

# Rising and roman, african and flat: aphra behn's oroonoko



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In the 19th century novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe portrays Uncle Tom, a black slave, as an heroic figure. Written shortly before the American Civil War, the novel attempts to change negative moral attitudes towards blacks. However, in order to accomplish this, Stowe makes Uncle Tom appeal to Southern Plantation owners, who would otherwise dismiss the book as abolitionist nonsense. Stowe makes Uncle Tom appeal to Northerners and Southerners alike by depicting him not as a typical slave, but rather as a devout Christian with a "white moral code." Similarly, Aphra Behn's 17th century composition *Oroonoko* was written in response to the growing African slave trade. Like Stowe, Behn makes her black hero appeal to a greater audience, which she accomplishes by describing Oroonoko as having European and royal attributes. One of Behn's primary objectives is to make Oroonoko clearly distinguished from the rest of his race, as in: "a beauty so transcending all those of his gloomy race" (2174). She can do this with relative ease for two reasons: 1) she writes a reportage, in the first person narrative, and 2) she is conscious of herself as a writer (i. e. "This prince, as I have described him" (2175)). Oroonoko's physical description is the easiest and most effective mode for underscoring the way in which he is superior to the rest of his race. Behn writes: The most famous statuary could not form the figure of a man more admirably turned from head to foot. His face was not of that brown, rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony or polished jet. His eyes were the most awful that could be seen, and very piercing, the whit of 'em being like snow, as were his teeth. His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat (2175)The juxtaposition of the phrases "rising and Roman" and "African and flat" illustrates the distinction that Behn is trying to make. The alliteration of "<https://assignbuster.com/rising-and-roman-african-and-flat-aphra-behns-oroonoko/>

rising and Roman” suggests nobility, while the assonance of “ African and flat” suggests plebeian and even inferior descent. This contrast nicely parallels the oxymoron that is used to describe Oroonoko: the “ Royal Slave.” Oroonoko is royal in his country, as well as in his character. At the same time, however, as a result of social and historical conditions (namely European colonization and trade) he is bound in slavery<sup>2E</sup> Behn uses the shocking incongruity of “ royal” and “ slave” to advance her moral purpose. In the same way that Stowe gives Uncle Tom a “ white moral code,” Behn must describe Oroonoko so that the British audience will not dismiss him on account of his color. While, as I have mentioned, Behn is conscious of herself in her writing, she is also conscious of her reader. This is evident in her description of Oroonoko (here Caesar) and his people as resembling “ our ancient Picts” (2196), which the Norton glosses as “ A North British people appearing in histories of England and Scotland.” It is also apparent in her describing the geography of the country by saying “ about half the length of the Mall here” (2199), the “ Mall” being a “ Fashionable walk in St. James’s Park in London” (Norton). Indeed, Behn uses phrases that are sympathetic to a noble British audience, such as “ refined notions” of “ true honor,” “ absolute generosity,” “ softness,” and “ gallantry” (2174) to paint Oroonoko’s character. Throughout the story, the trait upon which Behn focuses most is honor, because her main accusation of the slave traders is that they are utterly devoid of this quality. She is quite careful not to attack the traders directly, however, for all of the aforementioned reasons regarding her audience. For example, she does not say outright that the slave ship’s commander is an immoral person. Rather, she says that he was “ a man of a finer sort of address and conversation, better bred and more

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engaging than most of that sort of men are” (2189), thus implying that the commander’s royal qualities make him an exception to the rest of his kind. Later, the “ good” commander’s betrayal and cruel treatment of Oroonoko serves to reinforce her moral judgement. Although Behn conveys her opinions about the weaknesses of Christianity through Oroonoko, she checks these statements by mentioning religion in a manner that would be favorable to her audience. Throughout the story, she follows the pattern of making a negative generalization about a group of people by distinguishing one member of that group. An example is her comment about the Frenchman: “ though he was a man of very little religion, he had admirable morals and a brave soul” (2188). This statement implies that those who are not religious lack morals and brave souls. Behn also functions as a character within the story who attempts to Christianize Oroonoko and Imoinda. By telling stories, she tries to bring them to “ the knowledge of the true God” (2197). While this statement sympathizes with Christian readers, Behn criticizes the falseness of Christianity through Oroonoko’s contempt of the ship captain and other Christian characters who repeatedly break their promises. One of Behn’s most subtle techniques for incorporating her own point of view is through the Lord Governor, whose arrival is necessary for Oroonoko and his family to be freed. Upon closer inspection, Oroonoko’s frustration at waiting for the Lord Governor appears to be a metaphor for the futility of the Christian belief in the Messiah, or second coming of Jesus Christ. Behn indirectly elicits the reader’s sympathy by incorporating white supremacy in her description of the Indians as primitive savages. Behn’s narration of “ the extreme ignorance and simplicity of ’em” (2203)

encourages the reader to scoff at the Indians, along with their primitive  
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customs and incoherent babble (e. g. “ Tepeeme,” and “ Amora tiguamy”). Once the reader has been manipulated into this mode of thought, Behn once again reminds him that Oroonoko is “ more civilized, according to the European mode” (2189). Additionally, she compares Oroonoko to legendary European military leaders such as Alexander the Great, Hannibal, and Julius Caesar. Thus, Behn elicits the reader’s sympathy by making Oroonoko as European as possible. The reader of Uncle Tom’s Cabin will find himself emotionally disturbed by the death of the poor, beaten slave at the end of the book. Furthermore, the sermon-like quality (known as a jeremiad) encourages the reader to do some introspection, and reflect on his or her own morals and attitudes. This same reaction from the Southern plantation owners in the 1850s was only possible because Uncle Tom was everything but a stereotypical black. Through Stowe’s manipulation of Uncle Tom, she made him “ white” enough to be appealing to her audience, and thus had her desired effect of inspiring a moral conflict regarding the entire race. So, too, is Aphra Behn’s purpose achieved by shaping Oroonoko into an Europeanized black hero, unlike any other of his race. Beginning as a “ reportage,” Behn turns the story into a fairy-tale of grand proportions, almost fooling the reader. By making Oroonoko “ white” in every aspect except his skin color, Behn achieves her desired effect of having her readers sympathize with a black hero, serving as a step in the right direction toward racial equality.