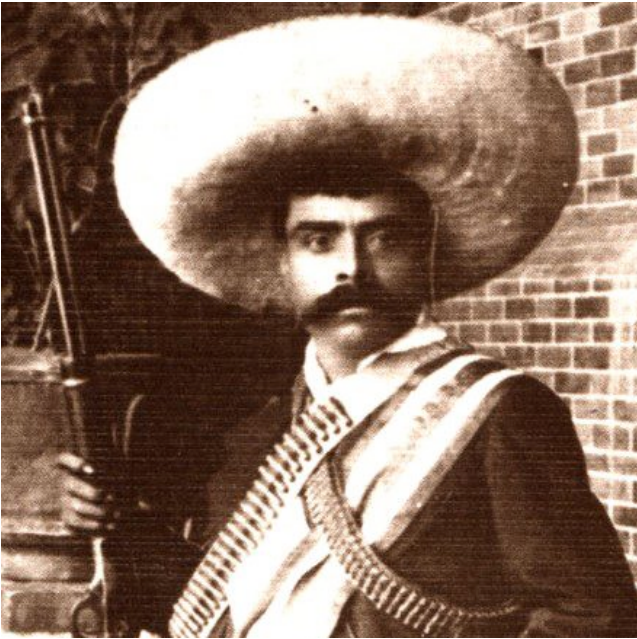
- a) Developing the skills of extracting main biographical details
- b) Summarizing and paraphrasing
- c) Finding similarities and differences between texts
- d) Understanding significant people and ideas

Learners will be able to answer the following questions:

- a) Who were Emiliano Zapata and Malcolm X?
- b) What were the main biographical details of their lives?
- c) What were their principal ideas and beliefs?
- d) What similarities were there between their lives and deaths?
- e) Do they have relevance today?

Procedure: Teachers can begin the lesson by first finding out what their students know about these figures. The texts are then distributed to pairs of students, who read them and take notes. They then tell their partners what they have discovered and look for similarities and differences. The lesson can end with a plenary on their feelings about the two leaders.

Who was Emiliano Zapata?



Emiliano Zapata is the most well-known and revered figures in Mexican history. As one of the leaders of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), he fought for "land and freedom" for the peasants and workers, believing "the land belongs to those who work it." Zapata's Liberation Army of the South victoriously rode into Mexico City in 1914 with other revolutionary forces, taking control of the seat of government. Zapata famously declined to assume power himself, stating instead that his aim was agrarian reform and to fight the abuse of power in Mexico.

In 1919, he was betrayed and assassinated, but his ghost was said to ride on in the hills of his Morelos state.

"Zapata vive!" cry his followers, up to the present day, "la lucha sigue!" Zapata lives, and the struggle continues!

The Story of His Life

Emiliano Zapata was born in the village of San Miguel Anencuilco in the state of Morelos on the 8th of August 1879.

The son of a mestizo peasant who trained and sold horses, Emiliano was orphaned at 17 years of age. Recognizing his leadership talents, his village elected him leader in 1909. A gifted organizer, Zapata began agitating for land reform in his home state of Morelos. He began recruiting an insurgent army even before the Revolution of 1910 which overthrew the dictator Porfirio Díaz.

Zapata's Liberation Army of the South did not accept the new reformist government under Francisco Madero, declaring Madero incapable of fulfilling the goals of the revolution, particularly in land reform. The Zapatistas fought on against the new government's troops led by General Victoriano Huerta. Huerta overthrew Madero in February, 1913, and was then, in turn, deposed by advancing revolutionary forces in 1914, led by Zapata and Pancho Villa. At the Convention in Aguascalientes--called to decide the future of Mexico--the Zapatistas demanded 'tierra y libertad' - land and freedom - for their people.

This was the core of Zapata's 'Plan de Ayala', produced in November 1911.

"The lands, forests and water that have been usurped ... will be immediately restored to the villages or citizens who have title to them ... Because the great majority of Mexicans own nothing more than the land they walk on ... one third of these properties will be expropriated ... so that the villages and citizens of Mexico may obtain ejidos, sites for towns, and fields."

