Heroes in Literature and In the Real World

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Claudette Colvin

What makes Claudette a hero? Claudette Colvin's story confirms that heroes come in all sizes, ages, races, and genders. In 1955 at the age of 15 this precociously intelligent, bookish girl refused to give up her seat to a white woman on a segregated bus in Montgomery Alabama. Moreover, as she was dragged by police out of the bus and to jail, she gave her rationally considered reason for her action, shouting, "It's my Constitutional right [to sit anywhere on a public conveyance once I have paid the fare.]" This occurred almost a year before Rosa Parks, a Black woman, made history for *her* refusal to give up her seat for a white person.

Notes

Background information on the times: We tend to forget that racial segregation, or Jim Crow, persisted in the American South well after *Brown v. the Board of Education*, the case in which

racial segregation in schools was judged by the Supreme Court to be unconstitutional, and the Court ordered that racial segregation in public schools must end. We tend also to forget that Jim Crow laws were *LAWS*, not merely customs. In 1952, for example, when a Black man named Brooks boarded a bus from the front door, and was ordered by the driver to get off and re-board the bus from the back door, he refused, saying that he *had* paid his fare. Thereupon the driver summoned a policeman, who, after dragging Mr. Brooks off the bus, *shot and killed* him! What is more the coroner ruled that the policeman's act was justifiable, since Brooks had been resisting arrest—"resisting" consisting in Brooks' verbal protest at being dragged backwards off the bus. Black people could not learn, play, or eat meals together with whites. They could not work or ride trains together with whites. They were forbidden *by law* to worship together with whites, to ride an elevator with whites, even to throw a ball back and forth in a park used by whites. Black American citizens, a full decade after many, many of them had fought against Hitler's Fascist order, were forbidden from drinking at the same water fountain, using the same bathroom, playing sports on the same team, swimming in the same pool, and OF COURSE, from marrying white people. Signs in restaurant windows said "We cater to white trade only." Signs in railroad stations directed Black people to the "Colored Waiting Room." Signs everywhere said, "NO Dogs, Negros, Mexicans" can enter here.

Claudette Colvin's History: Claudette Colvin was born on September 5, 1939 in Birmingham, Alabama. She was raised by her great-aunt, Mary Ann Colvin and her great-uncle Q. P. Colvin, whom she called Mom and Dad. Her early childhood was happy. She has said, "Pine Level [the small town in which she lived] didn't have much more than a few shacks for the sharecropper families, a schoolhouse, a church, and a general store, but I was at home in all of it. I floated free, and slept at the homes of my mom's friends as much as in my own bed." The school was a one-room schoolhouse; one teacher taught all six elementary grades. Even in elementary school, Claudette Colvin was a curious, intelligent child. She was an avid reader, completing the "Dick and Jane" book as soon as she got it because "Mama Sweetie," one of her mom's friends, had taught her to read before she went to school. She was, and still is, a committed reader. When Claudette was 8, her Mom, Mary Ann Colvin, inherited a small house in Montgomery, Alabama, and that is where she began to feel the full painful effects of racial segregation.

> Downtown could make me angry... We could shop in white stores—they'd take our money all right—but they wouldn't let us try anything on. I never went to a fitting room like white people did. The saleslady would measure me and then go get the dress or blouse and bring it out. She'd hold it up and tell me it was a perfect fit and expect my mom to buy it. When Delphine [her sister] and I needed shoes, my mom would trace the shape of our feet on a brown paper bag and we'd carry the outline to the store because we weren't allowed to try the shoes on. (17)

Late in the summer of 1952, her beloved sister, Delphine, was stricken with polio. The doctor sent her to St Jude hospital, which was the *only* hospital in the area that would treat Black people, and put her in an iron lung. But Delphine died in September, 1952, the date of Claudette's thirteenth birthday. At Booker T. Washington High School, an all Black school, of course, Claudette became more and more aware of the injustice suffered by black people. What is more, she began to be aware of the psychological effects that racial prejudice creates in its victims. "For some reason we seemed to hate ourselves. We put down our hair texture and skin color all the time…..Middle-class Black girls would always try to separate themselves from dark-skinned girls like me and emulate white girls." (22)

