



Oroonoko

Study Guide by Course Hero



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👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

Aphra Behn

YEAR PUBLISHED

1688

GENRE

Fiction

PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR

Oroonoko is narrated in the first person. The narrator plays a role in the action during the second half of the story.

TENSE

Oroonoko is told in the past tense.

ABOUT THE TITLE

The book shares a name with its protagonist, a fictional African prince who is sold into slavery in South America. The name *Oroonoko* may be derived from the South American river called the Orinoco.

🕒 In Context

Literary Models for *Oroonoko*

Though *Oroonoko*'s story takes place in Africa and South America, it reflects western European literary traditions. [Behn](#) borrows from genres such as medieval courtly romance, heroic drama, and travel narrative.

Medieval prose romances, written for aristocratic audiences and often based on Arthurian legend, were popular in England at the beginning of the 17th century. These romances often took place in a royal court, giving rise to the term *courtly love*. Noble knights pursued ladies in distress. Lovers were separated and then reunited. [Oroonoko](#) and his love interest, [Imoinda](#), have a similar story in many respects.

Oroonoko is a prince in an African court. His goals include victory on the battlefield and reunification with his lover. Like a medieval knight, he's conflicted between his duty to the king and his love for Imoinda. His actions are guided by a strong sense of honor, like the chivalric code of Western medieval romances. Behn describes Oroonoko as having "refined notions of true honor" and "softness ... capable of the highest passions of love and gallantry," phrases recalling a romantic hero or knight in a medieval romance.

Behn, a playwright, was also inspired by the heroic drama of England's Restoration period (1660–88). These dramas featured themes of courage, love, and honor, which Behn

adapted for *Oroonoko*. The larger-than-life traits of Behn's protagonists Oroonoko and Imoinda may have been borrowed from characters of heroic drama that display extraordinary virtue and valor. Heroic plays took cues from ancient epics with clear heroes and villains. Noble heroes perform sacrificial good deeds and face down monstrous enemies. Behn similarly depicts Oroonoko as a courageous warrior and Suriname's colonizers as evil cowards. Heroes of heroic drama may also deliver long speeches, such as Oroonoko's speech calling his fellow slaves to rebel.

Western drama and epics affect Behn's physical descriptions of her characters. Behn frequently describes Oroonoko and Imoinda's unusual beauty. But both lovers have traits considered attractive in a Eurocentric culture. Oroonoko's height, his "rising and Roman" nose, the shape of his mouth, and his long hair all conform to Western ideals of attractiveness. Oroonoko also has a Western classical education and conducts himself like a member of a "European court."

Behn was one of several Restoration playwrights to depict non-European royal princes who act like European monarchs. These characters display a form of nobility her English readers and audience understood. It also showed respect for the English royal family and monarchs such as James II, whom Behn admired.

The narrator, a British woman recounting her travels to South America, has many similarities to Behn herself. In this respect *Oroonoko* forms a travel narrative, or collection of observations written by a visitor to a foreign country. Many travel narratives come from the perspective of a Western visitor in a non-Western land, noncolonized or colonized. Readers, presumed to be Western themselves, experience new surroundings through the story.

Truth and Fiction

The subtitle of *Oroonoko* includes the phrase "A True History." Behn's narrator assures the reader she's recounting true events involving a real hero. Many details may reflect Behn's own time in Suriname, and she references historical personalities and events. However, almost all the main characters are fictional, and so is the plot. *Oroonoko* is fiction described as truth, combining elements of storytelling and memoir.

This technique immerses the reader in the story. By insisting she's recounting the truth, Behn's narrator gains authority. The assertions of truth also increase the story's emotional impact.

Behn frequently includes a modified version of herself as a character in her writing. The narrator of *Oroonoko* resembles Behn in many ways. She's an Englishwoman with in-depth knowledge of the novella's Suriname setting. She describes Suriname's flora, fauna, weather, and plantations in intimate detail. However, the narrator has an inflated social status compared to Behn. The narrator's father is a governor of several colonies, and she resides at the best house on the plantation.

The character of William [Byam](#), the villainous deputy governor, is based in fact. Byam was Suriname's deputy governor until 1667, when the Dutch took over the colony. Lord Willoughby, the actual Englishman who founded the colony of Suriname, does not appear in the novella but is referenced as the absent governor. Willoughby was the ruler of the colony, but he frequently traveled, leaving Byam in charge. Other English and Irish characters, such as the sympathetic [Trefry](#) and Colonel Martin and the cruel Banister, were modeled but not named after real colonists. The colonists' behavior in the story is modeled after Behn's observations in Suriname.

Behn injects an uncomfortable amount of reality into the narrative by including names and practices her readers might know. The true horror of slavery was practiced by real people—a fact Behn doesn't let her readers forget.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade in Suriname

In 1688 when *Oroonoko* was published, African slavery in North and South America was growing as a viable economic system. England was among the European nations to play a major role in the slave trade. Slavery sustained the nation's economy. Food production in colonies such as Suriname ensured robust trade, and plantation owners needed labor for the harvest.

In the 16th century, English colonizers started exploring the potential of the "New World" across the Atlantic Ocean. African slavery was already an established practice in other European colonies, with Portuguese and Spanish colonizers

enslaving Africans for sugar production. By 1624 England had its own sugar colonies in the Caribbean.

In 1647 English nobleman Francis Willoughby, 5th Baron Willoughby, known as Lord Willoughby, became the governor of Barbados, an island in the Caribbean West Indies. He wanted to expand his empire and had his eye on Suriname, a nearby colony in the northeast corner of South America. Italian explorer Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) had traveled to Suriname along a South American river known as the Orinoco or Oroonoko, the probable origin of Oroonoko's name.

Willoughby and other English settlers looking for financial gain set up settlements in Suriname. The colonies produced sugar, the Caribbean's main export and an expensive crop demanding many laborers. These laborers came from the transatlantic slave trade, part of a massive global exchange system transporting millions of enslaved Africans to the Americas.

European countries fought to control valuable colonies such as Suriname, a major source of sugar exports. Despite Lord Willoughby's efforts to keep Suriname under British rule, the Dutch took over the colony in 1667. Behn mentions the Dutch takeover in *Oroonoko*. She sees the transfer of power as a missed opportunity for British prosperity.

The slave trade wasn't abolished in England until 1807. England wouldn't outlaw slave ownership for about 26 more years. During Behn's lifetime, the system of buying and selling human beings for labor was a largely accepted part of reality.

Behn's Attitude toward Slavery

Was Behn against slavery? Though *Oroonoko* bears graphic witness to the physical and emotional brutality of slavery, its narrator does not condemn the practice. She lives on a plantation with slave owners. Even Oroonoko himself is a slave trader in his African nation, working closely with an English ship captain.

The book's attitude toward slavery as a larger global system is ambiguous. Behn depicts slavery as an economic reality despite its injustice to the enslaved. She observed the commercial gains England could make as a nation through the slave trade. There is evidence Behn believed slavery was good for England's economy, though this belief wasn't universally held. She wishes England had kept the colony of Suriname and

increased the power of the British Empire.

Behn differed from her contemporaries in her attitudes toward African and South American people. Behn depicts colonized tribes in Africa and South America as admirable, innocent, and sincere. Her narrative shows no desire to convert Africans and Native Americans to Christianity or suppress their cultural traditions, unlike most English settlers of Behn's time. Nonetheless, her writing still reflects a racist concept of European dominance. She portrays Oroonoko, an English-speaking prince with a Western education, as superior to other Africans. *Oroonoko* helped popularize the idea of the "noble savage" who was closer to nature than the supposedly civilized Europeans.

Behn's book questions the civility and morality of white European slave traders. *Oroonoko* often criticizes the merits of a religion that allows humans to treat others the way Europeans treat their slaves. While settlers such as the deputy governor Byam are duplicitous and evil, others such as Trefry and Colonel Martin are morally conflicted. Still, each settler plays an active part in sustaining the slave trade—including Behn's narrator, who protests the treatment of Oroonoko as an individual but not the system as a whole.

Though Behn doesn't argue for abolition, her hero Oroonoko does. The narrative doesn't shy away from describing the brutality of his punishment after a failed rebellion. It indicates how the physical punishment of slaves was commonplace. Behn exposes her readers to the graphic suffering of a hero they've come to admire, giving them a glimpse of a slave's reality.

Readings of *Oroonoko* changed with the times. Many English theatergoers became familiar with the story through a 1696 theatrical adaptation by Irish playwright Thomas Southerne (1660–1746). These audiences focused on the tragic love story. When the antislavery movement gained ground in the 18th century, abolitionists used the tragedy of Oroonoko as evidence of slavery's barbarism. In the late 1980s to early '90s scholars began to study *Oroonoko* through postcolonial and feminist lenses, exploring issues of race and gender through Oroonoko, Imoinda, and the narrator. By presenting slaves as fully realized individuals, Behn encourages readers to consider the impact of slavery and colonization.

Author Biography

Early Travels to Suriname and the Netherlands

The first Englishwoman to make a living from her writing, Aphra Behn worked in multiple genres as a celebrated playwright, novelist, and poet. Little is known about her early life and origins. Thought to be born in 1640, she may have been the daughter of a man named Johnson, who was related to English nobleman Francis Willoughby, 5th Baron Willoughby (c.1613–66).

Scholars do know Behn joined Johnson and his family on a voyage to Suriname, an English colony in South America, in 1663. Willoughby was in charge of Suriname before the Dutch seized the colony from the English. Behn spent several months in Suriname before returning to England. The voyage influenced her greatly, forming the setting of her groundbreaking 1688 novella, *Oroonoko*.

Behn married a Dutch merchant in 1664, taking his last name, Behn. It's unclear whether the couple separated or her husband died the following year. To earn a living, Behn became a British spy for King Charles II and traveled to the Netherlands in the secret service. Charles II didn't send her the promised funds for her journey home, so she borrowed to pay her way.

Back in England, she was imprisoned for debt. When she was released from prison, Behn was determined to support herself and began writing for a living.

Plays and Poems

Though Behn worked in many genres, she was best known in the 17th century for her plays. Her work became popular during England's Restoration, from 1660 to 1688, when Charles II's monarchy returned to the throne after years of strict Catholic rule by Oliver Cromwell. Restrictions on art, drama, and literature were lifted. Theaters reopened, and playwrights had more opportunities than ever.

