

Oroonoko: or the history of the royal slave penguin

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Oroonoko and his Path to Enlightenment Aphra Behn's Oroonoko, written with dedicated themes of racism, freedom, and slavery, are a vivid representation of the 18th century. During this time, enlightenment was exemplified, and the age saw violent slave trading on a global scale. It is clear to see why such topics might garner such interest, as Behn's vivid descriptions of the African natives and their plight is so strongly detailed. Aphra Behn, although seeking to explore racial divide, is seemingly looking for more, and it is seen through the theme of enlightenment. Through the character of Oroonoko, Behn asks her readers to explore their understanding of what it means to be enlightened, and what it means to be profane. In exploring Immanuel Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?", and Behn's feelings through slavery, racism, and enlightenment, one can gain a better understanding towards the age. Early on, it is clear that Behn wants us to sympathize with Oroonoko, as she tells readers that she has personally witnessed the great actions of "The Royal Slave", and describes him as a great man. She says, "I have often seen and conversed with this great man, and been a witness to many of his mighty actions — the most illustrious courts could not have produced a braver man", this exemplifies the respect and dignity that Oroonoko carries with him. There is no question that his character is admirable and physically beautiful, his complexion is "not of that brown, rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony, or polished jet", and "his nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat", it is evident that his African inherited traits are paired with those of a European, all to make the ideal masculine body, and ideals of masculine beauty. Additionally, Oroonoko is educated and is admired for so, he speaks "French and English — his discourse was admirable upon almost any

<https://assignbuster.com/oroonoko-or-the-history-of-the-royal-slave-penguin/>

subject; and whoever had heard him speak, would have been convinced of their errors”, the prince is unlike no other man in the words of the narrator, assumably Aphra Behn.

Although Oroonoko is beautiful, brilliant, and admired, he is still a slave and is not in possession of his own liberty, this is shown as he “ endured no more of the slave but the name”. Aphra Behn, going back to the sympathy that is placed upon us, regards it as a misfortune to be a slave, particularly for a great man like Oroonoko. However, she does not appear to be particularly horrified by the experience of the slave trade or the way in which it is conducted, which she describes in rather pragmatic terms “ but at the cutting off the other arm, his head sunk, and his pipe dropped”. Slavery can be, in some ways, seen romanticized by Behn, which can for the most part be seen with the reunion of Oroonoko and Imoinda. For instance, upon Oroonoko’s arrival at the “ house of the slaves”, it is noted that the black slaves “ prepared all their barbarous music, and everyone killed and dressed something of his own stock and clubbing it together, made a most magnificent supper”, this all seems a rather joyful description for his arrival at a slave camp, and odd that the English captors would allow for such festivities to happen. The light treatment of slavery, possibly having to do with Oroonoko and Imoinda’s status as nobles, is overall seemingly light considering the graveness of slavery in this age. In Immanuel Kant’s “ What is Enlightenment?” he describes enlightenment as “ the human being’s emergence from his self-incurred minority *sapere aude*” to discover and to be informed were amongst the most important qualities to have in this time. Kant states that cowardice and the dependance on the guidance of others is

the reason for self-incurred minority, which in turn, strengthens their laziness. He proposes that the requirements for enlightenment are to think freely, act judiciously and to be treated in accordance with one's dignity "upon the principles of government, which finds it profitable to itself to treat the human being, who is now more than a machine, in keeping with his dignity". It is clear that the character of Oroonoko is Behn's way of contrasting enlightened with the profane.

Oroonoko's virtue does not allow him to be deceptive of others. It is only when he is wronged against, that he rebels and fights back. This is evident when he finally has to acknowledge his grandfather's treachery, and later when he realizes he will always be subject to the Christian Europeans. To compare Immanuel Kant's essay, and Aphra Behn's Oroonoko with one another, the Europeans attempt to 'enlighten', and educate people through the settling of colonies and slavery. However, Oroonoko is able to acknowledge the subjugation of the African race and the racial prejudice among the European Christians. If this society was truly an "enlightened age", then slavery and deceit would not be tolerated. If it were the case, the African race would have the freedom to have their own thoughts, and ideas and would not be forced into blind obedience. Oroonoko asks of his people, "Why, my dear friends and fellow sufferers, should we be slaves to an unknown people? ... And why are we, by the chance of war, become their slaves? We are bought and sold like apes, or monkeys". Oroonoko exemplifies enlightenment when he is questioned: why him and his people are slaves. Oroonoko is smart, and he is capable of understanding that the leadership that has been forced upon them is dishonest, the Europeans

wrongfully enforcing obedience as well as physical and intellectual slavery. Oroonoko endeavoured “ to make those free, who were by nature slaves,” who had been “ whipped into the knowledge of the Christian gods”. He had “ no faith in the white man, or the gods they adored; who instructed them in principles so false”. Oroonoko questions the superiority of the Europeans, and how they have tried to corrupt their native civilization and feed them false ideas and knowledge while wrongfully keeping them in captivity. Through Oroonoko’s honor, he is led into enlightenment.

Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* does involve the issues of racism and slavery, but we must consider these issues in relation to her notion of enlightenment and the profane. While slavery may seem like an issue that revolves solely around racism, most societies during the time see it as an issue of class. It is not that Oroonoko is African which makes his subjection to slavery so appalling; it is his social rank that Behn seeks to point out. There is a clear underlying ideology of white supremacy in this story. Behn firstly describes Oroonoko as a beautiful man – like no other – with European features interlaced with his African traits, transcending all of those of his race. Behn, although this may be far off, may even demonstrate some European superiority, even if subconsciously, through describing Oroonoko’s physical attributes and nobility, which would never be expected from an African man, reinforcing that he is one-of-a-kind. Behn conveys – through Oroonoko – the horrors of slavery and depicts the European colonists as violent and wicked. Oroonoko, being aware of the oppression of his race and the natives, exemplifies enlightenment through his abilities to understand that they have been wrongfully enslaved, and Kant’s *sapere aude*, dare to know, is shown

here in Oroonoko. Behn finds profanity not necessarily in slavery, but in the lack of societies to hold true to their honor. The king does not honor Oroonoko; he is more concerned with possessions.

The Europeans do not honor Oroonoko, as they continuously cheat, lie, and murder him through dismemberment. Oroonoko stands above these communities as he takes them for their word, even when he was previously deceived. Oroonoko rises above the profanity within society; it is his honor that leads him into enlightenment, and through this enlightenment, the European's superiority is evident.