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HUST 205: History of Famous Women

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Two Women of the Century: A Complex Look at Jackie Kennedy and Rosa Parks

Two of the most famous women of the mid-twentieth century, Jackie Kennedy and Rosa Parks, seem to be polar opposites at a first glance, however through careful review, aided by *Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis: The Untold Story* by Barbara Leaming and *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* by Jeanne Theoharis, prove to have several similarities in addition to their differences.

Jackie Kennedy and Rosa Parks, while famous for a multitude of actions throughout their lives, were each most famous for one day in their lives in particular; Jackie Kennedy's life in the public eye was shaped by John F. Kennedy's assassination and Rosa Parks is widely known for her bus stand and subsequent bus boycott. On November 22, 1963, Jackie Kennedy watched in horror as her husband, President John F. Kennedy, was assassinated during a drive through Dallas, Texas. This PTSD-inducing event changed the course of both Jackie Kennedy and America's lives. In the direct aftermath of her husband's shooting, Jackie Kennedy's calm demeanor made her a symbol of strength. She insisted on walking behind JFK's coffin, even though it could have incited another bloodbath (136-7). America looked to her as a sign that they could persevere even in the face of communist dangers. However, in the years following the incident, the public started to turn from Jackie's fixation on the horrors she experienced. Her undiagnosed PTSD caused her to linger on every little detail and regret from that one day at a point when the public wished to move on from

the horrible events of the sixties (217-219). Her mental difficulties later in her life made her infamous for the events and aftermath of November 22, 1963. This one day in her life stands out above the rest and is often what people associate with the name Jackie Kennedy. Rosa Parks was similarly remembered only for a single infamous day. While Rosa Parks was a prolific activist her entire life, she is only widely known for the events of December 1, 1955, when she made a public stand on a Montgomery bus leading to a huge breakthrough in the Civil Rights movement. On her way home from work that day, she was asked to give up her seat on the bus to a white male. Rosa refused to do so, and the bus driver insisted on her arrest (63-64). The NAACP was at the time looking for a test case to try to take the Civil Rights issue all the way to the Supreme Court and Rosa Parks proved to be the right one (Hicks). During her arrest, Rosa Parks, like Jackie Kennedy, maintained a calm and respectable demeanor. Throughout the subsequent trial Rosa Parks became famous for her fortified and persistent approach to the Civil Rights movement. Even today, the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-6 is practically the only reason that Rosa Parks is mentioned in history classes (Hicks). November 22, 1963 and December 1, 1955 were pivotal days in the lives of Jackie Kennedy and Rosa Parks respectively. They each became known for the unusual events of one day in their lives, despite a multitude of other accomplishments.

Throughout their days of fame and beyond, both Jackie Kennedy and Rosa Parks utilized fashion to manipulate their public image. Jackie Kennedy is one of the most well-known fashion icons of the twentieth century. She is well known for the carefully put together look that allowed her to help the country through difficult times. Her unconventional beauty made her stand out and become “Queen Deb” when she came out in 1948 (14). This allowed her to attract Jack Kennedy. In addition to her classy looks before and during her marriage to JFK, Jackie’s attire played a large role in the aftermath of the assassination. She refused to change out of the pink suit, splattered with blood in the aftermath of her husband’s death (132). The sight of the gore on her dress in

comparison to her outwardly calm demeanor quickly became a symbol of America's continued fortitude in the face of the dangers of the Cold War. According to Leaming, this particular outfit proves that Jackie “was a woman whose costumes always calculatedly drew attention” (133). Later in life, her unique fashion style became known as the “Jackie Kennedy” look that is recognizable today (Hicks). Rosa Parks, particularly during and after the Bus Boycott of 1955, utilized her fashion choices to attract a wide variety of people to the Civil Rights Movement. During the trial, she was always to be seen in a clean cut, modest, respectable, and attractive outfit (88). This added to her persona of a middle class, church-going lady, deserving of the support and sympathy of the middle- and working-class African Americans and the white community of Montgomery, Alabama and further out across the country (Hicks). Mrs. Park’s handle on her daily attire allowed her to appeal to a wider audience and gain more traction for the Civil Rights Movement. According to Theoharis, “Mrs. Parks well understood the importance of image to this protest, and she chose her outfit to reflect a dignified and proud citizenship” (88). The boycott and subsequent trials were the kickstart for real movement for racial equality. Jackie Kennedy and Rosa Parks’ choices of ensembles shaped their public image and contributed to the effectiveness of their actions.

While Jackie Kennedy and Rosa Parks have many surprising aspects in common, the women also have several blaring differences. They came from very different social and economic backgrounds, providing them different levels of access to education. Jackie Kennedy came from a very privileged and wealthy upbringing. She was born to the Bouvier family and enjoyed the wealth of her stepfather. Because of her family’s prominence in society, Jackie Kennedy had access to a grand education. She was granted an extensive education bolstered by her grandfather’s love of French history (2) and her years at Miss Porter’s boarding school (Hicks). She continued her education through college, even though she didn’t take it seriously until later in life during her journalism career. When she won a competitive editorship, Jackie ended up turning the opportunity

down to pursue marriage (21). Jackie was taught growing up that going to school was just a way to make a wife more intellectually appealing to her husband. Part of Jackie's appeal to JFK as a wife was her intelligence. In a very different way from Jackie, Rosa Parks was born into a relatively poor family with an unstable home life. Her father was absent, and her mother worked as a teacher, leaving Rosa's grandparents to raise her and her brother (2-3). Segregation left very few options for Southern African American families toiling to meet their basic needs and Rosa's family grew up knowing that everyone around them saw them as lesser. This affected Rosa's education as well. Struggling to find a school that would educate her because of her gender and race, Rosa Parks was non-the-less "a serious student" and attended school until she was forced to drop out and take care of her grandmother the year before she would've graduated high school (10). Rosa Parks longed to receive even part of the education that Jackie Kennedy took for granted.

Furthermore, Jackie supported her husband's career while Rosa supported herself and the Civil Rights movement. Jackie Kennedy and Rosa Parks, while both active in the political arena, did not share the same motives. Jackie's work, particularly earlier in her life was centered around supporting the men, particularly her husband, in her life and their political careers. On the other hand, Rosa Parks worked as a stand-alone individual to support the Civil Rights movement and her own dignity. Throughout John F. Kennedy's career, Jackie worked to support him. In video clips of interviews during his presidential campaign, Jackie can be heard to turn the conversation back to highlight the strengths of her husband (Hicks). Furthermore, during their presidential tour, Jackie charmed Europe, giving her husband a good reputation with the leaders of Europe (111-113). Dinner parties full of important political figures was also a specialty of Jackie's (114). Her diplomatic efforts supported her husband's career. In a very different manner, Rosa Parks chose to fight for the Civil Rights movement and the effort stemmed from herself, not a desire to support her husband. In fact, Raymond Parks was largely overshadowed by his wife's activism while Jackie is overshadowed

by her husband's political career. Rosa Parks was a Civil Rights activist long before she met her husband and met Raymond through his work in the Scottsboro Boys case (13-14). While both ladies have their critical days of fame, Rosa Parks is the main heroine in the case of the bus stand while Jackie was merely a traumatized onlooker.

Overall, Jackie Kennedy and Rosa Parks, while two radically different female figures of the mid-twentieth century due to their family backgrounds and motivations, share a plethora of commonalities such as how the public views their fame and their usage of fashion to build their reputation.