But the crowning horror that started the process of Claudette's journey to full awareness of the injustice suffered by Black people came when her sixteen-year old neighbor and classmate, Jeremiah Reeves, was arrested and charged with raping a white housewife. Police quickly expanded the charges, claiming that he was responsible for raping six white women after breaking into their homes. Blacks in Montgomery were furious because they knew that the police had forced Jeremiah Reeves to confess. The young pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Martin Luther King Jr., wrote, "One of the authorities had led him to the death chamber, threatening that if he did not confess at once he would burn there later." And, despite his forced confession, he would burn. After a very brief trial an all-white jury sentenced Reeves to death in the electric chair. This brought Blacks all over Alabama to total outrage. Even if the charges were true, which nobody believed they were, Jeremiah had not killed anybody. Why should he be executed? They knew that no white man accused of raping a Black woman would have been convicted at all. (23) The NAACP was called to take the case. Claudette believes that that is precisely why the jury sentenced Reeves to death, to show that the NAACP could not take over the South. In 1954 the US Supreme Court threw out Reeves' conviction and ordered a new trial on the grounds that Reeves' confession was forced. Unfortunately, after two days of testimony, the new jury—entirely white once again—took only a half hour to restore Reeves' death sentence.

> Many at school wept for their classmate, but Claudette fumed: Why did everyone accept injustice? How could adults complain about the insulting way they were treated at work and then put on a happy face for their white employers? Why did her classmates

> worry about 'goods hair' when they had no rights? When was anybody ever going to stand up? (25)

And then Claudette met someone who would help her to transform her anger into action. Miss Geraldine Nesbit, Claudette's English teacher, had grown up in Montgomery, had gone to Alabama State College for her BA and then on to Columbia University in New York for a Masters degree in Education. Ms. Nesbit, a born teacher, was determined to push her students to learn. Since they were far behind high school students of their age, rather than drilling them in grammar and punctuation, as most English teachers of her generation did, she awakened them to the world. She taught them the Constitution and the Magna Carta. She taught them Patrick Henry's famous "Give me liberty or give me death" speech. They studied American the classics written by Hawthorne and Poe. She led them to examine passages from the Bible from a literary point of view. They wrote their thoughts and observations in essays and poems. And always, in everything she led them to do, Ms. Nesbit taught them to understand their position in the world, the terrible injustices they suffered. In 1955, Claudette's junior year, Ms Nesbit and one of her fellow teachers taught Negro History Week.

> We spent that whole February talking about the injustices we black people suffered every day in Montgomery—it was total immersion. My parents had only gone to sixth grade—they'd never had a chance for a class discussion like that. So I was grateful for it, and totally receptive. I had done talking about 'good hair' and 'good skin' but not addressing our grievances. I was tired of adults complaining about how badly they were treated and not doing anything about it. I'd had enough of just feeling angry about Jeremiah Reeves. I was tired of hoping for justice. When my moment came, I was ready. (27)

March 2, 1955 was that moment. Claudette and her schoolmates had gotten out of school early and boarded the bus for home. Since there were no whites in the front of the bus, she and her friends walked straight down the aisle. Claudette took a seat on the left hand side, near the exit door about halfway back. Her classmates sat beside her and two other students from their high school sat across the aisle in the same row. As the bus moved along, the seats filled up block by block with white passengers getting off from work in the downtown stores and offices. The ten "WHITE" front seats were quickly occupied. White people were soon standing in the aisle. Suddenly Claudette realized that a white woman was standing in the aisle between the four seats in the row occupied by her and her fellow students.. Clearly the woman expected Claudette and her classmates to vacate the entire row so that she could sit down in one of the seats. The driver looked up in his mirror and said, "I need those seats." The other three girls got up and moved back, leaving three empty seats beside Claudette. Claudette did not get up.