Behn's first play, *The Forc'd Marriage*, was produced in 1670. She drew comic inspiration from sources such as Italian

improvised comedy using stock characters, called *commedia dell'arte*. She also mined current events for comedy, thinly disguising characters, situations, and references based on real life in England. Her plays addressed topics such as marriage and sex, considered scandalous for a female writer. Despite the controversy around Behn's work, theatergoers flocked to her plays. Her most famous play, *The Rover*, was produced in 1677 and published later the same year. The sequel to the play, known as *The Rover part 2*, was produced in 1681. As a writer, Behn achieved a level of celebrity almost unheard of for a woman.

Behn's poetry and novels are characterized by a strong personal voice. She often wrote as "Astrea," a character who was a stand-in for Behn herself. Her ambitious projects included the multipart epistolary novel, or novel in letters, *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684–87). She adopted sophisticated techniques her contemporaries thought only male writers were capable of, and readers praised her craft.

Oroonoko

Later in her life Behn branched out into novel writing. Her novella *Oroonoko* (1688), which is based on her visit to Suriname, tells the story of an African prince forced into slavery. Though *Oroonoko* is fictional, Behn includes several real English colonists as characters, and the narrator is based on Behn. The novel is also known as *Oroonoko: or, The Royal Slave*, *a True History* or *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave*.

Oroonoko was revolutionary in both form and subject. It serves as a foundational text in the development of the English novel as modern readers know it. *Oroonoko* engaged topics such as racial inequality, gender inequality, and slavery more candidly than most writing of its time. Some readers considered it the first novel to argue for abolition.

Paving the Way for Female Writers

Behn died on April 16, 1689, a year after writing *Oroonoko*. She's buried in England's Westminster Abbey.

Her work's quality stands strong on its own, but Behn's most

enduring legacy is as a trailblazer for women writers. Critics in the 17th and 18th centuries initially dismissed her work, accusing Behn of disgracing womanhood by writing about lewd topics. However, other female playwrights began to make a living from their work after Behn. English writer Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), a well-known 20th-century modernist, honors Behn in her nonfiction work *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Woolf feels Behn was the first woman to take writing seriously as a career, giving future women permission to do the same. "All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn," Woolf says. Behn's own revolutionary attitudes toward gender in her work make her a foundational feminist figure.

Characters

Oroonoko

Oroonoko's courage, battle skills, and strong moral code resemble those of a hero in epic literary traditions. His education, wit, and love for his wife Imoinda resemble the traits of a medieval literary hero. He's an African general beloved by his people, retaining his dignity in slavery. White settlers are impressed by Oroonoko's Western education, innate intelligence, and diplomacy. Oroonoko becomes a tragic hero toward the book's end when he is executed after leading a failed rebellion.

Imoinda

Imoinda is well mannered, gentle, and modest. She is exceptionally physically attractive, inspiring desire in every man she meets, including both Oroonoko and the king. She is also respected by the settlers and slaves in Suriname. In Suriname she reveals herself to be a courageous fighter who has an honor code almost as strong as Oroonoko's. In many ways her positive qualities mirror those of Oroonoko's.

Narrator

Based on Behn, the narrator views the colony of Suriname through the lens of a British explorer. She's fascinated by the

nature and the customs of the native people. Though she befriends Oroonoko, she fears the larger population of slaves, worrying about the possibility of mutiny. She objects to Oroonoko's harsh treatment at the colonists' hands. Still, she's invested in England's prosperity and may or may not oppose the practice of slavery for financial gain.

Byam

Byam is well spoken and appears friendly to Oroonoko. In reality, however, Byam is vicious and controlling. He is the main advocate for brutal punishment of the slave rebellion's leaders. He fails to keep his word to Oroonoko after the slaves' surrender. Byam represents the worst instincts of powerful slave traders in British colonies.

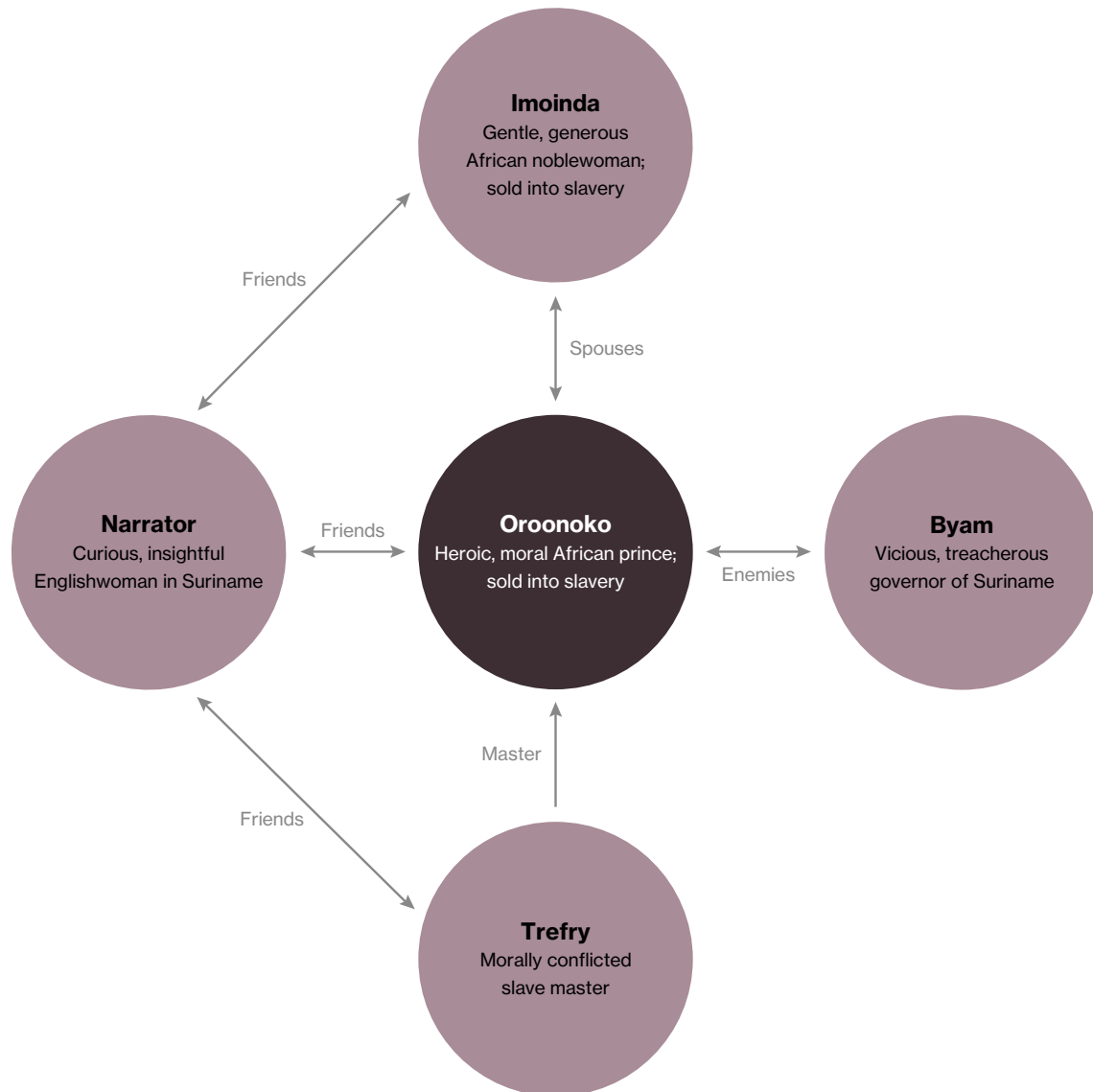
The king

The king rules by divine right and abuses his power to secure Imoinda as one of his wives. He is controlling and adheres strongly to tradition. Though he regrets his decision to sell Imoinda to slavery, a fate considered worse than death, he lies to cover up what he's done. The king's tortured conscience contrasts with Oroonoko's strong honor code, which doesn't allow treachery.

Trefry

Trefry is witty, intelligent, and fascinated by Oroonoko. He is portrayed as more compassionate than most slave masters, such as when he stops his advances on Imoinda in the face of her modesty and nobility. Oroonoko trusts that Trefry will act in Oroonoko's best interest. However, this trust proves misguided when Trefry is powerless to stop Oroonoko's beating and execution.

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
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.

Plot Summary

Dedication to Lord Maitland

[Behn](#) begins the novella with an "epistle dedicatory," or a letter of dedication, to Lord Maitland, a government minister and writer she admires. Both Maitland and Behn supported the reign of James II in England.

She praises Maitland for his faith and dedication to the Catholic Church, referring to him as "your Lordship." She says Maitland should pay attention to the story she's about to tell—a true story of a good man who met an "inglorious," or shameful, end. She had the honor of knowing this man, a "royal slave," when she traveled to a faraway country.

Behn admits the story may seem overly romantic. She's been careful to tell the truth, but she allows readers to judge on their own.

The South American Colonies

The narrator begins by asserting the truth of her story. She has witnessed many of the events herself or heard them directly from the story's main character and hero. Many listeners in the South American colony of Suriname, where the last part of the story takes place, are eager to hear all they could about the hero's life.

Before beginning the tale of her hero, a "gallant slave," Behn emphasizes the slaves brought to the colonies as being distinct from the native people of Suriname. European settlers and native South Americans, Behn claims, live in "perfect amity," or peace.

She describes the native people of South America. They are shy around settlers. They're modest, though they wear little

clothing. Behn finds them innocent, harmless, and virtuous. They live according to the rules of "simple Nature," uncorrupted by religion and civilization. White men teach the native people the only "vice or cunning" they know.

Behn briefly describes the native South Americans' tribal traditions. They obey the authority of their war captains and only take slaves they've conquered in battle. Since the native people help the settlers find food, the settlers rely on them and must treat them with respect.

The workers on Suriname's plantations are black African slaves. Settlers arrange in advance to buy slaves from ship captains. Many slaves come from Coramantien, a trading post located on the coast of Ghana. Behn describes Coramantien as a "country" with a population of "brave and warlike" people. The native people of Coramantien actively engage in their own slave trade, taking captives in battle. Coramantien's generals profit from slavery and negotiate with white slave traders.

Oroonoko's Life in Africa

[The king](#) of Coramantien is over 100 years old. Though he has many wives, all his sons died in battle. His only heir is a 17-year-old male grandchild. Trained as a soldier all his life, the grandchild is one of the country's bravest warriors. He also has a transcendent physical beauty. The young soldier's name is [Oroonoko](#).

When Oroonoko turns 17, a general sacrifices his own life to spare him in battle. Oroonoko then receives a promotion to general. After the war, Oroonoko, a prince of the royal family, returns to the country's court.

