



from

# Rosa Parks

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY

Rosa Parks headed to work on December 1, 1955, on the Cleveland Avenue bus to Court Square. It was a typical prewinter morning in the Alabama capital, chilly and raw, topcoat weather. Outside the Montgomery Fair Department Store a Salvation Army Santa rang his bell for coins in front of window displays of toy trains and mannequins modeling reindeer sweaters. Every afternoon when school let out, hordes of children would invade the store to gawk at the giant Christmas tree draped with blinking lights, a mid-1950s electrical marvel. But Rosa Parks saw little of the holiday glitter down in the small tailor shop in the basement next to the huge steam presses, where the  
 10 only hint of Yuletide cheer came from a sagging, water-stained banner reading “Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.”

Not that many of Montgomery Fair’s lower-level employees had the time to let the faded decoration make them sad. The department store rang up nearly half of its sales between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Day, which turned the tailor shop into a beehive of activity every December. But even on days spent **frenetically** hemming, ironing, and steam-pressing, Parks’s mind was more with the NAACP<sup>1</sup> than her workday duties. She was in the midst of organizing a workshop to be held at Alabama State University on December 3–4 and spent the morning during her coffee break telephoning H. Council Trenholm,  
 20 president of the university, applying enough quiet persuasion to be granted the use of a classroom over the weekend. “I was also getting the notices in the mail

## Analyze Visuals ▶

What qualities of Rosa Parks does the photograph convey?

**frenetically**  
(frə-nēt'ĭk-lē) *adv.* in a frenzied or frantic way

1. **NAACP**: a civil rights organization. The initials stand for National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.



*Comparing Across Genres*





for the election of officers of the senior branch of the NAACP, which would be [the] next week,” Parks recalled. That afternoon, she lunched with Fred Gray, the lawyer who defended Claudette Colvin and was serving as Clifford Durr’s<sup>2</sup> **protégé** at his law office above the Sears Auto Tire Store.

“When 1:00 p.m. came and the lunch hour ended, Mrs. Parks went back to her work as a seamstress,” Gray would write in his civil rights memoir, *Bus Ride to Justice*. “I continued my work and left the office in the early afternoon for an out-of-town engagement.” **A**

30 Shortly after 5:00 p.m., Rosa Parks clocked out of work and walked the block to Court Square to wait for her bus home. It had been a hard day, and her body ached, from her feet swollen from the constant standing to her shoulders throbbing from the strain and her chronic bursitis. But the bus stand was packed, so Parks, disinclined to jockey for a rush-hour seat, crossed Dexter Avenue to do a little shopping at Lee’s Cut-Rate Drug. She had decided to treat herself to a heating pad but found them too pricey. Instead, she bought some Christmas gifts, along with aspirin, toothpaste, and a few other sundries, and headed back to the bus stop wondering how her husband’s day had been at the Maxwell Air Force Base Barber Shop and thinking about what her mother would cook for dinner. **B**

40 It was in this late-day **reverie** that Rosa Parks dropped her dime in the box and boarded the yellow-olive city bus. She took an aisle seat in the racially neutral middle section,<sup>3</sup> behind the movable sign which read “colored.” She was not expecting any problems, as there were several empty spaces at the whites-only front of the bus. A black man was sitting next to her on her right and staring out the window; across the aisle sat two black women deep in conversation. At the next two stops enough white passengers got on to nearly fill up the front section. At the third stop, in front of the Empire Theater, a famous shrine to country-music fans as the stage where the legendary Hank Williams got his start, the last front seats were taken, with one man left standing.

50 The bus driver twisted around and locked his eyes on Rosa Parks. Her heart almost stopped when she saw it was James F. Blake, the bully who had put her off his bus twelve years earlier. She didn’t know his name, but since that incident in 1943, she had never boarded a bus that Blake was driving. This day, however, she had absentmindedly stepped in. “Move y’all, I want those two seats,” the driver barked on behalf of Jim Crow,<sup>4</sup> which dictated that all four blacks in that row of the middle section would have to surrender their seats to accommodate a single white man, as no “colored” could be allowed to sit parallel with him. A stony silence fell over the bus as nobody moved. “Y’all

**protégé** (prō’tē-zhā’) *n.* a person who is guided or supported by an older or more influential person

**A CHARACTERIZATION**  
How did Parks’s work for the NAACP differ from her job at the store? Why do you think Brinkley chose to highlight these differences?

