

Cloud School Pro (CSP)

Lecture Sheet

For 3rd Year Paid Group

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Novel, Fiction: Oroonoko

Writer: Aphra Behn (14 December 1640 – 16 April 1689)

Oroonoko; or, the Royal Slave is a work of prose fiction by Aphra Behn, published in 1688 by William Canning and reissued with two other fictions later that year. It was also adapted into a play. The eponymous hero is an African prince from Coramantien who is tricked into slavery and sold to European colonists in Surinam where he meets the narrator. Behn's text is a first-person account of Oroonoko's life, love, rebellion, and execution.

Oroonoko, in full Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave, novel by Aphra Behn, published in 1688. Behn's experiences in the Dutch colony of Surinam in South America provided the plot and the locale for this acclaimed novel about a proud, virtuous African prince who is enslaved and cruelly treated by "civilized" white Christians. A prince in his own country, Oroonoko has been educated in a Western manner. Behn's suggestion that "primitive" peoples are morally superior to Europeans was taken by many of her contemporaries as an abolitionist stance. Still her best-known work, the book is one of the earliest examples of the philosophical novel in English, and it influenced the development of the novel in general. Oroonoko was adapted for the theatre by Thomas Southerne and performed in 1695.

Writer

Aphra Behn, English dramatist, fiction writer, and poet who was the first Englishwoman known to earn her living by writing. Her origin remains a mystery, in part because Behn may have deliberately obscured her early life. One tradition identifies Behn as the child known only as Ayfara or Aphra who travelled in the 1650s with a couple named Amis to Suriname, which was then an English possession. She was more likely the daughter of a barber, Bartholomew Johnson, who may or may not have sailed with her and the rest of her family to Suriname in 1663. She returned to England in 1664 and married a merchant named Behn; he died (or the couple separated) soon after. Her wit and talent having brought her into high esteem, she was employed by King Charles II in secret service in the Netherlands in 1666. Unrewarded and briefly imprisoned for debt, she began to write to support herself.

Themes

The novel deals with many themes including **racism, freedom and slavery, love and loyalty, honor, trust, and betrayal**. Racist perspectives are acted out by all the white colonist characters, including Behn who judges Oroonoko by white European standards and endorses the principles behind the institution of slavery (Gustafson). Nonetheless, Behn shows us the inhuman facets of slavery and the price of freedom, and demands the readers to reflect upon their meanings. Throughout his tragic life, Oroonoko is torn between love and loyalty, and the struggle drives him to follow his heart and fight for the love of his life. However, Oroonoko's regard for honor and his trusting nature renders him vulnerable to the betrayal and abuse at the hands of the white slave owners.

Tone, Mood, and Emotion

The author adopts a **realist** tone in *Oroonoko*. The story is narrated as a true biography of a gallant hero. *Oroonoko* is now among the best-known of Behn's works, remarkable for its insistence on striking a **realist tone**.

Settings

Oroonoko is a short novel, styling itself 'a true history', set in the English colony of Surinam in the Guianas, South America, where Aphra Behn herself is believed to have spent some time as a young woman. *Oroonoko*'s narrator is often seen as a version of the author.

Characters

Oroonoko

Oroonoko is an African prince from the fictional country of Coramantien. He is sold into slavery in South America and executed after a failed rebellion. The narrator calls him **Caesar**, the name given to him by his slave masters in the second half of the book.

Imoinda

Imoinda is a young African woman of noble birth. She is sold into slavery in South America, where she is reunited with her husband Oroonoko; she later lets Oroonoko kill her and her unborn child to escape a life of slavery. Imoinda's slave masters give her the new name **Clemene**, but the narrator soon reverts to calling her by her African name.

Narrator

The narrator is a British woman living in Suriname. She gets to know Oroonoko and relays details of his life to the reader.

Byam

William Byam is the deputy governor in charge of the Suriname colony who reports to the absent Lord Willoughby. He encourages violence against the escaped slaves. Behn writes Byam as the villain of the narrative.

The king

The king is Oroonoko's grandfather and the ruler of Coramantien. He marries Imoinda and then sells her into slavery after she sleeps with Oroonoko.