The narrator remarks on Oroonoko's unusual generosity, humanity, and sense of honor. She attributes these traits in part to Oroonoko's Western classical education. A French scholar has taken an interest in Oroonoko and teaches him Western humanities and sciences. Oroonoko also learns English and Spanish from conversing with English and Spanish slave traders. The narrator herself has spent a lot of time talking to Oroonoko, and she is overwhelmed by his beauty. He is tall with dark skin, a Roman nose, and shoulder-length hair.

The general who dies to save Oroonoko leaves behind a beautiful, charming daughter, [Imoinda](#). After Oroonoko goes to court to see his grandfather, he decides to pay his respects to

the dead general's family. He wants to bring to the family the slaves captured in battle since they were trophies of the dead general.

Oroonoko and Imoinda

When Oroonoko meets Imoinda, he's astounded by her grace and compassion. She's equally amazed by him. The two instantly fall in love.

Oroonoko begins to woo Imoinda. Because of his sense of honor, he delays physical intimacy. He vows she'll be the only woman he loves in his life. Imoinda agrees to marry him.

The couple agrees to get the king's approval before they marry. The king, meanwhile, is himself intrigued by Imoinda and considers making her one of his many wives. First he wants to see her and test her commitment to Oroonoko.

The king sends a messenger with a gift to Imoinda, with instructions to pretend the gift is from the prince. The messenger reports that Imoinda exceeds her reputation for beauty and kindness. Additionally, her reaction to the gift makes clear that she's deeply in love with Oroonoko. Nevertheless, the king sends Imoinda the "royal veil," a ceremonial invitation to be his wife that Imoinda must accept under threat of death. When Imoinda arrives at court, she pleads with the king to understand that she's promised herself to another man.

The king threatens to murder her lover even though he knows the man is his grandson. Imoinda admits she hasn't consummated her marriage yet, and she reluctantly joins the king.

Oroonoko and the King

Oroonoko is furious when he hears that Imoinda has received the royal veil. Since he is Imoinda's lawful husband, his grandfather has broken the law. Thus, Oroonoko can legally retrieve Imoinda from his grandfather's otan, or harem. However, he worries that the king, despite his advanced age, has taken Imoinda's virginity—robbing Oroonoko of his privilege.

The king is disturbed by Imoinda's despair. Out of affection for

his grandson, the king lets Imoinda talk about her love for Oroonoko. The king's advisors lie and tell him that Oroonoko is no longer in love. The king passes this information on to Imoinda, who grieves privately.

Oroonoko successfully hides his love from the king. One day, however, when Oroonoko appears in court and sees Imoinda, his expression almost betrays him. Oroonoko flies into a rage when he sees the marriage bed that Onahal, one of the king's retired wives, prepares for the king and Imoinda.

Onahal and Aboan, a young man who accompanies Oroonoko to court, assure Oroonoko that Imoinda still has feelings for him. Onahal is secretly in love with the much younger Aboan. Aboan hopes getting close to Onahal, one of the most powerful women in the court, will improve his own status. He tells Oroonoko he can win Imoinda back with Onahal's support. Oroonoko urges Aboan to flatter Onahal as much as possible so she'll grant his request on Oroonoko's behalf. Aboan does this.

On Oroonoko's next visit to court, he watches the king's young wives dance. Imoinda stares at Oroonoko while she's dancing, loses concentration, and falls into Oroonoko's arms. Though the two quickly separate, the king orders Oroonoko to leave the court. Oroonoko and Aboan agree to meet in the otan's citrus grove that night, hoping Onahal will let Oroonoko see Imoinda one last time.

At night Oroonoko and Imoinda finally meet in private in the palace. They're overjoyed and quickly consummate their relationship. The absorbed lovers are startled by a commotion at the door. The king's spies have found them out. Imoinda urges Oroonoko to leave quickly to save his own life.

When the king confronts Imoinda, she claims Oroonoko broke into the palace and raped her. She hopes this story will convince the king to spare her life. However, the king has lost interest in Imoinda; it's a crime for him to touch her after she's been with his grandson. He decides to sell both Imoinda and the complicit Onahal into slavery.

Oroonoko Returns to the

Battlefield

Soon afterward, the king regrets his decision. He feels he should have honored Imoinda with a noble death instead. The king instructs a messenger to find Oroonoko, who's returned to the battlefield, and tell him Imoinda is dead.

Oroonoko is devastated, but he has expected this news. The messenger says the king begs for Oroonoko's forgiveness, which Oroonoko agrees to grant. Oroonoko gathers his troops and tells them to fight without him. He has nothing more to fight for.

He asks his troops to select another leader, and they choose Aboan. With Oroonoko's departure, however, the troops lose in battle. Oroonoko sleeps for two days. Then, when he hears the danger his army is in, he springs to life and returns to the battlefield, fighting "as if he came on purpose to die." His troops win the war.

Oroonoko takes an enemy soldier named Jamoan as a war prisoner. Jamoan later becomes a valued ally and friend. Jamoan's friendship, along with the friendship of Aboan and the French governor, sustain Oroonoko through his depression after the report of Imoinda's death.

Oroonoko returns to court victorious in battle once again, arriving just in time to greet an English ship. The captain and Oroonoko know each other well. Oroonoko frequently sells him slaves.

The well-educated ship captain gets a warm welcome at court. He and Oroonoko spend time together. The captain invites Oroonoko to visit the slave ship. Oroonoko, along with Jamoan, Aboan, the Frenchman, and a hundred other young men in the court, are welcomed onto the ship with a ceremony. They share a meal and wine with the slave traders.

Drunk, Oroonoko asks to look around the ship. The captain has made a plan in advance. He signals his men to chain Oroonoko and the other members of the court, locking them in the ship as slaves. The captain then sets sail.

Oroonoko's Capture

The captain tells Oroonoko he regrets his rash actions and promises to set Oroonoko free as soon as the ship can land.

Oroonoko, who's never broken his own word, believes the captain but wants his chains removed. The captain fears Oroonoko will take revenge if he's unchained, since Oroonoko is an untrustworthy heathen in his eyes. Oroonoko swears by his honor not to break an oath. If the captain violates his own promise, Oroonoko says, he will never "keep his word with the gods."

The captain unchains Oroonoko, who visits his people and urges them to be brave for his sake. Oroonoko is melancholy for the rest of the voyage, worried his slavery is a punishment for leaving Imoinda behind in the palace on their last night together.

The ship arrives at an English colony in Suriname. Settlers gather to buy slaves. These settlers include [Trefry](#), the overseer at the plantation where the narrator is staying. The captain's men separate family members so the slaves won't join together in rebellion.

Life as a Slave

Oroonoko is sold to Trefry. As he departs the ship, Oroonoko tells the captain his suffering was worth it since he learned the true nature of the captain and his gods. He encourages his fellow slaves to continue behaving honorably and leaves with his new master.

Trefry, an intelligent man, recognizes Oroonoko's extraordinary character and engages him in conversation on the boat ride to the plantation. When Oroonoko tells Trefry his story, Trefry is outraged on his behalf and vows to return Oroonoko to his country somehow. Oroonoko asks to hear reports of his friends and fellow slaves, which Trefry promises to provide.

People all over Suriname have heard of Oroonoko. Crowds flock to see him everywhere the ship stops. His upbringing in a royal household shines through despite his status as a slave. As is customary for settlers to rename their slaves, Trefry renames Oroonoko "Caesar" in honor of the historical Julius Caesar.

For the rest of the tale, the narrator refers to Oroonoko as Caesar. In Suriname, Caesar is treated more like an honored guest than a slave. He receives his own house and land, he doesn't join the slaves at work on the plantation, and he is treated like a god by the other slaves.

At dinner Trefry tells Caesar many slaves are in love with a female slave who's been on the plantation for six months. The female slave, who's been given the name Clemene, is 15 or 16 years old and the most enchanting woman Trefry's ever seen. Trefry confesses he's tried to take her as a lover, but Clemene's modesty and tears make him retreat. While everyone else on the plantation laughs at Trefry's "civility to a slave," Caesar is impressed by the nobility of both Clemene and Trefry.

Oroonoko as Caesar and Imoinda as Clemene: Reunited

The next day Trefry takes Caesar to Clemene's cottage, warning Caesar he might fall in love the instant he sees her. Caesar assures Trefry he'll never love again after losing Imoinda. Clemene runs out of the house, chasing her escaped pet dog. Caesar can instantly tell her real identity: Imoinda. Clemene recognizes him and faints into Trefry's arms. For the rest of the story, the narrator alternates between using the names Clemene and Imoinda for the character.

The reunited lovers are overjoyed. Trefry goes to tell the narrator about the coincidence. She confirms Caesar's story with the Frenchman, who also sailed to Suriname on the slave ship. The Frenchman stays in Suriname to seek his fortune.

The narrator meets and admires Clemene, who soon conceives a child. Caesar bargains with Trefry for his and his family's liberty. Trefry and the other settlers make promises but delay acting on them. They want to wait until the governor arrives: the absent Lord Willoughby, who's in charge of British activity in Suriname. Caesar suspects the settlers are lying, possibly waiting until the child is born so they can enslave the entire family.

Caesar's Quest for Liberty for His Family

Fearing a rebellion, the settlers ask the narrator to talk with Caesar and calm his fears. The narrator regularly meets with Caesar and Clemene, telling them stories and attempting to convert them to Christianity. Caesar says he will not take any

action against the white colonizers and promises the narrator he'll wait a little longer for the governor.

Caesar takes a party of settlers, including the narrator, to visit the native South Americans. The settlers want to see how the native people live, but they're nervous about potential conflict. With Caesar guiding the interaction, the native South Americans greet the settlers and invite them into their homes. He is the link between the settlers and the native people, so the settlers make Caesar and Clemene's lives as easy as possible.

The Hero's Rebellion

Imoinda, like Caesar, is impatient for freedom. One Sunday while the settlers are drinking, Caesar gathers the adult male slaves in a group and delivers a passionate speech about slavery's indignities and cruelties. The slaves cheer in agreement.

Caesar then warns the slaves of the physical dangers on the journey he is proposing. He plans for the slaves to find a ship and sail to a new colony where they can be free. If they die in the attempt, death is still better than slavery. The group agrees to leave that night with their families.

On Monday morning the plantation's overseers find the slaves gone. Alarmed, they assemble an army to find the slaves. Most men don't go along with the army; they respect Caesar and are aware that plantation rebellions often end in death.

The deputy governor, a man named William [Byam](#), leads the search army. Byam has flattered Caesar more than anyone, but now he has violent intentions. Trefry joins the army, hoping to mediate any dispute.

