

Slavery and racism

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



Jack O'Donnell Development of Western Civilization Dr. Carlson November 17, 2011 Slavery and Racism: Are They One in the Same? Aphra Behn was an extremely significant and influential English writer in the 1600s. One of her more famous works, *Oroonoko*, discusses the issues of slavery and racism in the Americas. Many people believe that slavery and racism go hand in hand. In fact, these two ideologies are awfully different. Slavery is the act of forcing humans to be treated property whereas racism is the belief that discrimination based on inherently different traits is justifiable.

Behn, in *Oroonoko*, makes the fundamental differences between slavery and racism apparent. With the philosophical views of Rousseau and Trouillot's analysis on the Haitian revolution, slavery and racism in *Oroonoko* can easily be separated and distinguished to show their dissimilarities. In the novel, *Oroonoko* is an African prince and war hero who enslaves many men from the various tribes he conquers in battle. *Oroonoko* believes this form of slavery is just and should be acceptable. Later in the story, *Oroonoko* is tricked and sold into slavery.

He eventually works with many of the slaves he had sold to the Europeans back in Africa. *Oroonoko* considers this form of slavery to be incredibly unjust. The plantation owners did not "win" their slaves over in battle like *Oroonoko*, rather they barter or trade for them (Boeninger 9/26). The white males also treat *Oroonoko* as a lesser human being even though he is royalty. They constantly deceive *Oroonoko* into believing that his freedom is coming when in reality it is nowhere in sight. Because there was such an economic gap between the black slaves and the white slave owners, racism naturally became common custom (Behn).

Racism in this case was derived from slavery; they were not the same idea. Behn depicts slavery and racism in this manner to show how different the two ideas are. In Africa, the slaves and the slave owners were of the same race. The color of their skin was not a factor in how they were treated. The fact that they lost in battle was the only reason they were slaves (Behn). In the Americas however, race had a much bigger role in the treatment of slaves. The large plantation owners were white and the slaves were black.

Because of the racial divide in the owners and slaves, many forms of racism were justified (Boeninger 9/27). This also led to the discrimination of the free black men in the society. Behn purposely shows slavery in Africa and slavery in Surinam to point out the extreme differences between racism and slavery. Behn's description of Oroonoko and Imoinda also show the inherent difference between racism and slavery. Behn describes Oroonoko as a beautiful person by stating, " His nose was rising and Roman instead of African and flat; his mouth the finest shape that could be seen, [...].

The whole proportion and air of his face was so noble and exactly formed that, bating his color there could be nothing in nature more beautiful, agreeable, and handsome (Behn 13). " The fantastic image Behn provides shows the reader that slavery and racism have different foundations. If they were the same idea, Behn would have never given such praise to a slave. She compares Oroonoko's looks to those of a white man which would not have happened if racism and slavery were the same. The description of his beauty relays to the reader that slavery and racism can be two very separate entities.

Even though Behn makes a clear distinction between slavery and racism in the novel, many people would disagree in how she got that message across. In *Oroonoko*, Behn's message seems anti-racist but it appears that she does not have a problem with slavery. Her problem arises from how the slaves are treated, but slavery in general is acceptable for Behn. One philosopher in particular would have a problem with Behn's message. Jean- Jacques Rousseau, if he were to read *Oroonoko*, would have some concerns. In Rousseau's "A Discourse", he discusses slavery and the rights of man.

Rousseau believes that all men are born free and are equal according to nature. He would criticize Behn on her opinion of slavery saying that all men are born and should remain equal (Rousseau). Behn is very passive about her views on slavery where Rousseau is active in his writings. Even though he disagrees with Behn's view on slavery he still believes slavery and racism are different. Rousseau would not dispute Behn over her view of racism. According to Rousseau, racism contrasts with his view on the rights of man. He believes all men are created equal; race should not be a reason to discriminate.

He would also affirm what Behn has to say about the horrible treatment of *Oroonoko* by the white males throughout the story. They kept deceiving and leading *Oroonoko* on when they knew he would never be freed. Rousseau would say he should have received better treatment. The color of his skin should not matter in his given situation. Rousseau's belief on the equality of mankind can be used to critique the works of Behn (Carlson 11/10). Even though there are disagreements between the views Behn and Rousseau,

both see that racism and slavery are two different ideas and should be treated separately.

The Haitian revolution also witnessed severe racism and slavery. In Haiti, slaves occupied about 85% of the population while the free men only occupied about 15% (Breen 10/31). The sugar plantations needed these slaves to run the production which was a gruesome process. Through this horrible procedure, many people made their fortunes. The rich white men would have children with their black slaves and eventually their heirs were of mixed race. When the white females came to Haiti to look for a partner, they noticed the white males were only attracted to the mixed race females.

The hatred led to severe racism of the black community in Haiti (Breen 10/31). The stories of the beginning stages of Haitian revolution can easily be compared to the novel *Oroonoko*. In the Haitian revolution, many of the slave owners were of African descent. They resemble *Oroonoko* in Africa when he owned slaves of his same race. Racism was not a factor in either of these situations but slavery was. Because all parties were of the same race, slavery and racism did not go hand in hand. The problem in both cases was when the Europeans intervene.

The racism was very prevalent in *Oroonoko* when all the white males were lying to him. They clearly did not respect the fact that he was royalty because of his descent. During the Haitian revolution, the European women's jealousy caused racism to become prevalent on the island (Breen 10/31). The European jealousy also led to racism back in France. The European intermediaries were one of the sources of racism in the early stages of the

Haitian Revolution and in Oronoko. The Haitian revolution was a power struggle amongst the white French and the black Haitians.

Within this battle, many sects of Haitian rebel groups began fighting among each other. In Trouillot's *Silencing the Past*, he discusses these fights among each other in the form of King Henry and Sans Souci (Trouillot). In his book, Trouillot talks about the race dilemma with the French and the Haitians. If Trouillot were to read Behn's work, he would see similarities between the racism in Surinam and the racism in Haiti. In *Oroonoko*, the blacks are treated so horribly that they eventually revolted. That is very similar to what happened in Haiti. The Haitians eventually could not take the abuse and decided to revolt.

In both cases they revolted for the racism and the slavery (Carlson 10/3). In *Silencing the Past* and *Oroonoko* during the revolts, it seems that slavery and racism are the same. In actuality the slavery and racist views stem about from different ideas. Even though at times it seems that slavery and racism are related, there are always underlying views that separate the two thoughts. Through Aphra Behn's novel, the public can get a solid grasp of the differences between racism and slavery. With the help of Rousseau and Trouillot, the differences between slavery and racism only become greater and more distinct.

Hopefully, people will come to realize how different these two ideologies actually are so they can get a better grasp of the past. Bibliography Behn, Aphra. *Oroonoko*. London: Penguin, 2003. Print. Boeninger. Notes. 9/26/2011-9/27/2011 Breen. Notes. 10/31/2011 Carlson. Notes. 10/3/2011, 11/10/2011 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Rousseau: On the Origin of Inequality: <https://assignbuster.com/slavery-and-racism/>

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