

Case Study on the Montgomery Bus Boycott

"Assess the varying depictions of Rosa Park's involvement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott".



“The white fellow behind her is not an angry white man in 1955; it is a UPI journalist scooping the 1956 Supreme Court ruling.”¹

1,999 words

¹ <http://interactive.usc.edu/members/peggy/>

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A. Plan of the Investigation

This investigation examines the interpretations of Rosa Parks' participation in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. I'm going to compare these depictions to decipher the manner of Rosa Parks' involvement in the Boycott.

To appreciate the social situation in America in the 1950s, I shall discuss the history of racism and its impact on African Americans. I will assess two sources; a cartoon story and an article reflecting on the life of Rosa Parks. Considering the value and limitations of each will give an impression of which is more reliable to historians today. For the main body of my investigation, I shall establish why Rosa Parks' actions are relevant today. I will discuss sources which imply that the event was spontaneous and those suggesting that it was part of a wider campaign. Assessing the reliability of each source will enable me to draw a conclusion on Rosa Parks' involvement in the Boycott.

150 words

B. Summary of Evidence

During the 1950s in America, racism was a significant problem which led to many conflicts and changes throughout the decade. As a result of the American Civil War in 1861-1865 anti-African American laws were introduced to many Southern states. These were later referred to as Jim Crow laws and legalised discrimination against African Americans. The laws made segregation extremely common such that black people had to sit in separate areas of buses and trains. To contribute to this, marriage between African Americans and whites was forbidden and black people were not allowed to attend certain public schools, use facilities including cinemas, hotels, restaurants and theatres. “Black people were forced to pay their fares at the front, then get off the bus and walk around to the side door to get to the backseats. Sometimes, before these paid passengers reached the other door, the bus drivers would drive off.”² Lynching by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan was still used as a method of violence upon black people.

Racism can be dated back to the colonial settlers in America who did not distinguish which work was to be done by each race. This later changed when a high number of African Americans arrived in America causing it to be assumed by the slave owners that any slave work should only be done by black slaves. This then characterised the nature of slavery, and racism was established. The Marxist writer CLR James believes that “the conception of dividing people by race begins with the slave trade”.³ The connotation of a slave was that they were an object to be merely bought and sold. The impact of such thoughts were that all black people were of a lower class and unworthy of attention. This view continued whilst the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was prominent and for decades to follow.

In the early 1950s organisations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) attempted to bring an end to segregation on transport. They initially failed to do so but it brought to light the discontent felt by many African Americans. Others actively portrayed their discontent with the discrimination by protesting. Many of these proved unsuccessful until December 1st 1955 when Rosa Parks “refused to move when she was asked to get up and move back by the bus operator.”⁴ Rosa Parks felt “tired of being pushed around”⁵ and

² Reflections by Rosa Parks with Gregory J. Reed (1994). Quiet Strength. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House. p30

³ www.garstangfairtrade.org.uk/racism

⁴ Edited by Clayborne Carson (1998). The autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. New York: Intellectual Properties Management in association with Warner Books. p50

decided to remain in her seat when asked to move.

Rosa Parks was born on February 4th, 1913, into a religious family in Alabama. Here she grew up and attended school until she was forced to drop out due to the poor health of her mother and grandmother who both required her assistance. Later she married Raymond Parks; a member of the NAACP. Rosa was determined to be equal to whites and on her third attempt managed to register to vote. In 1943 Rosa Parks joined the Montgomery sector of the NAACP and soon became its secretary.⁶ “Rosa Parks was one of the first women in Montgomery”⁷ to join this association. On the day of December 1st 1955 Rosa paid for her ticket and sat in the black section of a bus. This bus soon became full and she was asked by the bus driver, James Blake, to give up her seat for a white man who was standing. By refusing to do so, Rosa was consequently arrested. Her action encouraged members of the black community to fight against racism, resulting in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, causing in 1956 the Supreme Court ruling that segregation on transport was unconstitutional.