The escaped slaves haven't had a chance to go far. When the settlers find the slaves, Caesar and Tuscan take charge of defending the group. The settlers and slaves fight, and many of the settlers are killed. The settlers tell the slaves they'll receive a pardon if they yield. Frightened by the violence, the women and children begin to pull their husbands back from the fighting. Soon only Caesar, Tuscan, and Imoinda are left on the battlefield. Imoinda shoots and wounds Byam, but a native South American woman heals his wound.

Byam tries to convince Caesar to surrender, promising he'll be treated with respect and freed as soon as a ship lands on the

coast. Caesar replies he no longer trusts the promises of white men or their gods. Caesar angrily renounces his fellow slaves, who have given up their fight for freedom and have begun fighting for the settlers.

Trefry, however, tearfully encourages Caesar to give in. Eventually Caesar agrees for Imoinda's safety. Caesar requests the promises be written in a contract since he's observed this is how white settlers make agreements. The contract is written, including a pardon for Caesar and Tuscan. The slaves return to the plantation with the settlers.

The Settlers Break Their Contract

Soon afterward, the settlers whip Caesar and Tuscan as punishment and the other slaves, now on the side of the settlers, join in. Imoinda is kept from seeing Caesar's dramatic punishment.

The narrator and the other women on the plantation flee after the slaves have departed, fearing Caesar would murder them. A settler named Colonel Martin finds the women and tells them what happened.

The women find Caesar, who's miserable and in pain. They beg his forgiveness. He understands they had no part in his punishment. Caesar can't forgive Byam, though. He hopes to live and take revenge on Byam.

Byam hears about Caesar's plans for vengeance. He calls his council—a group made up of lawless villains. The council decides to hang Caesar and make an example of him.

Trefry tells Byam that more powerful people, such as the absent governor, want to keep Caesar alive. Plus, Trefry's in charge of the plantation. The other settlers set up safeguards around Caesar to keep him alive.

Byam, a lazy man who never works, remains on the plantation. Caesar worries about what to do next. He thinks he'll die after killing Byam. He's also angry enough to plan on killing many more settlers. He dreads leaving Imoinda behind to slavery, rape, and shameful death.

Oroonoko's and Imoinda's Deaths

Caesar comes up with a plan that's horrifying but brave. He takes Imoinda into the woods and explains his plan to kill her, then his enemies, and then himself. Imoinda agrees, begging to die an honorable death at Caesar's hands. Grieving, he professes his love one last time and then kills her and her unborn child.

Caesar mourns for two days and rests for six more before returning to the plantation. Meanwhile, the settlers send a search party to hunt for him. They find Caesar alive, though he's on the brink of death. He leads them to Imoinda's body.

Caesar tells the settlers he can no longer kill Byam. Several settlers move to capture Caesar. Despite his weakness, Caesar refuses to be captured without a fight. To prove to the settlers he's not afraid of death, he cuts a piece of flesh from his own throat and rips out his own bowels. When an Englishman tries to attack him, Caesar strikes him dead. Tuscan is wounded while trying to save Caesar.

The settlers carry Caesar back to the plantation. In a week he's recovered enough to talk. He tells them why he killed his wife. They beg him to live, but Caesar's ready to die. The narrator and several others leave the plantation for Colonel Martin's residence.

Once they leave, Byam gets Trefry off the plantation and brings in a villainous Irishman and council member named Banister. Banister ties Caesar to a post and threatens to kill him publicly. Caesar remarks this is the bravest thing Banister's ever done. Caesar tells the crowd he'll stand still and die without restraints, but if they plan to whip him, they'll have to restrain him.

Before death, Caesar is given a pipe to smoke. The executioner cuts off parts of his body one by one, starting with his fingers and then cutting off his ear, nose, and arms. The crowd is violent. Caesar continues to smoke until his second arm is cut off. Then he drops dead.

The executioners cut Caesar's body into quarters and send the body parts to other plantations in Suriname. Colonel Martin is sent a quarter but refuses to accept it, saying he has no respect for the plantation's brutal government.

The narrator concludes by hoping her novella is noble enough to honor the hero and Imoinda. She wants their story to survive.

Plot Analysis

Making the "Royal Slave" Immortal

Behn writes *Oroonoko* as if it were nonfiction. She knows readers may take true stories more seriously. The subtitle includes the phrase "A True History," giving the story extra authority and impact. Behn disguises her story as the reported truth of a travel narrative, admitting her descriptions may seem "romantic," or too fanciful to be real. Behn gets her readers' attention by suggesting an incredible and surprising but true story.

The subtitle also refers to Oroonoko as "the royal slave," a phrase that may seem like an oxymoron. *Royal* indicates a noble birth and a dignified bearing, both of which Oroonoko possesses. Slavery, however, is a lowly condition. Being a slave and remaining noble and dignified seems contradictory.

Some of Behn's contemporaries thought slaves deserved their fate. The philosopher Aristotle's (c. 384–322 BCE) doctrine of "natural slavery," or the idea certain people are destined by nature to be slaves, was promoted by theologians such as St. Augustine (354–430 CE) and Thomas Aquinas (c. 1224–74). African cultures were held in low esteem because they didn't subscribe to Western Christianity. Behn's story challenges this doctrine by presenting a slave born into a high social class and by questioning Christianity's ability to encourage justice in its followers.

Behn is aware of social status distinctions throughout the book. Her epistolary dedication, the letter at the book's beginning, legitimizes her work by dedicating it to someone of higher status.

Lord Maitland, a member of a Scottish royal family, is a writer and translator Behn respects. She honors him as a patron, or someone who supports writers financially. The references to Lord Maitland's faith signal Behn's support for the Catholic

Church and King James II.

Similarly, as a woman, Behn gives her book greater authority through its dedication to a man. She continually anticipates gender-based criticism of her work. In 17th-century England, a female novelist was unheard of, and Behn predicts the reader will view a female writer as inferior to a male writer. When she, as narrator, laments how Oroonoko has "nothing but a female pen" to honor his legacy, she's acknowledging her own status among her contemporaries.

She does, however, insist on respect for the writer's craft. The dedication emphasizes the power of words and stories to give their subjects life after death. Kings of England and other historical figures live on in books. They become part of future generations' sense of history, yet men such as Oroonoko, whom Behn claims live equally noteworthy lives, might have their stories lost forever. Writing is a way to make these men immortal.

Though she doesn't directly condemn anyone in this passage, Behn suggests that if Oroonoko had been protected by important figures such as Maitland, he might not have died. She flatters her patron but reminds him of England's role in the slave trade as well.

Oroonoko: A Hero in an Uncorrupted Land

As Behn launches into her story, through her narrator, she repeats her claims to authenticity. Behn probably lived in Suriname from 1663 to 1664, and her descriptions of the colony are likely based on experience. Even so, she places herself at a distance from the events, saying she heard most of the story secondhand from Oroonoko. This unusual setup shows Behn experimenting with the conventions of the novel and seeing how much authority she can claim as a writer. Her narrator's voice, conversational and often informal, is also rare for the time period.

As unorthodox as the book's style is, Behn uses many familiar tropes to tell her story. Her descriptions of South America ring with exoticism. As a Western writer she depicts cultural difference by highlighting the otherness or peculiarity of another country's customs. This viewpoint was a common feature of books written by Western visitors to colonized

countries. Like settlers before her, Behn is amazed by animals and plants she's never seen before. Since whiteness is considered the model for attractiveness in Behn's culture, she's surprised to find beauty in people with dark skin.

The Author's Christian Lens: A Critique

Behn sees the country through the lens of Christianity. She makes references to the Christian concept of life in Paradise before "the Fall." Other mythologies refer to a "Golden Age," or an ancient time when humans lived a harmonious, conflict-free life on Earth. In the biblical story of creation, Adam and Eve, the first humans, whom Behn calls "our first parents," were cast out of their perfect life in the Garden of Eden. Their exile, known as the Fall, was punishment for an attempt to acquire knowledge. Once Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, they become conscious of their nakedness and put on clothing. This event is often described as a fall from innocence and virtue into knowledge and sin. The English writer John Milton wrote a dramatic depiction of the Fall in *Paradise Lost*, an epic poem published in 1667 and popular when Behn wrote *Oroonoko*.

When Behn's narrator notices the appearance and behavior of the native South Americans, she's reminded of the biblical Eden. The absence of clothing and of Western cultural knowledge conveys innocence to the narrator.

Though she elaborates on a concept Christian readers would recognize—the disgraced fall from Eden—she takes it in a different direction. The novella subverts the idea that Western Christianity makes its followers good and honorable. In *Oroonoko* white Christians are the villains who lack morality. Africans such as Oroonoko live life according to a moral code. Behn's anecdote about the South Americans' confusion when a white man lies to them foreshadows the book's repeated instances of betrayal by white settlers. Her critique of Western religion and the conflict it brings also recalls the tension in 17th-century England between Catholics and Protestants.

The Trope of the "Noble Savage"

Through her depiction of the native people's virtue, Behn promotes another popular cultural trope: the noble savage. Oroonoko is one of the earliest instances of the "noble savage"

character. John Dryden, Behn's contemporary, was the first to use the term. A noble savage comes from a culture that's considered uncivilized, but he or she displays natural goodness and virtue. Books such as *Oroonoko* argue Western civilization corrupts this innate virtue in colonized people.

Behn emphasizes her characters' nobility by idealizing Oroonoko and Imoinda. They resemble character archetypes, or models, such as a flawless knight and lady in a medieval romance.

The narrator's reverence toward native populations, however, comes with fear. White settlers have power in colonized countries, but they're in unfamiliar territory. They rely on the native population to find food. They're also outnumbered. If the native population or enslaved Africans rebel, the settlers might be defeated. Behn's narrator is constantly aware of this danger, noting the measures ship captains and plantation owners take to suppress potential rebellions.

The Narrator's Ambiguity

The narrator's support for the slaves or the masters remains ambiguous. Her allegiances and loyalties shift throughout the book. These shifts are partially indicated by the narrator's choice of pronouns. Sometimes she uses the first-person plural *we* to refer to the colonists in Suriname. Other times she uses the third-person plural *they*. When Europeans are being deceitful and cruel, the narrator distinguishes herself from the group. When Europeans feel their livelihoods threatened by a possible shift in power, she's more likely to join the group. She's both observer and participant. For instance, when the narrator calls the African slaves "those ... whom we make use of," she acknowledges herself as part of a group with slave owners.

The slave trade between Coramantien and England represents a common 17th-century procedure. Coramantien, which Behn uses as the name of a country, was a West African trading post off the coast of present-day Ghana.