> There were three empty seats in A row, but that white woman would not sit down—not even across the aisle from me. That was the whole point of the segregation rules—it was all

> symbolic—Blacks had to be *behind* whites. If she sat down in the same row as me, it meant I was as good as her. So she had to keep standing until I moved back. (30)

The driver yelled "why are you still sittin' there?" The white woman hovered above Claudette; the driver shouted, "Gimme that seat!...Get up, gal." But Claudette remained seated and did not say a word. Finally, when the bus reached Court Square, the exasperated driver snapped open the door, hollored for a transit policeman, and, pointing toward Claudette said, "It's her." The officer ordered Claudette to get up and again she refused. He then explained to the driver that as a transit policeman he did not have authority to make an arrest, and he left the bus. One block later a squad car was waiting and two Montgomery City policemen boarded the bus. One of them angrily said to the driver, "Who is it? When the driver pointed Claudette out to the policeman he said, "That's nothing new…I've had trouble with that 'thing' before."

> One cop grabbed one of my hands and his partner grabbed the other and they pulled me straight up out of my seat. My books went flying everywhere. I went limp as a baby—I was too smart to fight back. They started dragging me backwards off the bus. One of them kicked me. I might have scratched one of them because I had long nails, but I sure didn't fight back. I kept screaming over and over, 'It's my constitutional right!" I wasn't shouting anything profane—I never swore, not then, not ever. I was shouting out my rights.

The policeman had Claudette put her hands outside of the door, and he handcuffed her. Then he jumped in the back beside her. "I put my knees together and crossed my hands over my lap and started praying." Two burly grown men spent their time during the ride to jail calling this small teenaged girl, "Nigger Bitch," guessing her bra size, and cracking jokes about parts of her body. This was the FACE OF THE LAW in the South in the 1950s, just a little over 50 years ago. Her treatment at the police station was, if anything, worse. The police there too called her "thing" and "whore." They told her that she would be going to the women's penitentiary. After fingerprinting and booking her they put her back into the police car and drove her to the city jail, an adult jail. They led her directly into a cell without allowing her to telephone.

> The lock fell into place with a heavy sound. It was the worst sound I ever heard. It sounded final. It said I was trapped….I looked around me: three bare walls, a toilet, and a cot. Then I fell down on my knees in the middle of the cell and started crying again. I didn't know if anyone knew where I was or what had happened to me. I had no idea how long I would be there. (34)

Luckily, the three classmates who had witnessed the scene on the bus and seen the police haul Claudette away, called her mother, Mary Ann Colvin, who in turn called their pastor, Rev. H.H. Johnson. Together, Mary Ann and Rev Johnson drove to the jail and bailed Claudette out.

> On the ride home from jail…Reverend Johnson said something to me that I'll never forget…"Claudette," he said, "I'm so proud of you. Everyone prays for freedom. We've all been praying and praying. But you're different—you want your answer the next morning. And I think you just brought the revolution to Montgomery." (35)

How Claudette inspired people to act: The news of Claudette's arrest quickly spread all through the black community in Montgomery. Dr. Jo Ann Robinson, a professor of English at Alabama State College, was inspired by Claudette's experience to finally do something about the buses. She organized a face-to-face meeting among Black leaders, city officials and bus company representatives. Robinson's appeal for change was hardly radical. She proposed that whites sit in the back and Blacks in the front until the buss filled up; she proposed that Blacks be allowed to pay their fares in the front of the bus, and that drivers be made to stop at every corner in Black neighborhoods, as they did in white. But in this very modest proposal there was a thin, thin fragment of steel. Robinson said at the end of her requests that "there has been talk from twenty-five or more local organizations of planning a city-wide boycott of busses." Since three quarters of the bus riders in Montgomery were Black, the threat of a boycott was serious. Nevertheless the letter led only to more polite meetings, and more and more talk without the whites budging on Jim Crow arrangements.