Trefry

Trefry is the slave master who buys Oroonoko for his plantation. Trefry befriends Oroonoko and advocates for his fair treatment.

Aboan

Aboan is a young man in the Coramantien king's court. He is the love interest of the king's retired wife Onahal.

Banister

Banister is an Irishman who oversees Oroonoko's execution.

Coramantien soldiers

The soldiers make up Oroonoko's troops in the Coramantien army. They're loyal to Oroonoko as their leader.

The executioner

The executioner cuts off Oroonoko's body parts when Oroonoko is publicly murdered.

The Frenchman

The Frenchman is Oroonoko's tutor in Western educational topics, including language and mathematics. He travels to Suriname against his will but stays to make his fortune.

The general

The general is Imoinda's father, a Coramantien soldier who sacrifices his life to save Oroonoko in battle.

Jamoan

Jamoan is a fighter for a rival army in Coramantien. He becomes Oroonoko's slave and later his friend. He's sold to slavery in Suriname with Oroonoko.

Colonel Martin

Colonel Martin is a white settler sympathetic to Oroonoko. He protests Oroonoko's execution at the novella's end.

Native South Americans

The native South Americans occasionally interact with the white settlers. They live an innocent, peaceful life close to nature.

Onahal

Onahal is one of the Coramantien king's retired wives. She uses her power in the court to reunite Oroonoko and Imoinda for one night and is sold into slavery with Imoinda.

Ship captain

The ship captain trades with Oroonoko for slaves on the Coramantien coast. He betrays Oroonoko by trapping him on the slave ship and taking him to Suriname.

Tuscan

Tuscan is a slave on the Suriname plantation. He is the only one to join Oroonoko and Imoinda to fight the English settlers. Later he shows his loyalty by attempting to save Oroonoko's life.

Summary

Oroonoko's tale is told from the perspective of a female narrator, possibly Aphra Behn herself. The narrator claims to have known Oroonoko during his captivity in Suriname, South America. Suriname is a British colony at the time the narrative takes place (the 1660s). As the novel's full title announces, Oroonoko is not just any old slave—he is the last descendant of a royal line, and the prince of an African country called Coramantien (probably modern-day Ghana). Coramantien is a brave and warlike nation that participates in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, selling prisoners of war to Western ships.

Oroonoko has grown up away from the court, and has been trained to be a great military leader by Imoinda's father. One day, during an intense battle, Imoinda's father takes a fatal arrow in the eye and saves Oroonoko's life. The seventeen-year-old Oroonoko becomes the new general, and returns

to court an elegant and intelligent young man. The narrator spends much time describing Oroonoko's noble characteristics, and is particularly interested in detailing his exceedingly fine physical beauty, which is a blend of Roman and African traits.

While at court, Oroonoko visits the daughter of his foster father, the beautiful and pure Imoinda, they fall in love at first sight. They participate in a marriage ceremony but Oroonoko still has to ask his grandfather, the King, for his blessing, in keeping with the patriarchal customs of the society. However, the king, a lecherous old man, hears about Imoinda's beauty. After seeing her at court, he decides he wants her to become one of his concubines. While Oroonoko is off hunting, the king sends her the royal veil, a sign of invitation for attractive women to come to court. Imoinda is duty-bound to obey.

Separated from her true love, Imoinda is kept cloistered at the Otan, the King's pleasure palace. She is still a virgin and refuses, as much as she can, the King's advances. Due to the strict laws of the Otan, Oroonoko is prevented from seeing Imoinda until the King invites him.

Despite being persuaded otherwise by those around them, the lovers remain faithful to each other. Oroonoko confirms Imoinda's longing to return to him from Onahal, one of the King's old wives, and by exchanging secret glances with Imoinda when visiting the Otan.

Before Oroonoko leaves for war, he is determined to consummate his marriage to Imoinda. With the help of his good friend and fellow warrior, Aboan, he concocts a plan to do so. Aboan seduces Onahal, who quickly agrees to help the lovers, and Oroonoko and Imoinda spend the night together. Unfortunately, the King, who had been suspicious that something might happen, sends his guard to confront Oroonoko, but Oroonoko flees to the battlefield. As punishment for her perfidy, the King sells Imoinda into slavery, an ignoble punishment, but he tells Oroonoko he has executed her.