Behn distinguishes slaves captured in war from slaves stolen for commerce. Oroonoko sees loss in battle as an honorable and legitimate way to enter slavery. A battle victory proves superiority. To prove Oroonoko's exceptional status, Behn praises his skill in war. In fact his story begins with a tragic sacrifice on the battlefield. Like other literary heroes such as the Greek Odysseus and Achilles, Oroonoko proves himself in

combat.

Other aspects of life in Coramantien are based on Western or European traditions. Coramantien's king must be succeeded by a male heir. This tradition mimics the patrilineal descent of English monarchs, who required male heirs to the throne. Many African countries, however, had a system of matrilineal descent—tracing family lineage from female ancestors, not male ancestors. Behn bases her story on the royal succession patterns familiar to her and her readers.

She also writes Oroonoko as a hero who will appeal to readers in England. His noble birth puts him in a league with literary epic heroes, as do his standout physical features. Behn knows her English readers will probably find physical attractiveness in facial features common to Europeans. She compares the color of Oroonoko's skin to "ebony" and "polished jet," two materials conveying wealth.

In addition to his fighting skills, Oroonoko possesses traits typical of knights in medieval romances such as Gawain and Lancelot. These knights were literary heroes that appealed to a wealthy, educated leisure class. They performed well on brutal battlefields, and off the battlefield they became scholars, gentlemen, and lovers. Oroonoko's knightly virtues include generosity, gallantry, softness, and a Western education, virtues wealthy readers enjoyed in their heroes.

The character of the Frenchman functions as a plot device to explain how Oroonoko has learned Western scholarship. The Frenchman's fate also illustrates the wildly divergent fates white and black residents met in English colonies.

Another explanation for Oroonoko's education is more organic to the story. His business with English and Spanish slave traders taught him not only the language of Europeans, but also their cultural signifiers. Oroonoko can conduct himself like a high-class European, a tactic Behn's narrator admires. Oroonoko has adopted European ideas of breeding and civility and mastered European politics. He laments "the deplorable death of our great monarch," or the 1649 execution of Charles I. This mention is Behn's way of showing her support for Charles's successor, James II. As a leader, Oroonoko has sharpened his diplomatic skills, giving him many traits Behn herself may have wished for in a monarch.

Even so, this cultural fluency means Oroonoko aligns himself to some extent with European slave masters. As an African nobleman, he actively profits from the slave trade. He delivers

and owns slaves. Oroonoko is in the unique position of being both oppressor and oppressed. His view of slavery shifts when he becomes a slave himself.

As a leader in Africa, however, Oroonoko is elevated to a divine level. Behn was familiar with the divine, or godlike, rights of kings. In 17th-century England monarchs such as James I were said to rule by divine right, not answerable to any human authority. Similarly, Oroonoko's grandfather, the king, commands unquestioning obedience from his subjects, forcing Imoinda to marry him.

Oroonoko and Imoinda are viewed as deities by their people. Behn compares them to the Roman god Mars and goddess Venus. She describes the couple using hyperbole and superlatives. The narrator says that "there could be nothing in nature more beautiful, agreeable, or handsome" than Oroonoko's appearance. The magical, otherworldly hero and heroine elevate the narrative to a mythological level. Behn is telling a story specific to a place and time, but she's also telling a myth for the ages.

Since Oroonoko is one of the world's "great souls," he's capable of transcendent love. In this respect Oroonoko is similar to the courtly lover in Western medieval tradition. A male courtly lover worships the object of his affection, existing only to serve her. These lovers participate in an elevated discourse available to nobility and royalty. Similarly, Oroonoko speaks to Imoinda in a passionate language of love only the two of them can understand.

Loyalty is one of the courtly lover's traits, which Behn explains in the context of Coramantien tribal tradition. She portrays Oroonoko's tribe as polygamous. A man, especially a powerful prince such as Oroonoko, can have as many wives as he wants. When a man's first wives grow old, he marries younger ones. When Oroonoko declares lifelong fidelity to Imoinda, Behn considers this commitment a sign of unusual honor.

She goes further to implicate the hypocrisy of her countrymen in England. She contrasts Oroonoko's behavior with English men's "ill morals" and poor treatment of women, including abandonment.

Behn and her narrator often contrast the white settlers' belief in Western Christianity with Oroonoko's personal beliefs. His strong honor code comes from personal conviction rather than religion, as he'll explain later to the ship captain. The religious beliefs of his tribe may draw from West African or European

mythologies. Behn makes vague references to "the gods" of Coramantien tribes, including the "Captain of the Clouds." She suggests that human actions can invite the approval or wrath of these gods and that the gods can likewise intervene in human affairs.

Still, the plot is set in motion when the Coramantien king takes advantage of his right to be treated as a god. Like a deity in Greek or Roman mythology, the king acts with godlike power but human emotions.

The story of the king's pursuit of Imoinda creates drama and intrigue, similar to the sustained drama of a play. As a playwright, Behn knows how to entertain her audience. She creates suspense by separating the lovers and throwing roadblocks between them. She adds a stock trope of comedy by suggesting the younger Oroonoko can sexually compete against the much older king and win. Behn and her contemporary playwright John Dryden often mined the distinction between youth and age for comic effect. The parallel story of Onahal's passion for Aboan, a much younger man presented as a comically mismatched lover, adds some levity to the narrative. Plus, Oroonoko has to outsmart his enemy rather than defeating him in battle—another plot development likely to keep readers interested. Despite his outsized heroism, Oroonoko is weak when facing love, a character trait bringing him down to earth as a human.

Behn most likely bases the otan, or harem, on traditions she's heard of in Eastern countries, continuing the book's tendency toward exoticism. Even in her invented society, though, she's sensitive to the portrayal of gender. Coramantien's women have limitations and jealousies but also inventive minds for subverting cultural restrictions.

Imoinda's character also allows Behn to explore ownership of human beings. The king and Oroonoko battle for the right to Imoinda's virginity and hand in marriage. Once she receives the royal veil, she's required to submit to the king, but when she's sold into slavery, one form of submission is replaced with another. This time the consequences are much worse.

The king's tortured conscience doesn't come from the practice of slavery itself but from his failure to respect Imoinda's status. He distinguishes between a "common slave"—someone he feels deserves slavery—and someone such as Imoinda, who is considered more noble. An honorable, dignified death is a privilege, one Imoinda deserves. Though the king is jealous, manipulative, and controlling, he has a personal honor code. He

isn't the story's true villain.

The concept of the honorable death recurs near the end of the book, when Oroonoko and Imoinda battle people from a culture seemingly with no morals at all.

In Africa Oroonoko fights for a dignified death of his own. He determines to "meet death the noblest way" in battle, refusing to be a slave to a winning tribe. He shows humility and self-sacrifice, making his character more nuanced and admirable. Courage and goodness can come from anywhere, he tells his men, not just noble birth. The idea of behavior, rather than birth or rank, determining personal worth contrasts with the king's concept of commoners and royalty. Oroonoko's speech is also a lamentation: titles and glory can't protect him from pain.

Oroonoko fights twice in the narrative, both times to defend others. His performance on the battlefield in Africa draws parallels to epic heroes. Like the Greek hero Achilles, who returns to fighting to avenge a dead friend, Oroonoko leaps into action once his army is in danger. In war he transcends normal human strength. He even inspires affection and loyalty in slaves such as Jamoan. Until the book's final showdown, when his own people betray him, he's a leader and role model.

In a twist of situational irony, Oroonoko's moral code leads to his defeat at the hands of the English ship captain. As the narrative continues to engage ideas of honor and betrayal, it raises the stakes. Unlike a foe in war, the captain doesn't compete honorably. He tricks Oroonoko into believing they're friends and equals, getting him drunk in the guise of celebration. Oroonoko comes from a world with strict hierarchies and codes for behavior. He doesn't see the treachery coming. Like the native South Americans, he can't understand why a person would lie.

His immersion in European culture becomes an education in vice and manipulation. Now the hero has to live in a world where there is no honor. He's a prince turned into a slave. This sudden shift in the hero's status propels the narrative into new territory.

The strange fate of the Frenchman provides some clues to the European slave traders' mindset. The Frenchman was expelled from his country for "heretical notions," indicating he disagreed with the country's dominant religion. He's forced to board the ship with the African captives. Since he's European and white, however, he has the privileges of a Christian in Suriname.

Slave traders see Africans differently. European slave traders did kidnap African slave traders, though the practice was widely condemned. Behn's narrator stands back from the story to let the reader judge. She allows the facts of her story to speak for themselves, suggesting an unspoken disapproval of anyone who thinks the captain showed courage.

A New World without Honor

Oroonoko's honor code won't allow him to accept slavery, at least not without a fight. He'd rather die on his own terms than live in servitude to someone else. This aspect of his character stays constant until the novella's end.

His character evolves in other ways. At first he thinks everyone is as honorable as he is. He tries to reason with his enemies, assuming the captain will act in good faith. Later in the book Oroonoko doesn't trust anyone who's harmed him. He turns to violence and retribution as his only options. His view on the responsibilities of a slave changes, too. When he lands in Suriname, he encourages his people to be noble and brave. After spending more time in the colony, he decides rebellion and rejection of slavery are the true noble and brave actions.

The slave traders' behavior helps motivate this character change in Oroonoko. Writers other than Behn discussed the unchristian cruelty and duplicity of slave traders. Behn extends this condemnation to the rulers of the plantation by making Byam, the acting governor of Suriname, the villain to Oroonoko's hero.

The discussion between Oroonoko and the captain is fraught with tension and highlights the difference between their two worldviews. The captain's religion seems to affect his fortune only in the afterlife. Oroonoko's morals affect events in his current life. If Oroonoko breaks a vow, he won't be able to live with himself. He'll face not only the wrath of the gods, but also the anger of his fellow man. His actions will then reverberate beyond his own life, "eternally offending and diseasing all mankind." Dishonesty, to him is worse than death.

Oroonoko is the only character in the book who takes his principles this seriously. He acts honorably not to preserve his own safety or avoid the gods' punishment. He sticks to his code because he has no other choice. Oroonoko's identity is inseparable from his morality. Behn emphasizes the consistent dignity of his character, a nobleman forced to live as someone

he is not.

He continues to show traits of a leader and literary hero. He makes long speeches explaining his beliefs, denouncing his enemies, and lamenting injustice. Even those who don't know him recognize his noble bearing and give him privileges. Imoinda, as the heroine, is treated with similar respect. Restoration heroic drama, a genre Behn used to craft her novella, often told the stories of royal characters from faraway countries. Like Oroonoko, the international monarchs onstage often acted like European royalty. These stories appealed to the audience's desire for exotic elements while providing a way for playwrights to address debates about England's monarchy.

