

from Rosa Parks

Biography by Douglas Brinkley

Rosa

Poem by Rita Dove

What is DIGNITY?

What is dignity but a quiet strength and an air of self worth? Rosa Parks is one historical figure who had dignity—so much that she refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. You are about to read two selections about Rosa Parks—a biography and a poem. Both pieces portray her as a dignified and courageous woman.

DISCUSS With a partner, list five people, living or dead, real or fictional, whom you consider to have dignity. Then discuss whether dignity comes mainly from within or from the approval of others.

People or Characters with Dignity

1. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Text Analysis: Characterization Across Genres

Writers of fiction use various methods of **characterization** to develop the made-up characters in their stories. Fiction writers might provide descriptions of the character’s appearance, examples of the person’s speech, thoughts and feelings, and ideas and comments about the character. However, when writers of other **genres**, such as nonfiction and poetry, write about real people, they cannot make up facts and details. Instead, writers shape readers’ ideas about the person by combining facts about the person with elements that are unique to the genres in which they are working.

The biography and poem that you are about to read tell about Rosa Parks. Below are some of the techniques each writer uses to characterize her. As you read, look out for examples of these techniques.

Techniques Used in the Biography	Techniques Used in the Poem
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• facts and details about Rosa Parks’s actions, thoughts, and appearance• quotations from Rosa Parks• quotations from others who knew Rosa Parks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• word choice to describe Rosa Parks’s actions and appearance• images to depict Rosa Parks’s traits

Reading Strategy: Set a Purpose for Reading

When you **set a purpose for reading**, you find specific reasons for reading a work. Your purpose for reading the selections that follow is to **compare and contrast** the ways in which Rosa Parks is portrayed. Use the chart below to compare the biography and poem.

Points of Comparison: Rosa Parks	In the Biography	In the Poem
Her appearance	<i>appears tired, has swollen feet (lines 37–40)</i>	<i>wears a sensible coat (line 6)</i>
Her daily life		
Her personality, thoughts, and feelings		
Her values and the things she thought were important		

Vocabulary in Context

Note: Words are listed in the order they appear in the story.

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

*The crowd cheered **frenetically** during the suspenseful competition.*

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

*The chef's **protégé** asked if he could design a menu for the restaurant.*

reverie (rĕv'ə-rē) *n.* a state of daydreaming

*During class I let my mind wander in a pleasant **reverie**.*

exhortation (ĕg'zôr-tā'shən) *n.* a communication strongly urging that something be done

*After we lost the game, our coach gave us an **exhortation** to try harder.*

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

*The water on the lake is as **serene** as a summer day.*

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

*The nice young lady helped me **retrieve** the lost scarf.*

**SET A PURPOSE
FOR READING**

Read this biography to find out how Rosa Parks made history.

Rosa Parks

Biography by
DOUGLAS BRINKLEY



BACKGROUND Southern states once had laws that enforced racial segregation, or separation. Among other injustices, African Americans were forced to sit in separate sections of busses. In 1955, Rosa Parks’s refusal to give up her seat for a white passenger on a bus triggered a 382-day bus boycott by African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama. The boycott brought Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and their cause to the attention of the nation. In 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation on buses and other transportation was unconstitutional.

PAUSE & REFLECT

Look back at the background and consider what you already know about Rosa Parks. Why does she “see little of the holiday glitter” (lines 9–10) at the tailor shop?

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
10 little of the holiday glitter down in the small tailor shop in the basement next to the huge steam presses, where the only hint of Yuletide cheer came from a sagging, water-stained banner reading “Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.” **PAUSE & REFLECT**



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
 20 was more with the NAACP¹ 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, 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 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’s² **protégé** at
 30 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**

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
 40 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

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

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

Why is the meeting with Clifford Durr’s **protégé** significant?

A CHARACTERIZATION

What do you learn about Rosa Parks’s daily life from the last three paragraphs? What was she interested in outside of her job as a seamstress? Add this information to the chart you started page 101.

1. **NAACP:** a civil rights organization. The initials stand for National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.
 2. **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.

reverie (rĕv'ə-rĕ) *n.* a state of daydreaming

PAUSE & REFLECT

Why is it significant that there was one white passenger left standing? What does everyone on the bus expect Rosa Parks and the other black passengers to do?

B CHARACTERIZATION

Reread lines 62–79. How does Rosa Parks react to the bus driver’s commands? Based on this reaction, what can you guess about her values and what she thinks is important?

Air Force Base Barber Shop and thinking about what her mother would cook for dinner.

