

The morality vs power: oroonoko representation

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Humans have wrestled with power and morality throughout time, recognizing that the issue is much more elaborate than simply deciding good from evil. Aphra Behn's narrative *Oroonoko: the Royal Slave* focuses on the relationship between those in power and those in submission, allowing the reader to decipher what motivates the Europeans to continue the cycle of slavery, no matter how horrific the institution. Because of Oroonoko's contradictory status as a royal slave, a morally ambiguous conflict arises between the oppressor and the oppressed. The complex social hierarchy implemented by the Europeans creates tension throughout *Oroonoko*, bringing a focus to the internal struggles of balancing power and morality—especially in the lives of Trefry and Aphra Behn.

From the onset of the narrative, Trefry walks a thin line between respecting and oppressing Oroonoko. Upon meeting Oroonoko, Trefry quickly notices his intelligence, befriending Oroonoko and “loving him as his dearest brother and showing him all the civilities due so a great man” (2157). Trefry looks past Oroonoko's difference in skin color and focuses on the content of his character, and by doing so, Trefry soon learns of Oroonoko's many plights. By putting his dominance aside, Trefry is able to focus on equalizing Oroonoko instead of alienating him, and in his desperation to help Oroonoko, Trefry promises to reunite Oroonoko with his family. However, Trefry cannot possibly keep his word to Oroonoko without great repercussions, and although Trefry quickly becomes friends with Oroonoko, he never relinquishes his dominant role. For example, Trefry renames Oroonoko, which is a common practice for new slaves, proving Oroonoko's royal status does not absolve him of his fate (2158). By giving Oroonoko the name

Caesar, Trefry not only rids Oroonoko of his royal name, he strips away Oroonoko's personal identity. Moreover, the name Caesar itself foreshadows the great betrayal Trefry will deal Oroonoko. Trefry's inner indecisiveness tears him in two: one part of him knows Oroonoko deserves freedom, and the other reminds Trefry of his allegiance to the very system keeping Oroonoko captive. Soon, Oroonoko grows weary of waiting for Trefry to fulfill his promise of freedom. Trefry's inability to act upon his word pushes Oroonoko over the edge, resulting in Oroonoko's rebellion, subsequent torture, and death. As Oroonoko is ripped apart piece by piece, Trefry is unable to intervene (2178). The rigid socioeconomic structure of his culture renders Trefry impotent in the situation, and although he knows Oroonoko deserves freedom, he cannot possibly grant the liberation of one slave family while the rest suffer. Despite his power, if Trefry set Oroonoko free, he would carry the burden of arbitrating which slaves deserve freedom and which must remain in captivity. Trefry must sacrifice his relationship with Oroonoko in order to maintain order within his complex social system. Ergo, Trefry is culpable, but not solely responsible for Oroonoko's death.

Just as Trefry depicts the difficult position of a slave master grappling with morality and power, Aphra Behn provides a more multifaceted view on the precarious role of upper class women. When Behn first encounters Oroonoko, she immediately notices his regal appearance and intellect. Behn notes, "the most illustrious courts could not have produced a braver man, both for greatness of courage and mind," thus giving the reader a deeper perception of the humanity possessed by Oroonoko (2140). Although at times Behn's description of Oroonoko objectifies his looks with the European standard of

beauty, she goes much further to humanize a black man than many other writers of her time. Furthermore, instead of demeaning Oroonoko, and writing him off simply as a man meant to become a slave based on the color of his skin, Behn outlines Oroonoko's intelligence and sparkling personality, which accompany his regal stature. Although Behn acknowledges Oroonoko's difference from the other slaves, she still domineers over Oroonoko by attempting to push her ideals upon him. For example, Behn tells Oroonoko Christian stories, thus imposing her Western culture and belief system upon Oroonoko. When Oroonoko refuses to listen to Behn's religious stories, Behn simply recites them to Oroonoko's wife, Imoinda. Behn only follows Oroonoko's wishes to a certain extent, and relays her beliefs to Imoinda, who has less power and cannot refuse Behn. Although Behn acknowledges Oroonoko as a man greater than the rest of the slaves, she does not fully accept his ideals and beliefs. As Oroonoko faces grave danger and is no longer certain of his promised freedom, Behn is unable to help him, not because of her lack of willingness, but because she is unable to alter his fate. In Behn's case, her race does not directly grant her power; she is still a woman, thus Behn is still submissive to European men. Aphra Behn utilizes her writing capabilities to keep Oroonoko's story alive because she cannot save his life. Behn's unique ability to relate with both the oppressed and the oppressor allows her to understand Oroonoko's inability to fight for equality, while she receives attention and praise for capturing Oroonoko's story.

Oroonoko: the Royal Slave reveals that those in power recognize that slavery is morally flawed, but look past their consciences and submit to the system. This passiveness demonstrates power can corrupt even the innocent,

<https://assignbuster.com/the-morality-vs-power-oroonoko-representation/>

causing them to become bystanders, rather than the activists they yearn to be. Trefry and Behn struggle to strike a balance between freedom and restraint within their society. Ultimately, the inability for justice to trump power reveals that the European society is deeply flawed. Oroonoko proves to be the only man living up to his ideals, accepting death because he is not granted liberty. Those in power are not always what they seem, and often are slaves themselves, puppets of a broken system.