Oroonoko's new name, Caesar, is also telling. Behn's narrator believes she is telling an epic story, one similar to the story of Julius Caesar, the Roman leader famously betrayed by his countrymen. Behn calls English King James II "Caesar" in many of her poems, indicating she felt the king was wrongfully betrayed, too.

Hints at the betrayal of Oroonoko abound in the book. When Oroonoko first meets Trefry, Oroonoko doesn't want to trust him. Slaves considered a "backeary," or slave master, untrustworthy by nature. Oroonoko still has some hope, though. He's learned to respect wit and intelligence as signs of good character.

Trefry, the overseer of Parham Plantation, is based on Lord Willoughby's real overseer at Parham and St. John's Hill, where the narrator stays. Lord Willoughby was the Earl of Parham, and the plantation is named after him.

Behn makes Trefry a morally conflicted character. His affection for Oroonoko seems genuine, but he can't or won't use his authority to save Oroonoko from the hero's eventual downfall. Oroonoko is similarly helpless when he encounters the other slaves. They pay him "divine homage" and treat him as a god, but he knows he can't rescue them.

Slaves received Roman names in English colonies as allusions to the slave-owning Romans. As the narrator says, the new names were easier for Westerners to pronounce and understand. Slaves lost their countries, their families, and finally their identities.

Caesar's new name foreshadows his tragic ending. Like Julius Caesar, he's born to be a ruler, and he will trust the wrong people. Though Caesar maintains his new name, in Suriname

he lets the narrator know his old name. He clings to his old, fallen nobility.

Imoinda's new name, Clemene, may come from the Latin *clementia*, meaning "gentleness." It's an indication of her modest character. Clemene doesn't keep her new name. The narrator soon starts calling her Imoinda again, occasionally referring to her as Clemene. Unlike Caesar, who can assimilate easily into European culture, Imoinda has only her African identity. Her European name doesn't fit her the way Caesar's name fits him. She's treated with more respect than African women usually received on plantations. Behn hints at the overseers' typical cruelty toward enslaved women when the dinner guests are amused by Trefry's civility to Clemene.

Behn mentions the naming ritual and the separation of enslaved families at colonial outposts but doesn't describe the effect of this erasure on slaves. She reveals the physical violence and brutality of slavery, as well as its damage to the mind and soul, primarily through the story of her hero. By focusing on the tale of tragic lovers in a terrible circumstance, she avoids making the book a universal condemnation of slavery. In fact Behn, through her narrator, says England should have kept the Suriname outpost instead of selling it to the Dutch.

Caesar and Clemene enjoy many privileges other slaves don't. Additionally, the white settlers are invested in their lives, even befriend them. The truth, however, always remains the same on the plantation, even when it's unspoken. The slaves aren't free. Unlike the Frenchman, who can make a fortune in Suriname, Caesar can't earn money.

Also, Caesar and Clemene are constantly under observation. The narrator is an observer, noticing the unusual art of Clemene's tattoos. The tattoos may have come from Behn's knowledge of Eastern tradition, where body art was more common and where slaves were treasured rather than simply used for work. The two lovers are a curiosity and a novelty, but they lack the power to tell their own story. The observer—the visiting white narrator—relates the events of their lives to the reader instead.

Rising Tension and Cultural

Clashes

Once Caesar realizes his lack of control, his doubts rise to the surface. The narrative begins moving toward its climactic moment. He sees what the promises of white settlers really mean. Since he needs to get his unborn child out of slavery, the stakes are higher than ever.

His response to the narrator's books indicates his changing mindset. The narrator reads Plutarch's *Lives* to Caesar, a book about ancient Greek and Roman leaders' triumphs and failures. This reference is one of many allusions to classical heroes, particularly defeated ones, in this novella. Caesar, who still wants to see himself as a hero, enjoys these stories, but he resists efforts to convert him or Imoinda to Christianity. He doesn't admire the models of Christians he's seen so far.

At this point the narrator inserts herself into the story in a different way. She becomes a major character who can determine the story's outcome. She warns Caesar his doubt may get him into trouble and reminds him of the power structures in the colony. If he accuses his captors of lying, he might make things worse for himself. Does the narrator have his best interests at heart? Is she encouraging Caesar to remain a slave by reminding him he has no choice? Can Caesar save himself through his "rough and fierce" spirit, or will his actions backfire?

Still bound by a code of honor, Caesar insists he won't strike first. Even so, he's turning from a romantic hero into a more action-hungry hero. Love has allowed him to be vulnerable, which is a luxury he can't afford in slavery. The narrator drops hints Caesar is craving war, conflict, and revenge, though he promises not to harm anyone.

The narrator, meanwhile, begins to be wary. She may be watching Caesar for his own safety, but her main goal is to protect the interests of the white settlers. She knows Caesar has a lot of influence over the other slaves. If he rebels, they will follow. As an Englishwoman she has an interest in keeping the plantation intact.

Regardless, her admiration for Caesar remains constant. She devotes a large section of the book to a travelogue, or description of places a traveler encounters, taking the reader to visit Suriname's flora, fauna, and native populations. Woven into this section are awestruck accounts of Caesar's heroic exploits in unfamiliar terrain. Caesar's nature is to defend the

weak and defeat the strong. When he saves the unprepared settlers from dangerous animals, he shows the superhuman strength revealed on the battlefield in Africa.

As the narrator explores an unfamiliar land, she returns to her view of Suriname as a Golden Age paradise. The weather is always springlike, and the trees always blossom. The real climate of Suriname was harsher and less comfortable—Behn idealizes the weather for dramatic effect. Other specific details, such as the unusual animals and the indigenous tribes' rope-based counting system, may have been based on Behn's own reading and travels.

The native South Americans and Africans again function as both ignorant innocents and the exotic, frightening other. Europeans showed off their technology in many records of cross-cultural encounters, and in *Oroonoko* the narrator notes the native people's awe when a European sets a fire using mirrors. She briefly observes how unusual the Europeans seem to the native people. Each culture greets the other with a sense of awe and wonder. Caesar serves as a cultural broker, or go-between, when the European and non-European cultures meet.

The new world also carries an air of menace to the narrator. Caesar's escapade with the electric eel—when he is almost killed by trying to catch it with bare hands—besides adding a jarring comic effect, creates the sense of a dangerous world with strange creatures. She frequently uses the word *barbarous*—brutal or uncivilized—to describe aspects of the slaves' lives in Africa, and she observes Suriname through a similar lens.

The native war captains' appearance terrifies her. She describes their self-mutilation ritual in graphic detail. This ritual was likely invented by Behn, possibly to shock the reader with the grotesque otherness of the tribe. Caesar will later reenact the ritual for honor's sake as the war captains do. Instead of showing his valor in battle, he'll show his need to die on his own terms.

The narrator mentions "gold dust" in a reference to a rumored city of gold in South America. The narrator regrets several times what England lost by not keeping the colony, including the possibility of gold. During her visit to the tribes, she alludes to the ways the Dutch will torment the native population after the 1667 Dutch takeover of Suriname. When Behn visited Suriname in 1663–64, the Dutch and French were already moving to take control of the colony from Lord Willoughby.

The Hero's Betrayal and Tragic End

Besides a few passing references, Behn leaves the European nations' struggle for domination outside of the story. She also largely omits the growing unrest among the colonists, many of whom opposed Willoughby and his supporters at Parham Plantation. Instead, she focuses on the more dramatic narrative of Caesar's future.

Caesar realizes his child may be born into slavery if he doesn't take action. He wants a different legacy. So does Imoinda, whom the narrator now calls by her original name again—a sign Imoinda is reclaiming her African identity.

As Caesar switches his allegiance to the slaves, so does the narrator. She presents the English settlers as a comically outnumbered group with inferior weapons. The reader is primed to hope for the slave rebellion's success.

Caesar's impassioned speech provides the novella's climactic moment. His identification with the slaves may seem surprising. In Suriname, Caesar has had what the narrator calls "only the name of a slave, and ... nothing of the toil and labor." He's been treated as an honored guest. The story hasn't shown him completing any of the backbreaking work he describes as the other slaves' lot.

Being enslaved for eternity is a damage to his honor. To Caesar the fight for freedom is about identity as much as daily labor. He compares the slave's position to that of an animal, referencing monkeys, dogs, horses, and other beasts. These descriptions reflect the dehumanizing language of racial slurs Europeans used against Africans. Caesar adds visceral descriptions of physical punishments slaves received, such as the "sordid stripes" of "whipping."

The speech saves its harshest words for the white slave masters and traders, whom Caesar calls "below the wildest savages." His language subverts the English perception of Africans and other non-European groups as savage. The real savages are supposedly civilized and Christian.

Caesar is also critical of the slaves, though. When he first lands in Suriname, he encourages his countrymen to suffer with honor. Now he sees there is no honor in slavery. A loss in battle is a legitimate consequence of defeat, which "would not anger

a noble heart." African slavery in European colonies is different. It denies the slaves humanity and any chance at dignity. Why would they put up with it?

The slaves, Caesar says, allow themselves to be treated poorly. They have agency. They can choose to unite and rebel. When Tuscan points out that the slaves' choices are realistically limited by a number of factors, such as their families' safety and the difficulty of escape, Caesar persists. He even urges the men to disown any women who stay behind.

The book foreshadows Caesar's own defeat. He models his escape after the Roman general Hannibal, and Hannibal never made it to Rome. Caesar, too, will fail to reach his destination of a new colony. His plan to be a settler and a king in the new land reflects his desire to earn back his old noble status.

As Caesar breaks ranks with the Europeans and joins with the oppressed slaves, the narrator aligns herself firmly with the colonists. Behn's narrator, like Caesar, is in a complicated cultural position as both oppressed and oppressor. As a woman she's vulnerable in a way male settlers are not. She has less decision-making power than the white men on the plantation. However, her status as a white Englishwoman gives her more authority than Caesar and lets her easily secure her own safety.

Once the narrator imagines herself to be in danger, she joins the colonists, saying "we" gathered the militia against the rebelling slaves. She places herself in the vulnerable group of English women and children—not in the group of male colonists who attack Caesar. This shift in perspective lets her distance herself from the settlers' most brutal actions. She keeps the reader's sympathy by not harming Caesar herself. Despite her admiration for Caesar and refusal to cause him direct harm, her first priority is her own safety.

The narrator's role is sidelined when Behn introduces a clear-cut villain to the story. Behn takes creative liberties with the character of William Byam, who was the real governor of Suriname, making him embody all the duplicity and cruelty of the slave masters. In fact, Byam is the only settler advocating violence.