598 words

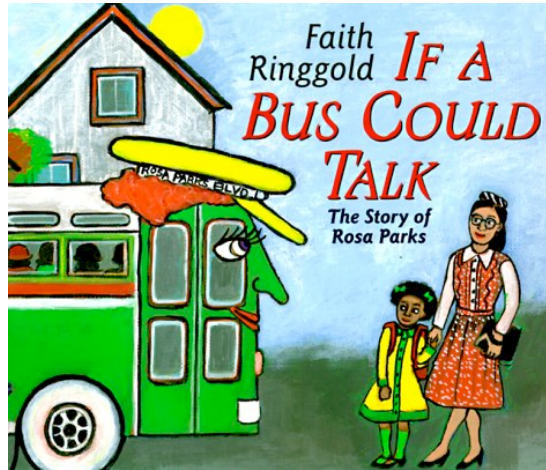
⁵ Reflections by Rosa Parks with Gregory J. Reed (1994). Quiet Strength. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House. P17

⁶ <http://www.grandtimes.com/rosa.html>

⁷ Herbert Kohl, Marian Wright Edelman (Introduction) (2005). She Would Not Be Moved. New Press. p13

C. Evaluation of Sources

Source 1 [If a Bus Could Talk by Faith Ringgold]



This source originates from a cartoon story, its purpose is to be a teaching resource for children. On one hand this makes the source valuable: as a teaching aid it could be deemed more truthful in order to portray the correct facts to the children. Also, the book was published in 2003 thus making it a fairly recent story thus allowing the author to write the book with knowledge of the impact the event had.

Nevertheless, the source also has significant limitations. Children are the target audience of this story thus the story has been simplified to facilitate comprehension. The impact is that vital information is omitted deemed too complex for children. Also, the cartoon is a secondary source which could imply that it's a narrow study focusing on one particular aspect of the event. Parks' actions are the topic of the book and discussed in a make-believe manner, "Now the voice seemed to be coming from the bus itself. I could hardly believe it – I was on a talking bus"⁸, which potentially confuses children which aspects are factual or fictional.

Source 2 [Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott] (See appendix A)

This source originates from the September 2006 edition of 'History Review' written by Viv Sanders and has many values. The source's purpose is to give an educational account of the Boycott. Viv Sanders wrote the article to "take issue with these three contentions" referring to the

⁸ Faith Ringgold (Illustrator) (2003). If A Bus Could Talk. Aladdin, p3

varying portrayals of the Montgomery Boycott. The author has also written articles such as 'African American Women & the Struggle for Racial Equality' displaying the extent of her knowledge in the field thus it is a topic in which she specialises. Sanders' articles have been published in respected journals thus we can conclude that her writing is of a high quality thus reinforcing its reliability.

Nevertheless, there are limiting factors to the source. To present Rosa Parks in a complimentary manner to celebrate her life, certain aspects of her story may be exaggerated. The purpose of the article is to educate 14-16 year olds of Rosa Parks' life in a hagiographical nature, "In the years after her refusal to give up her seat ... she became an icon."⁹ It's likely that the language is restricted to make ideas comprehensible for younger people: certain aspects of the story may be omitted that can only be explained using complex vocabulary. As an article it is probable that the writer had a word limit to abide by. Sanders had to decide which aspects of the event are the most important to discuss. This inevitably leads to an unavoidable portrayal of the author's own opinions in what gives the most representative idea of the events which led to the Bus Boycott.

444 words

⁹ Viv Sanders. (2006) Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, History Review

D. Analysis

Rosa Parks is portrayed as an iconic figure with claims that she sparked the Civil Rights Movement. Still historically important, the event serves to portray the impact of one individual's actions. The story encourages children to appreciate the value of standing up for their beliefs and the positive impact this has. Nowadays, the Boycott is still relevant. Evidently racism is still present today but in a different and perhaps less publicised sense. The Bus Boycott acts an example of how one can stand up for their beliefs in a manner which will impact society for decades to follow. Inaccurate portrayals of Rosa Parks' actions by exaggerating her heroic status exemplify the flaw of the 'Great Man Theory'.

Ideas expressed concerning Rosa Parks' actions suggest they were entirely spontaneous. The notion "It had been a long hard day and she was tired"¹⁰ is a common interpretation. This implies that that day was different to others: Rosa Parks was more tired than usual thus put less thought into her actions. Rosa Parks' describes herself as being "Tired of seeing the bad treatment and disrespect of children, women, and men just because of the colour of their skin. ... I was just plain tired."¹¹ Although similar in the use of the word 'tired' they differ in implications. 'United States Past to Present' implies that Rosa Parks was physically tired from a long day at work, whereas Rosa Parks describes herself as being tired of the situation, a feeling built up over a long period of time.