It was in this late-day **reverie** that Rosa Parks dropped her
 50 dime in the box and boarded the yellow-olive city bus. She took an aisle seat in the racially neutral middle section,³ 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
 60 got his start, the last front seats were taken, with one man left standing. **PAUSE & REFLECT**

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,⁴ which dictated that all four blacks in that row of the middle section
 70 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 better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats,” Blake sputtered, 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. **B**

3. **racially neutral middle section:** a section of the bus where African Americans could sit, as long as no whites needed or wanted seats there.
 4. **Jim Crow:** a term referring to the segregation of African Americans.



80 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 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 KKK⁵ every night with a loaded shotgun in his lap, echoing abolitionist John Brown’s⁶

90 **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.”

Her majestic use of “may” rather than “can” put Parks on the high ground, establishing her as a protester, not a victim.

100 “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. **C**

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

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

C CHARACTERIZATION

Reread lines 80–105. Underline examples of the following genre techniques in the last few paragraphs of his biography of Rosa Parks:

- facts and details about Rosa Parks’s actions, thoughts, and appearance
- quotations from Rosa Parks

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.

**SET A PURPOSE
FOR READING**

Read this poem to compare and contrast the characterization of Rosa Parks in the biography and in the poem.

D PARADOX

A **paradox** is a statement that seems to say the opposite of what it means and that reveals some insight or truth. For example, the statement “I always lie” is a paradox. If a man says he always lies, he is admitting that he is a liar, which is a truthful statement. Therefore, the man sometimes tells the truth. How is the thought expressed in line 7 a paradox?

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

E CHARACTERIZATION

Underline an image in the poem that portrays Rosa Parks as a modest person.

Rosa

Poem by

RITA DOVE

BACKGROUND When Rosa Parks made her momentous decision not to give up her seat on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, she joined a tradition of nonviolent resistance that spans many cultures.

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: **D**
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. **E**

Text Analysis: Characterization Across Genres

You just read works by two different authors describing Rosa Parks. Now, use the chart below to help you analyze the characterization methods used by each writer. List at least one example from the texts for each technique.

BIOGRAPHY	POEM
Details about her actions, thoughts, and appearance <i>Example:</i>	Words used to describe Rosa’s actions and appearance <i>Example:</i>
Quotations from Rosa Parks <i>Example:</i>	Images to depict Rosa’s traits <i>Example:</i>
Quotations about Rosa Parks <i>Example:</i>	

In both the biography and the poem, what words and actions convey Rosa Parks’s dignity?

Reading Skill: Set a Purpose for Reading

Review the notes you took as you read. Then write a comparison statement for each point about Parks based on what you learned from reading the biography and the poem.

Points of Comparison: Rosa Parks	Comparison Statement
Her appearance	<i>Parks was a sensible, hard-working woman.</i>
Her daily life	
Her personality, thoughts, and feelings	
Her values and the things she thought were important	

What is **DIGNITY**?

Is dignity something you have or would like to have? Explain.

Vocabulary Practice

Use the vocabulary words to fill in the blanks.

- Boarding the bus, Rosa Parks was lost in a private _____ of memories.
- She had been working _____ all day because it was the busy season.
- She lunched with a lawyer who was a _____ of a famous civil rights attorney.
- She recalled her grandfather's _____ to act.
- Her belief in her refusal made her calm and _____.
- If she lost her self-respect now, she might never _____ it.

WORD LIST
 exhortation
 frenetically
 protégé
 retrieve
 reverie
 serene

Academic Vocabulary in Writing

complex

device

evaluate

interact

perspective

A new **perspective** is a fresh outlook or view on something. What did you know about Rosa Parks before you read these selections? What new **perspective** about civil rights have you gained from reading these selections? Use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your response. Definitions for these terms are listed on page 69.

Assessment Practice

DIRECTIONS Use “Rosa Parks” and “Rosa” to answer questions 1–4.

- 1 What decision did Rosa Parks make on the bus?
 - A** She decided not to give up her seat even if it meant getting arrested.
 - B** She decided to move to the back of a bus.
 - C** She decided to obey the laws of segregation.
 - D** She decided to quit her job at the department store.
- 2 Which words describe the way Rosa Parks is characterized in both selections?
 - A** aggressive, irritable
 - B** sweet, kind
 - C** dignified, noble
 - D** uncaring, selfish
- 3 In the biography the writer reveals Parks’s internal thoughts on the day she boarded the bus in Alabama. What did you learn from those thoughts?
 - A** She refused to change seats simply because she disliked the driver.
 - B** She was unaware of the sacrifices of her forebearers.
 - C** She decided many days earlier that she would refuse to obey the driver.
 - D** She felt fearless in the moments after the driver approached her.
- 4 Which of the following phrases from the poem best expresses the dignity that Rosa Parks possessed?
 - A** How she sat there “the time right inside a place”
 - B** That trim name with “its dream of a bench”
 - C** Doing nothing was the doing “the clean flame of her gaze”
 - D** How she stood up “when they bent down to retrieve” her purse.