Though other settlers want to avoid open conflict, they fear mutiny. The reader may expect the English colonists to eventually turn against Caesar, but another betrayal is more startling: the readiness of the other slaves to join the English once the conflict escalates.

This betrayal is less an opposition to Caesar than an activation of survival instinct. Slaves did what it took to stay alive, and this measure often meant pleasing their master. When women and children encourage their men to stop fighting, the men think of their families' safety. Their dilemma shows the impact slavery has on the mind and heart. As Caesar says when he encourages the slaves to rebel, they've been conditioned to accept punishment. This conditioning has had a lasting effect. While at first they might have fought for honor, now they fight to keep from losing any more than they already have. The only slaves to keep fighting—Caesar, Tuscan, and Imoinda—are the slaves the story sets up to be sacrificial.

True to his honor code, Caesar would rather die with his entire family than surrender. By now he knows Byam's promise to pardon him is a lie. Caesar is no longer trusting but on guard against the white settlers. He thinks no better of the slaves who have defected. He thought they had the moral courage to keep their commitments and reject a life of slavery. Without an honor code and a sense of their own worth, they're "by nature slaves." Caesar's extreme stance seems like an argument that some slaves deserve their fate, but his stern moral code won't allow any lies. The slaves promise to stick together and then go back on their word once the going gets rough. Caesar is an uncompromising hero.

He seems to have learned his lesson about trusting the colonists. However, he makes one final mistake. Adapting his behavior to the code of the community he's in, he trusts a written contract to save him. If white men don't keep a verbal promise, he believes they'll keep a written one.

This retreat ends once again in betrayal and graphic violence. The slaves are now fully on the side of the colonists. They've become a mob, attacking Caesar instead of following him. Even Trefry worries the slaves will harm him if he speaks for Caesar. Caesar represents a stance they're not willing to take—the hero's death and extreme self-sacrifice.

When the brutality of the colonists becomes clear, the narrator once again shifts allegiances. She continues to balance her power as a white English settler with her female vulnerability. Did she have enough authority, as she claims, to stop Caesar's punishment if she'd been informed? She isn't sure herself. She's constantly negotiating power boundaries. After Trefry manages to spare Caesar's life, the narrator—now assured Caesar won't harm anyone but Byam—rejoins the group of "we" as a friend to Caesar.

Caesar, meanwhile, has sworn off any allegiance to the colonists. He reverts to his African identity and calls himself Oroonoko again. He's been betrayed throughout the book: by the king, the ship captain, and his fellow slaves. He won't forgive treachery any longer.

The only acts left to him are revenge and an honorable death. Imoinda, as bound to a moral code as Caesar is, will receive the dignified death the king of Coramantien denied her. She decides her child can't be born into slavery at any cost. She proved herself by fighting alongside her husband. Caesar, once again, acts to protect the woman he loves. As a further romantic touch, Behn gives her lovers the possibility of meeting in their own country in the afterlife.

Tension remains in the narrative after Imoinda's death. Will Caesar get his revenge? His grief nearly kills him. The desire for vengeance might keep him alive. Behn denies her hero the satisfaction of this ending, however. None of the slave masters are punished in the story. Caesar's last resort is to deprive the colonists of the satisfaction of killing him.

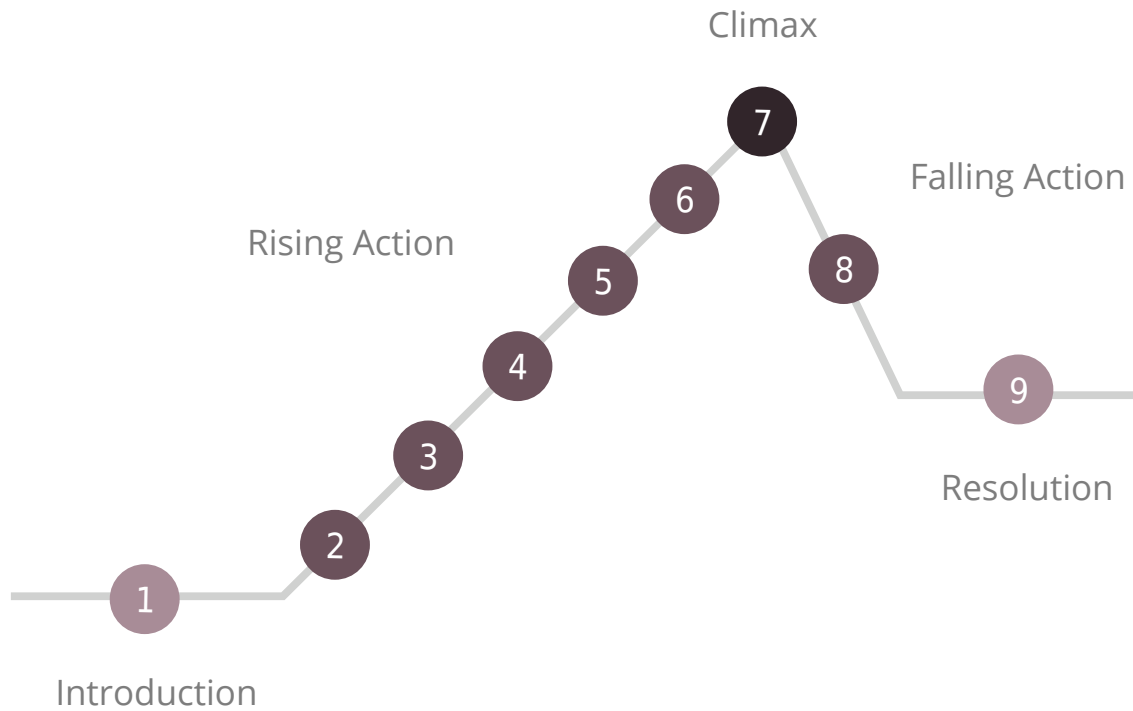
Then he gets what he wants. Ignoring the pleas of the female settlers, he threatens to murder "a great many" if he's not allowed to die on his own terms. The reader can see how different Caesar's world truly is from the world of the settlers. He doesn't avoid sickness and tragedy the way the narrator does. He faces death head-on.

His graphic self-torture and execution may surprise modern readers. Behn's 17th-century audience, though, had seen criminals punished by public mutilation similar to what she describes. Behn had probably read stories of Catholic martyrs' suffering in which the ability to endure pain was seen as a sign of honor. Caesar's superhuman qualities emerge again in his death when he remains bold and uncompromising. He dismisses Banister with a cutting insult. He smokes tobacco, which was often given to slaves as a calming agent, while he's tortured—a feat the narrator regards as impressive. Readers join the colonists as spectators to the execution. The book doesn't allow them to look away from the most brutal aspects of slavery.

The narrator views the "spectacles of a mangled king" as tragic reminders of a great man who suffered the greatest possible injustice. Her language asserts Oroonoko's status as an epic hero history deserves to remember. The final lines name Imoinda as the courageous heroine, achieving immortal status in her own right. Behn's nonfiction narrative conceit allows her

to write Oroonoko and Imoinda into history.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Oroonoko and Imoinda fall in love.

Rising Action

2. The king marries Imoinda.
3. Oroonoko and Imoinda meet for one night.
4. The king sells Imoinda into slavery.
5. The ship captain tricks Oroonoko and sells him into slavery.
6. Oroonoko and Imoinda reunite and marry in Suriname.

Climax

7. Oroonoko leads a slave rebellion.

Falling Action

8. Oroonoko gives Imoinda and her child an honorable death.

Resolution

9. The settlers execute Oroonoko in public.

Timeline of Events

Soon after

The king marries Imoinda.

Some time later

The ship captain betrays Oroonoko, selling him into slavery.

Soon after

Imoinda becomes pregnant.

The next day

The English settlers catch the escaped slaves and punish Oroonoko.

About a week later

Oroonoko is executed.

Sometime in the 1660s

Oroonoko falls in love with Imoinda.

Some time later

The king sells Imoinda into slavery.

Some time later

Oroonoko and Imoinda reunite and marry in Suriname.

Some months later, Sunday

Oroonoko, now named Caesar by the slave owners, leads the plantation's slaves in a rebellion.

A few days later

Oroonoko gives Imoinda and her child an honorable death.

“” Quotes

"The pictures of the pen shall outlast those of the pencil, and even worlds themselves."

— Narrator

In Behn's epistolary dedication, she promotes the power of stories to preserve lives. She wants to immortalize the character of Oroonoko through her book. The reference to "worlds themselves" implies that a good book has a timeless message that outlasts the culture of its creation. Behn wants Oroonoko's story to be as enduring as an epic.

"I was myself an eye-witness to a great part of what you find here."

— Narrator

The narrator claims the story is based on real events she has witnessed. Behn knows readers approach invented stories and true stories differently. Truth seems more relevant to readers' lives. Behn blurs the boundary between fiction and nonfiction by making the narrator's voice similar to her own. The reader is, therefore, primed to trust the narrator and to reckon with the "true" events as if they really happened.

"These people represented ... the first state of innocence, before man knew how to sin."

— Narrator

Behn describes the native South Americans in the language of the Christian religion. In many mythologies, including the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, humans lived in an early period of happiness before evil entered the world. According to

the biblical story, once humans learned to sin and commit evil acts, they left Eden behind at their own peril. Behn uses this myth to contrast the dishonesty of English slave traders with the purity of native populations.

"Religion would here but destroy that tranquility they possess by ignorance."

— Narrator

The primary purpose of European colonization was financial gain through trade. Still, Europeans also attempted to convert native populations to Christianity. The English often equated Christian religion with morality and civilization, viewing non-Christians as heathens or savages. However, Behn observes that Christian colonizers don't behave very well either. They introduce labor and profit motives to a civilization reliant on nature. Behn's use of the word *ignorance*, a word with a negative connotation, suggests a positive simplicity. She admires a culture she views as almost childlike in its innocence.

"It is not titles make men brave or good, or birth that bestows courage."

— Oroonoko

Oroonoko has noble birth and royal titles—he's modeled after an epic hero. His modesty makes him human. As he encourages his army to choose a new leader, he tells them to look beyond traditional signs of success. This motivation will be important to Oroonoko later as he struggles to maintain his own courage in slavery. By presenting a slave as her hero, Behn agrees those without "titles" or markers of social status have more opportunities to prove their courage.

"Is that all the obligation he has to be just to his oath?"

— Oroonoko

The ship captain claims he'll keep his promise to Oroonoko because he fears eternal punishment otherwise. Oroonoko wonders why it takes the fear of torment in the next life for the captain to keep his word in this life. Here is where Oroonoko begins to doubt that the Christian religion makes its followers better people. The captain, a Christian, relies on his god and the abstract threat of eternal damnation to keep him honest. He can't do the right thing for its own sake in the here and now.

