

from
**Rosa Parks:
My Story**

by Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins

Coretta Scott King Award Medal

For pages 107–110

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objective:

Reading: Analyzing social context.

Set a Purpose for Reading

Read this autobiographical excerpt to learn about the event that inspired the poem "Rosa."

Build Background

During the 1950s, many states in the South still enforced laws that supported racial segregation. The incident described in this excerpt took place in 1955 and sparked a boycott of the Montgomery, Alabama, buses.

Reading Skill Analyze Social Context

To analyze the social context of a literary work, gather background information about the social issues of the time. This selection gives background for the poem "Rosa." Use a graphic organizer to take notes on the social context.

"Rosa"	Social Context
Doing nothing was the doing	Rosa Parks gained attention by not giving up her seat.

When I got off from work that evening of December 1, I went to Court Square as usual to catch the Cleveland Avenue bus home. I didn't look to see who was driving when I got on, and by the time I recognized him I had already paid my fare. It was the same driver who had put me off the bus back in 1943, twelve years earlier. He was still tall and heavy, with red, rough-looking skin. And he was still mean-looking. I didn't know if he had been on that route before—they switched the drivers around sometimes. I do know that most of the time if I saw him on a bus, I wouldn't get on it.

I saw a vacant¹ seat in the middle section of the bus and took it. I didn't

¹ *Vacant* means "empty." A vacant seat is a seat with nobody in it.

even question why there was a vacant seat even though there were quite a few people standing in the back. If I had thought about it at all, I would probably have figured maybe someone saw me get on and did not take the seat but left it vacant for me. There was a man sitting next to the window and two women across the aisle.

The next stop was the Empire Theater, and some whites got on. They filled up the white seats, and one man was left standing. The driver looked back and noticed the man standing. Then he looked back at us. He said, "Let me have those front seats," because they were the front seats of the black section. Didn't anybody



On the December 21, 1956, Supreme Court ruling, African Americans in the South had to sit in the back seats of the bus.

View the photograph. How does this photograph help you understand the times Rosa Parks tells about?

move. We just sat right where we were, the four of us. Then he spoke a second time: "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats."

The man in the window seat next to me stood up, and I moved to let him pass by me, and then I looked across the aisle and saw that the two women were also standing. I moved over to the window seat. I could not see how standing up was going to "make it light" for me. The more we gave in and complied,² the worse they treated us.

I thought back to the time when I used to sit up all night and didn't sleep, and my grandfather would have his gun right by the fireplace, or if he had his one-horse wagon going anywhere, he always had his gun in the back of the wagon. People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.

The driver of the bus saw me still sitting there, and he asked was I going to stand up. I said, "No." He said, "Well, I'm going to have you arrested." Then I said, "You may do that." These were the only words we said to each

² **Complied** means "went along with" or "did what was asked or ordered."



Rosa Parks was arrested again on February 22, 1956. She had dared to disobey another segregation law.

other. I didn't even know his name, which was James Blake, until we were in court together. He got out of the bus and stayed outside for a few minutes, waiting for the police.

As I sat there, I tried not to think about what might happen. I knew that anything was possible. I could be manhandled³ or beaten. I could be arrested. People have asked me if it occurred to me then that I could be the test case the NAACP⁴ had been looking for. I did not think about that at all. In fact if I had let myself think too deeply about what might happen

3 To **manhandle** someone is to treat that person roughly.

4 **NAACP** stands for National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. This group wanted to get rid of the laws that allowed unfair treatment of African Americans. The group hoped that if such laws were to be tested in a court case, the laws would then be made illegal.

to me, I might have gotten off the bus, but I chose to remain.

Meanwhile there were people getting off the bus and asking for transfers, so that began to loosen up the crowd, especially in the back of the bus. Not everyone got off, but everybody was very quiet. What conversation there was, was in low tones; no one was talking out loud. It would have been quite interesting to have seen the whole bus empty out.

Or if the other three had stayed where they were, because if they'd had to arrest four of us instead of one, then that would have given me a little support. But it didn't matter. I never thought hard of them at all and never even bothered to criticize⁵ them.

5 To **criticize** is to point out what is bad about someone or something.

Eventually two policemen came. They got on the bus, and one of them asked me why I didn't stand up. I asked him, "Why do you all push us

Rosa Parks sits in the front of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, after the Supreme Court ruled segregation illegal on the city bus system on December 21, 1956. The man sitting behind Parks is Nicholas C. Chriss, a reporter for United Press International in Atlanta, Georgia.



around?" He said to me, and I quote him exactly, "I don't know, but the law is the law and you're under arrest." One policeman picked up my purse, and the second one picked up my shopping bag and escorted me to the squad car. In the squad car they returned my personal belongings to me. They did not put their hands on me or force me into the car. After I was seated in the car, they went back to the driver and asked him if he wanted to swear out a warrant.⁶ He answered that he would finish his route and then come straight back to swear out the warrant. I was only in custody,⁷ not legally arrested, until the warrant was signed.

As they were driving me to the city desk, at City Hall, near Court Street, one of them asked me again. "Why didn't you stand up when the driver spoke to you?" I did not answer. I remained silent all the way to City Hall. ✎

6 A **warrant** is a document, or piece of paper, that gives a police officer the right to do something, such as arrest a person.

7 To be **in custody** is to be held by the police.

Respond and Think Critically

1. Write a brief summary of the main events in this excerpt before you answer the following questions. State the main events in your own words and in a logical order. **[Summarize]**
2. What did the bus driver mean when he said, "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats"? **[Interpret]**
3. What does Parks suggest was the reason that she did not obey the bus driver's order? **[Infer]**
4. **Text-to-Text** How do the following lines from Rita Dove's poem "Rosa" express the

importance of Parks's experience: "the time right inside a place / so wrong it was ready"? **[Connect]**

5. **Reading Skill Analyze Social Context** Why was Parks's refusal to give up her seat such an important action in the 1950s? Provide details to support your answer.
6. **BQ BIG Question** Based on what you learned about Rosa Parks in this excerpt, how do you think she would answer the Big Question?