

## 2016-2017 English 9 Midterm Exam Review

### *One Man's Search for His Roots*

Directions: Read the article, *One Man's Search for His Roots*, then answer questions that follow.

[1] Alex Haley leaned over the railing of the *African Star* and stared at the inviting sea below. Just one step, he thought, and it would all be over. "Simply step through this rail and drop into the sea, and I'd be out of my misery forever," he recalled thinking. Then there would be "no more debts, no more deadlines, no more agonizing over slavery, no more nothing."

[2] But Haley didn't jump. He heard voices in his head telling him not to kill himself. The voices urged him to go on with his book. "I knew exactly who [the voices] were," he said. "They were Bell, Kizzy, Chicken George, Cousin Georgia, my grandma – all those ancestors of mine." Haley turned away from the railing. Back in his stateroom, he sat down and cried for hours.

[3] That night Haley went down into the dark hold in the *African Star*, as he had done several times before. He went into the bowels of the ship to gain a sense of what his African ancestors had experienced after they had been taken as slaves. First, Haley stripped down to the waist. Then he lay down on a rough board between bales of raw rubber and close his eyes. In his own words, Haley tried to imagine what it was like "to lie there in chains, in filth, hearing the cries of ... other men screaming, babbling, praying, and dying around you."

[4] After four nights of this, Haley broke through whatever it was that had been holding him back. He knew he could finish his book. "I felt for the first time that I *was* [the slave] Kunta Kinte," said Haley. "From that moment on, I had no problem with writing what his senses had registered crossing the ocean."

[5] To get to the point, Haley had traveled a grinding and torturous road. He had become a writer while serving for 20 years in the U.S. Coast Guard. After leaving the service in 1959, he devoted himself to freelance writing. It was a real struggle. He got hundreds of rejection slips. He had no money most of the time. Still, he turned down well-paying jobs in order to keep writing. After three years, his determination paid off. He sold some articles. He even began to write regularly for some major magazines such as the *Reader's Digest*.

[6] Then, in 1965, Haley co-wrote *The Autobiography of Malcom X*. The book was a huge success. It sold over six million copies and was published in eight languages. He could now call his own shots. He could easily earn \$100,000 a year by writing short articles and lecturing. No one would have faulted him if he had taken this easy path. But he had something else in mind. As an African American, Haley burned with a desire to find out about his family's history. He wanted to trace his roots all the way back to Africa.

[7] Haley didn't have much to work with. He knew only a little about his ancestors and a few African words taught to him by his grandmother. But these slender clues were enough to encourage him. He began checking libraries and census records. He also consulted a language expert to trace the words his grandmother had taught him. His quest soon became a consuming passion. He traveled more than half a million miles following clues and checking records.

## 2016-2017 English 9 Midterm Exam Review

[8] In time, he traced his family tree back for eight generations. His search took him back to Juffure, an African village in the modern nation of Gambia. Here he found that he was a direct descendent of Kunta Kinte, a man who had been born in 1750 and sold into slavery 17 years later. When the villagers heard of Haley's identity, they embraced him as a long-lost son.

[9] Despite this happy reunion, writing the book took an enormous toll on Haley. It drove him to the railing of the *African Star*. All the research and travel cost money. His publishers, Doubleday & Company and the *Reader's Digest*, had advanced him some cash. But that money was soon gone. Next, he borrowed from old friends. "I owed everybody I had been able to borrow from," he later said. "It was humiliating." In addition, his publishers pressed him to write faster. Haley missed five deadlines. He had to keep asking for a little more time.

[10] Worse, Haley was riddled with self-doubt. Was he up to the job of writing this book? After all, what did he really know about slavery? What did he know about the pain and suffering of Africans who had been sold into slavery and shipped to America? "I asked myself," he once said, "what right had I to be sitting in a carpeted high-rise apartment writing about what it was like in the hold of a slave ship?" At other times, sheer rage over slavery itself stymied his writing. He said he felt "like going back through history swinging an axe at the society that permitted slavery to happen."

[11] In the end, though, Haley overcame all these obstacles. After 12 grueling years, he at last finished the book. In 1976, Doubleday published it under the title *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. *Roots* was an engrossing blend of fact and fiction. Haley called it "faction." The book was a runaway bestseller. It was translated into 30 languages and sold millions of copies. A year later, *Roots* was turned into an ABC TV miniseries. It shattered all rating records at the time. More than 130 million people saw at least one episode of the eight-part series. *Roots* changed the way many Americans – black and white – looked at themselves and their history.

[12] Alex Haley died in 1992. But he never lost sight of the road he had traveled to find his roots. The royalties from the book and the TV show had made him a wealthy man. Still, in his mansion he hung a glass frame on the wall. In it, he placed two old sardine cans and 18 cents. These simple items reminded him that at one times this was all he had in the world.