*"The man of no honor suffers ...
the scorn and contempt of the
honester world."*

— Oroonoko

Like many epic heroes, Oroonoko has a fatal flaw. His flaw is trusting the people around him—believing everyone is as honest as he is. This quote sums up his worldview. He believes anyone who breaks an oath suffers "scorn and contempt." However, on the Suriname plantation, those who break oaths remain in positions of power.

*"A man of wit could not be a knave
or villain."*

— Narrator

Oroonoko is familiar with the culture of educated Europeans, who prize traits such as intelligence and wit. They equate these traits—the ability to hold a conversation and charm a listener—with virtue and goodness. Oroonoko notices the European slave master Trefry's intellect and trusts him as a result. This quote, a maxim Oroonoko believes, shows how Oroonoko has adapted to European values. He trusts that men who show signs of intelligence will also act virtuously. This trust will be broken toward the end of the novella, but Oroonoko doesn't know this yet.

*"The royal youth appeared in spite
of the slave."*

— Narrator

This quote separates Oroonoko's two identities: the "royal youth" and the "slave." Once Oroonoko is captured, he appears to lose his royal status. Still, this status is part of who he is; slavery can't take it away. Behn portrays Oroonoko as a hero who can transcend his circumstances. Although slavery stripped identity from its captives, Oroonoko holds on to the dignity he had in his former life.

*"They had lost the divine quality of
man, and were become insensible
asses."*

— Narrator

The narrator reports that Oroonoko describes the slaves' plight in graphic terms. He argues humans are born with a "divine quality" animals lack. With this quote Behn emphasizes the humanity of slaves. She also depicts slavery's damage to the spirit. When humans are treated like "insensible" animals—animals that lack qualities such as reason and intellect—they become animals.

*"Why ... should we be slaves to an
unknown people?"*

— Oroonoko

In Africa, Oroonoko was a slave owner. Slavery was the agreed-upon consequence of losing to another tribe or country in battle. The winning armies earned the right to slaves through their superior battle skill, but the slaves in Suriname have been taken captive by foreign powers most of them have never seen before. They labor to make money for these foreigners. The English slave traders have done nothing to earn slaves; they've simply taken them. This deceit has no place in Oroonoko's

code of honor.

"We are bought and sold ... to be the sport of women, fools, and cowards."

— Oroonoko

This quote, part of Oroonoko's speech to his fellow slaves, shows his true opinion of the colonizers. Keeping slaves is "sport," or a low-stakes game, for the English in Suriname. Women are entertained and impressed by the educated Oroonoko—he kills animals they won't touch. The slave masters, the "fools" and "cowards," profit from slave labor so they can live an easy lifestyle in the colonies. Since Oroonoko has seen the world of the white settlers up close, he knows what they really think of their slaves.

"Though no people professed so much, none performed so little."

— Narrator

After multiple encounters with English colonizers and many vows to return him and his family to their country, Oroonoko's had enough. He's seen the hypocrisy in Trefry's and Byam's promises. The gulf between what the English say and what they do convinces Oroonoko he's better off without them. As an English colonist herself, Behn also sees the repeated failures of the people in power. England mismanaged the colony in Suriname and eventually surrendered to the Dutch. Behn critiques the failure of English leaders to live up to their promises in many ways.

"With them a man ought ... never to credit one word they spoke."

— Narrator

Behn argues colonized people learn how to lie and scheme from their colonizers. Even Oroonoko, well-versed in European culture, didn't know how to be on guard against liars. Slavery has altered his view of the world. He now knows there are people who will never tell him the truth. At first he was trusting and ready to negotiate; now he's defensive and ready to fight. The story shows how an honorable hero operates in a world without honor and how his beliefs can change depending on the foes he faces.

"Oroonoko scorns to live with the indignity that was put on Caesar."

— Oroonoko

Oroonoko's many identities—slave and free; European-educated and African-born; royal and common—fight for dominance. This quote shows he thinks of Oroonoko and Caesar as separate sides of himself. As he plots revenge against Byam, he returns to his original identity as an African prince. He realizes Oroonoko would never endure the punishments Caesar has endured. Oroonoko, who urged his fellow slaves to rise above their slavery, knows he'll need to do the same. As his death approaches, he returns to the mindset of a warrior who will die on his own terms or not at all.

Symbols

Names

Names represent identity and history. The renaming of slaves was a common practice. As their identity changed from free people to slaves, their names changed from African to European. When [Oroonoko](#) and [Imoinda](#) receive the new names Caesar and Clemene, they leave their old selves behind. This method of cultural erasure negatively affects Oroonoko's self-image and foreshadows his fate.

Oroonoko is a beloved prince in his country. Caesar, however, is a powerless leader destined for betrayal. While Oroonoko

learned European languages and history willingly, Caesar must adapt to European culture to survive. In Suriname, Oroonoko isn't sure which group to ally with—the slave masters or the slaves. When the narrator tries to talk him out of rebellion, he confesses his doubt in the trustworthiness of his slave masters. [Behn](#) takes Oroonoko's Roman name from the emperor Julius Caesar, whose close confidants participated in his murder plot. The renamed African Caesar is also betrayed by the slaves who once worshiped him as a god. While Oroonoko is a successful leader, Caesar is ultimately a failed one. The renamed Caesar suffers indignities he swears he would never have let happen to Oroonoko.

Imoinda's European name doesn't stick. The narrator calls her Clemene for only part of the story. Once the renamed Clemene gives up hope in the Europeans and allies with the slaves, she's called Imoinda again. This reversion to her old name symbolizes her rejection of European culture and the resilience of her true identity.

The Royal Veil

The royal veil, a ceremonial invitation in Coramantien culture, represents submission and control. The invitation it represents is a demand in disguise. Like slavery itself, the royal veil takes away freedom and choice.

Once [Imoinda](#) receives the royal veil, she's required to marry the king. [Oroonoko](#) realizes these rules present a greater obstacle than armies or fortresses he could conquer. He can't overcome the obligations of his culture as easily. Tradition becomes a force more powerful than physical intimidation.

The royal veil also gets its power from the king's ultimate authority. He can kill Imoinda for disobeying him. This authority is paralleled near the end of the book when the escaped slaves return to their masters. The slaves know that their masters have authority and can put them to death. Threat and control become more powerful than their own desires.

Themes

The Toll of Slavery

[Behn](#) writes for 17th-century readers who have accepted slavery as a way of life. [Oroonoko](#)'s fight for freedom and his condemnation of slave traders reveal the human cost of slavery. He and [Imoinda](#) lack power over their own bodies and lives.

When Oroonoko is captured, his nobility is put to the test. Slavery becomes a trial of character for the hero. At first he fights using the skills of diplomacy. He negotiates with the ship captain for his release from chains and tells his fellow slaves to accept their fate with courage. In Suriname, however, he learns that good behavior won't make slavery any better. The condition is dehumanizing no matter how nobly he and others try to bear it. Plus, he can't negotiate with the European slave masters because they don't keep their promises. After failed attempts to buy his freedom from [Trefry](#), Oroonoko sees he's trapped as a slave no matter what. He determines the only way to fight violence is through insurrection and rebellion. His captors then punish him brutally. The story shows that slavery brings out the worst and most violent of human impulses.

Slavery also affects Oroonoko and Imoinda's view of the future. Once they realize their unborn child will never enjoy freedom, they decide death is better for both the child and Imoinda. When Oroonoko pushes his fellow slaves to rebellion, he tells them slavery will last for eternity. They will never be anything other than slaves unless they resist. Their names have been changed, and their families have been separated. Their identities are irrevocably altered. After the rebellion, the slaves give in to their masters, revealing how slavery has affected their view of themselves. They see they can only survive through obedience. Oroonoko's final fate shows them the cost of resistance and the lack of power even the royal slave has over his own life.

The Honor Code

To [Oroonoko](#), honor means keeping his word, living with dignity, and defending his people. Honor is more important to him than life. This dedication to a code, a feature of many heroes in epic and medieval literature, elevates [Behn](#)'s hero to a higher plane than the rest of the characters. The honor code affects Oroonoko's actions both as a warrior and as a frustrated slave.

When Oroonoko fights, he comes to win. After the loss of [Imoinda](#), what breaks through Oroonoko's depression is the possibility his army might lose. When Oroonoko battles the slave traders in Suriname, he continues to fight after his fellow slaves have betrayed him for the other side. If he is under attack, he will defend himself to the point of death.

However, honor includes obeying the terms of the world in which he operates. When the narrator sees that Oroonoko is growing restless in Suriname, she wants to ensure he won't harm the settlers. Oroonoko agrees "he could do nothing that honor should not dictate." When Oroonoko gives his word, he keeps it. Otherwise, as he explains to the ship captain, "all brave and honest men" will despise him. Even when Oroonoko is surrounded by dishonest men such as slave traders, he obeys a higher law than those around him.

European Colonialism and Power

Colonialism, or the process of occupying and controlling another country, extended the British Empire around the world. [Behn](#) doesn't condemn colonialism—she accepts England's domination of other countries as an essential part of trade. Still, she examines colonialism's impact on native populations and on the colonizers themselves.

Behn's narrator imagines the native population living in blissful harmony with nature before colonists arrived in Suriname. Their innocence means they don't have any concept of dishonesty, vice, or evil. She compares them to Adam and Eve in biblical legend, who lived in peace before knowledge was

introduced to the world. With knowledge came sin. Behn compares the colonizers' attempt to civilize native populations with the devastating introduction of knowledge to people who were better off without it. Colonizers introduce religion and laws, practices the Europeans consider necessary to preserve order. However, Behn's narrator argues that these practices only teach native people to lie, scheme, and manipulate. The African country of Coramantien has strict laws, but the citizens follow these laws and respect them. Even the cunning king, who abuses his power to marry [Imoinda](#), feels guilty he didn't give her an honorable death. Behn portrays Coramantien as more civilized and self-regulated than the European society that enslaves Coramantien's people.

Colonialism may sustain England's economy as a whole, but it can also corrupt individuals. Behn's narrator observes how power reveals the vicious nature of settlers such as [Byam](#). The council of English colonizers, with whom Byam discusses Caesar's fate, consists of lawless men who swear and fight with one another. They are encouraged to govern their slaves with fear and intimidation; Byam sends quarters of Caesar's body to slave masters so they can scare their slaves into obedience. Behn portrays some slave masters, such as [Trefry](#) and Colonel Martin, as essentially decent men, but they don't have as much power as those who are willing to govern through violence. They can't stop Caesar's punishment and death.

Suggested Reading

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