But the Zapatista Plan de Ayala was rejected by other factions of the insurgent forces, and war broke out between the moderates (Carrancistas) and the revolutionaries (Conventionists). Zapata and his insurgent army (now numbering 25,000 men) remained in opposition, fighting bloody battles against the other forces, until 1919. Lured to a meeting with government troops apparently mutinying against the new President Carranza, he was gunned down on April the 10th, 1919. Although the insurgents fought on, and legend has it that Zapata's ghost was seen riding the hills of his native state, Morelos, inspiring his people to struggle.

Finally, the conservatives won out and the turmoil of Mexican Revolution came to an end, although the ideals of the revolutionaries had not been realized. Zapata's struggle for fair distribution of land remained largely ignored until the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas in the late 1930's, who undertook a valiant but flawed attempt at land reform. President Salinas' privatization of communally held land in 1993 undid any work that had been done on land reform in Mexico since the revolution.

Zapata's memory, like his ghost, rides on in Mexico. His name has been invoked by the indigenous rebel army in Chiapas, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), in their struggle against exploitation and injustice. And wherever people in Mexico have risen up against oppression, they take heart from Zapata's cry:

It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees!

Who was Malcolm X?



Malcolm Little was born in Omaha, Nebraska on May 19, 1925. He was one of the eight children of Earl and Louise Little. His father was a Baptist minister and a follower of the black nationalist and separatist leader, Marcus Garvey. Because of his father's beliefs, Malcolm's family was constantly persecuted by white supremacists, having to move to Michigan, where their house was burnt down. Two years later, Earl was found dead, most likely murdered, and the children were placed in foster homes and institutions.

When Malcolm was 16, he moved to Boston to live with his sister in Boston, and quickly became embroiled in a life of crime as he tried to make a living on the streets in the black ghetto. Moving to New York, he was introduced to drugs and developed an addiction. At 20, he was arrested in Boston for burglary and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Malcolm used his time in prison to study and to read about history, philosophy and religion and was introduced to Islam by his brother. He joined the Nation of Islam, which was led by Elijah Muhammad. The movement preached a Muslim lifestyle, which rejected alcohol and drugs, and insisted that its members had jobs. It also preached against white racism and rejected the civil right's movement philosophy of integration into white society, adapting instead a separatist ideology.

When Malcolm left prison six years later, he replaced what he considered to be a slave surname and took the name 'X'. Malcolm quickly progressed through the ranks of the Nation of Islam and became one of its most eloquent speakers and effective organizers. His eloquence made him a media magnet, and he soon became more famous than Elijah Muhammad. Thousands of new members joined the movement, largely due to Malcolm's charisma and organizational skills.

White people sat up and took notice as the Nation of Islam grew, expressing much more radical views than the civil rights movement, rejecting non-violence, espousing anti-integrationism, while at the same time organizing schools and businesses in the black communities.

Malcolm's growing fame and embrace of politics brought him into conflict with Elijah Muhammad and some of the leaders of NOI, who claimed he was overlooking the original religious objectives of the movement. When Malcolm claimed that John

F. Kennedy's assassination was a case of "the chicken's coming home to roost", there was national uproar and Elijah Muhammad took this opportunity to suspend him from the movement.

Malcolm was also unhappy with many aspects of Muhammad's leadership and lifestyle and formally broke with him in 1964, forming his own group called the Muslim Mosque. This new group had a strong international aspect and tried to start a back-to-Africa movement. That same year Malcolm went on pilgrimage to Mecca, a trip that was to have a profound effect on him. He also visited a number of African states and met with Muslim scholars.

After this trip, he changed his anti-white views and concluded that the causes of racism in the US were due to the capitalist system and formed the Organization of Afro-American Unity in an effort to bring together black groups. This new position meant that he now worked more closely with the civil rights movement, and his anti-capitalist stance also brought him support from the broader American left.

Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965 while speaking at a public meeting. He was 39 years old. His views still inspire many black activists and leaders today.