**B CHARACTERIZATION**  
Reread lines 30–39. What do Rosa Parks’s thoughts and actions reveal about her?

**reverie** (rēv’ē-rē) *n.* a state of daydreaming

COMMON CORE L 4a

### Language Coach

**Word Roots** The Latin root word *commodare* (“to make fit”) has lent itself to the formation of many English words, such as *commodious* (“roomy”). Reread lines 54–58. Which word in this sentence comes from *commodare*? Based on context clues, what does the word mean?

- Claudette Colvin . . . Clifford Durr’s:** Claudette Colvin was an African-American teenager who had refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus earlier in 1955. Clifford Durr was a white lawyer who worked for civil rights.
- racially neutral middle section:** a section of the bus where African Americans could sit, as long as no whites needed or wanted seats there.
- Jim Crow:** a term referring to the segregation of African Americans.



better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats,” Blake sputtered,  
 60 more impatiently than before. Quietly and in unison, the two black women  
 sitting across from Parks rose and moved to the back. Her seatmate quickly  
 followed suit, and she swung her legs to the side to let him out. Then Parks slid  
 over to the window and gazed out at the Empire Theater marquee promoting  
*A Man Alone*, a new Western starring Ray Milland. **C**

The next ten seconds seemed like an eternity to Rosa Parks. As Blake  
 made his way toward her, all she could think about were her forebears, who,  
 Maya Angelou would put it, took the lash, the branding iron, and untold  
 humiliations while only praying that their children would someday “flesh out”  
 the dream of equality. But unlike the poet, it was not Africa in the days of the  
 70 slave trade that Parks was thinking about; it was racist Alabama in the here and  
 now. She shuddered with the memory of her grandfather back in Pine Level  
 keeping watch for the KKK<sup>5</sup> every night with a loaded shotgun in his lap,  
 echoing abolitionist John Brown’s<sup>6</sup> **exhortation**: “Talk! Talk! Talk! That didn’t  
 free the slaves. . . . What is needed is action! Action!” So when Parks looked up  
 at Blake, his hard, thoughtless scowl filled her with pity. She felt fearless, bold,  
 and **serene**. “Are you going to stand up?” the driver demanded. Rosa Parks  
 looked straight at him and said: “No.” Flustered and not quite sure what to do,  
 Blake retorted, “Well, I’m going to have you arrested.” And Parks, still sitting  
 next to the window, replied softly, “You may do that.”

80 Her majestic use of “may” rather than “can” put Parks on the high ground,  
 establishing her as a protester, not a victim. “When I made that decision,”  
 Parks stated later, “I knew I had the strength of my ancestors with me,” and  
 obviously their dignity as well. And her formal dignified “No,” uttered on a  
 supertime bus in the cradle of the Confederacy as darkness fell, ignited the  
 collective “no” of black history in America, a defiance as liberating as John  
 Brown’s on the gallows in Harpers Ferry. **D**

**C CHARACTERIZATION**

Reread lines 50–64. What do you learn about Rosa Parks from the way she reacted to the bus driver’s commands?

**exhortation**

(ĕg’zôr-tă’shən) *n.* a communication strongly urging that something be done

**serene** (sə-rĕn’) *adj.* calm; peaceful

**D CHARACTERIZATION**

How does Brinkley convey Rosa Parks’s dignity and strength?

5. **back in Pine Level . . . KKK:** Pine Level is a town about 100 miles southeast of Birmingham. The KKK was the Ku Klux Klan, an extremist secret society that often violently terrorized blacks in the South.

6. **abolitionist John Brown’s:** Brown, a white militant, performed radical acts to force the abolition of slavery, including a failed attempt to steal guns from the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.



# Rosa

RITA DOVE



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How she sat there,  
the time right inside a place  
so wrong it was ready.

That trim name with  
5 its dream of a bench  
to rest on. Her sensible coat.

Doing nothing was the doing: **E**  
the clean flame of her gaze  
carved by a camera flash.

10 How she stood up  
when they bent down to **retrieve**  
her purse. That courtesy. **F**

## COMMON CORE L.5a

### **E PARADOX**

A **paradox** is a figure of speech in which a seemingly contradictory statement reveals some insight or truth. How is the thought expressed in line 7 a paradox?

**retrieve** (rĭ-trĕv') v. to find and return safely

### **F CHARACTERIZATION**

Which **images** portray Rosa Parks as a modest, unextravagant person? Which portray her as strong and serious?