Martin Luther King Jr's autobiography corroborates with Rosa Parks' actions being spontaneous. "On December 1st 1955, Mrs Rosa Parks refused to move when she was asked to get up and move back by the bus operator."¹² The source continues to illustrate Rosa Park's character, describing the nature of her actions as "a quiet, calm, dignified manner, so characteristic of the radiant personality of Mrs Parks".¹³ Martin Luther King Jr gives a sense of Rosa Parks' character; she was not rude and insulting but merely 'sat down' for what she believed in. He explicitly states that "No, she was not planted there by the NAACP or any other organisation; she was planted

¹⁰ Karen McAuley (1987) *The United States Past to Present, Teacher's Edition, Grade 5*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, p405

¹¹ Reflections by Rosa Parks with Gregory J. Reed (1994). *Quiet strength*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House. p17

¹² Edited by Clayborne Carson (1998). *The autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Intellectual Properties Management in association with Warner Books. p50

¹³ *ibid*

there by her sense of dignity and self-respect”¹⁴ which categorically portrays her actions as spontaneous.

Contrarily, arguments exist suggesting Rosa Parks’ actions were orchestrated as part of a wider campaign. Rosa Parks’ position as secretary of the NAACP and her childhood beliefs are evidence of her dissatisfaction with inequality between the races. Therefore it’s arguable that she had strong motivation to change the system and had sufficient means to do so. “Rosa Parks is sometimes described as someone who almost accidentally became part of the civil rights movement. ... She had been a youth adviser and secretary for the Montgomery NAACP ... where both African Americans and white Americans were trained to be active participants in the labour movement.”¹⁵

Additionally, the seat Rosa Parks sat in attracts debate; if she chose to sit in the white section this could be considered deliberately provocative. “Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the white section of the bus.”¹⁶ This implies that the policeman was justified in arresting Rosa Parks as she was breaking the law by not sitting in the black section and that she was effectively doing something wrong. According to Herbert Kohl, Rosa Parks sat in the front row of the coloured section which she was perfectly within her rights to do so. He also states that “this was not the first time she had refused to move”¹⁷ showing the action to be less spontaneous and a thought out action due to built up anger at the situation.

The reasons behind these differences are essentially due to the target audiences of each source. The clashes of Rosa Parks’ own words are with informative stories for children. Ignoring Rosa Parks’ life as a protestor is to “turn an organised struggle for freedom into a personal act of frustration.”¹⁸ Appreciating the varying depictions of the Montgomery Bus Boycott allows us to consider the emphasis put on stories with a moral value told to children and how they resemble the truth.

694 words

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵Wayne E. King (2001) United States History. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service, p557

¹⁶Leonard C. Wood (1985) America: Its People and Values. Harcourt College. p721

¹⁷Herbert Kohl, Marian Wright Edelman (Introduction) (2005). She Would Not Be Moved. New Press.

¹⁸ ibid

E. Conclusion

Evidently differences exist in the portrayal of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. However, these are perhaps inconsequential as the substantial discrepancies are told in stories aimed at children where information has either been omitted or glorified. It may be satisfactory to strip the story of certain truths to make the Boycott seem less complicated for children. Although there are disadvantages to this, it ensures that children can comprehend the idea and have the ability to draw their own conclusion on events. Glorification may inspire students to follow Rosa Parks' example. Portraying Rosa Parks heroically is likely to attract and engage students thus encouraging them to learn about a topic that they perhaps wouldn't have otherwise studied.

113 words

Sample History Internal Assessment by student at IST via www.activehistory.co.uk

F. List of sources

Books:

Edited by Clayborne Carson (1998). The autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. New York: Intellectual Properties Management in association with Warner Books

Wayne E. King (2001) United States History. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service

Herbert Kohl, Marian Wright Edelman (Introduction) (2005). She Would Not Be Moved. New Press

Karen McAuley (1987)The United States Past to Present, Teacher's Edition, Grade 5. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company

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Faith Ringgold (Illustrator) (2003). If A Bus Could Talk. Aladdin

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Websites:

<http://interactive.usc.edu/members/peggy/>

www.garstangfairtrade.org.uk/racism

<http://www.grandtimes.com/rosa.html>