Upon hearing this, Oroonoko gives up his will to live and fight, and he abandons his troops, retiring to his tent. When they are about to lose, however, Oroonoko rouses himself from his lovesick stupor and leads his army to victory.

An English sea captain comes to Coramantien, and Oroonoko receives him as a royal guest. The Captain double-crosses Oroonoko, however, inviting him onboard his ship and then kidnapping him, along with a hundred of Oroonoko's attendants. The Captain brings Oroonoko across the Atlantic to Suriname, where he sells him to an intelligent and kind-hearted slave-owner named Trefry. Trefry gives Oroonoko the name "Caesar," and promises to help free him one day. Trefry also unwittingly reunites Caesar with Imoinda, whom Trefry knows as "Clemene." Together at last, though in undesirable circumstances, "Caesar" and "Clemene" conceive a child and spend their days mingling with the white nobility, who immediately accept the couple because they are noble, virtuous, and beautiful.

As Imoinda's pregnancy develops, Caesar becomes increasingly restless and wants to take his new family back home. Though he esteems some white people, like Trefry and the narrator, he is also rightly suspicious of the lengthy delay regarding his release. He feels that he will once again be tricked and his family will remain in slavery. Indeed, this is exactly the plan of Deputy Governor Byam, who is part of the colonial government in Suriname and intends to keep Caesar a slave.

Because he is a man of action, Caesar determines to take matters into his own hands and convince the slaves to run away. Led by Caesar, they manage to escape, but their journey ends in disaster when the white colonists come after them. With the exception of Caesar's friend Tuscan, most of the slaves flee the group, leaving Caesar and a heavily pregnant Imoinda to confront the plantation owners. They all fight bravely and Imoinda wounds Byam in the shoulder with a poisoned arrow.

With the help of Trefry, Byam convinces Caesar to surrender peacefully and promises to fulfill all his demands. They write a contract, but Byam almost immediately breaks it. He sequesters Imoinda and brutally whips Tuscan and Caesar. Now that he is fully awakened to Byam's treachery, Caesar vows

revenge. He murders Imoinda and their child, with Imoinda's permission and blessing, to save them from prolonged suffering. Caesar then fails to enact his revenge against Byam, however, when he succumbs to a debilitating grief beside his wife's corpse.

When the colonists come looking for Caesar, he is rescued against his will by his friends. Sick and dying, he tells them of his plan to kill Byam. They try to encourage him to abandon this idea and focus on recovery. One day, the ruthless Irishman Banister kidnaps Caesar at Byam's behest. Caesar is again tied to the stake, where he is slowly dismembered, dying without making a sound.

Key Questions

What is the story Oroonoko about?

"Oroonoko" follows Oroonoko, an African prince, who is tricked into slavery, but eventually leads a rebellion. Oroonoko is credited as one of the earliest examples of the English novel due to its linear structure and biographical account. However, it differs from the modern genre due to its shortness. It is also credited as being the first European novel to sympathize with slaves.

How is Oroonoko tricked into slavery?

While selling captives as slaves to the British, Oroonoko and his friends are invited to view the ship. Not knowing this is a trick, they are taken captive as well to be enslaved. The captain continues to lie to Oroonoko, promising his freedom, only to sell him in Surinam.

Is Aphra Behn the narrator of Oroonoko?

Aphra Behn blends truth and fiction in "Oroonoko" by making herself a participant narrator. She makes herself a character in the story and writes some passages in first person, switching her role between author, narrator, and character. This also adds to her attempt to make her fictional account seem more realistic.

What happens to Oroonoko at the end of the story?

After leading a slave revolt, the characters meet a tragic end. Many of the slaves die and, in fear of slavery, Imoinda agrees to let Oroonoko kill her and their unborn child. Refusing to leave their bodies, Byam finds, kills, and dismembers Oroonoko.

What are the major themes of Oroonoko?

The themes of Oroonoko are: **slavery, racism, love, and honor**. These themes are enforced by the use of the female narrative and participant narrator.

How does Aphra Behn describe Oroonoko?

Oroonoko is introduced as an attractive and noble warrior, which is greatly emphasized. Behn repeatedly describes him as honorable, which is seen in common themes of the novel.