The summer of 1955 was in many ways a turning point. A case that shocked the nation and drew the attention of people of good will all across the country was that of Emmett Till. Emmett was

a fourteen year-old boy from Chicago who had gone to Mississippi on a summer vacation to visit relatives. He allegedly whistled at a white store clerk and said "Bye, baby" as he left the store. Three nights later he was kidnapped and his body, wrapped in barbed wire and mutilated was found floating in a river. Claudette had become an open activist by that time; she was not only a member of Rosa Parks NAACP youth group, but she defied her classmates view of beauty by wearing her hair in corn-rows. Then, early in the fall, another teen-ager, Mary Louise Smith, who had been taught by the nuns in her school, St Jude High School, that all people, God's children, are brothers and sisters and must be respected. Mary Louise, following Claudette's example, refused to give up her seat on the bus. Following the same practice that had led to Claudette's arrest, the driver called a policeman and Mary Louise was arrested and led to jail. Her father paid the required fine and she was released, because by this time the white establishment in Montgomery was getting nervous about the publicity Claudette's case had raised.

Charges against Claudette: Claudette's arrest caused a great deal of talk and sharp divisions in the Black community. While some people admired what she had done, others thought that she got what she deserved for making things harder for everybody. Still others said that if she didn't like the way things were done in the South, she should go North. But Claudette was facing serious criminal charges, and with her court hearing only weeks away, she was terrified that she would be sent to reform school as a juvenile delinquent. Then where would her dreams of college and a career be? Claudette's parents got in touch with E. D. Nixon, a leader who had great prestige and power in the black community. E. D. Nixon also called Rosa Parks, who had for many years served as secretary to the Montgomery NAACP and would also head the NAACP youth group in Montgomery. Both Nixon and Parks saw promise in the arrest, jailing and trial of a fifteen year-old girl, a way of arousing the interest of young people in the struggle for justice. They also procured a lawyer named Fred Gray to defend Claudette. Although he was not much older than Claudette, Fred Gray like her was fired with a zeal for justice. He had studied law in the North and then returned home, vowing he said to "destroy everything segregated I could find." The hearing was held on March 18, 1955.

Claudette was charged with: 1) violating segregation, 2) disturbing the peace, and "assaulting" the police officer who had dragged her from the bus. Although Black leaders from all over rallied around her, distributing leaflets, and although Fred Gray argued a strong case on her behalf, Claudette was found "guilty of all charges." She would be placed on probation, declared a ward of the state, and released into the custody of her parents. The NAACP and other Montgomery groups decided not to protest Claudette's conviction with a boycott, but they continued to raise money to appeal the ruling and clear her name. Nevertheless, tempers were extremely hot and the ranks of activists for civil rights continually growing.

Why was Claudette a hero? She took a righteous action against racial injustice aware of the negative consequences facing her, and she set up the cultural climate that made it possible for Rosa Parks to soon after help achieve that goal of desegregation of all transportation.

Discussion Questions:

- *How do you feel when you have seen an injustice? What thoughts go through your head? Do these thoughts prevent you from taking action?*
- *What social issue is occurring that causes Claudette's friends to be so concerned about hair texture and skin color? Does this internalized oppression still exist in society today? What other implications does this line of thinking have? What impact does it have on how successful a person is?*
- *What led to Claudette's decision to not move to the back of the bus? Were the people who influenced her thinking acting as heroes?*
- *Why is it important to discuss social issues? How important is it to seek out other points of view?*
- *What happens when one person acts courageously in a challenging situation? Does it make it easier for others to act courageously?*
- *Why were some of the Blacks in Montgomery upset with Claudette for not moving to the back of the bus? What are some reasons why people are so resistant to change?*
- *What are some things a person can do when faced with resistance? How does fear of resistance hold a person back from being a leader?*