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But What Can I Do?

It seems fitting that a speech honoring Rosa Parks as a champion of the civil rights movement in America not only occurred on what would have been her centennial, but, more importantly, that the recognition of her activism was delivered by the country's first African American president, Barack Obama. In his speech, delivered at the dedication of the Rosa Parks statue in the National Statuary Hall of the United States Capitol Building, **former president Obama uses the experience of Rosa Parks to encourage Americans to stand for their principles and convictions. Through a series of rhetorical choices and appeals highlighting Parks, *Obama reminds disheartened or dissatisfied Americans that "there's always something we can do."***

Obama starts his address through a **narrative mode** reciting an **anecdote of Park's now infamous experience** with an Alabama bus driver on December 1, 1955. On this day, the story goes, Parks refused the bus driver's order to give up her seat. This disobedience was decided 12 years earlier when the same bus driver, "grabbed her [Parks] sleeve and pushed her off the bus" for entering through the front door reserved for white passengers. Obama continues to **narrate** Martin Luther King Jr's arrival in support of Parks, and the thousands of activists, "teachers and laborers, clergy and domestics, through rain and cold, and sweltering heat," who would begin the civil boycotting of Alabama buses. **By recounting this history in the form of story,** Obama is able to celebrate Park's own history, the history of the more general civil rights movement, but he is able to do so in a way that **prepares the reader for some moral insight, some parabolic lesson**, a thematic epiphany. Like the countless Mother Goose tales and

Folkloric fables that teach lessons about ethical behavior to children, Obama uses the storytelling structure to teach political and social action, the need to do something, **the structure sets the audience up.**

Additionally, Obama relies on a tried and tested rhetorical technique practiced by African American orators in political speeches and religious sermons, **rhythmic language.** Throughout the speech Obama relies on **tri-colon and amplification** to maintain a narrative rhythm using **repetition and elaboration to build import.** He describes Parks activism in swelling groups of three, "fighting for voting rights…rallying against discrimination…serving the NAACP." Each added detail dramatically amplifies the significance of the action for the audience, **overwhelming listeners with reasons** to admire Parks and her achievements. He later paints a picture of Parks in the grips of her civil disobedience through tri-colon, "clutching her purse, staring out the window, waiting to be arrested." Again, by adding additional details, **Obama is able to intensify the emotive power of Park's experience** by not just remembering but by reliving tangibly and viscerally through nuanced description.

Finally, Obama encourages audience action by **comparing Parks' disobedience to other acts of righteous condemnation and conviction to moral justice** making it clear that he expects those in attendance to continue the fight Parks ignited. Obama creates a **heightened sense of purpose** when he rightfully connects Parks to names like Martin Luther King Jr., lending authority and credence to her cause. Later allusions to "God" and "Scripture" establish the entirety of the civil rights movement as a moral, a religious, and a Christian truth. For the crusading activists and the evangelical Christians listening, **these allusions serve as a call to action,** a rhetorical question of "courage and kindness and fellow feeling, and responsibility" to act. More than simply recalling the honorable and courageous acts of a hero, of heroes, Obama turns the continued need for civil rights action into an issue of moral and ethical virtue. He personally calls on each American as if to say, as Parks would herself, **"You, you seated here and listening to or reading these words, can and should 'carry forward the power of her principle and a courage born of conviction.'"**