

# Interesting narrative by Olaudah Equiano: an olive branch to the white audience

[Literature](#)



Throughout his Interesting Narrative, Olaudah Equiano successfully appeals to his white European and American audience and is able to somewhat see the pitfalls of slavery. Although I believe his primary motive in writing this piece was to tell the story of his life, the respect he earned from the hard work and dedication that was apparent in this piece allowed for his audience to be more tolerant of his message. To convince his white audience that slavery is wrong, Olaudah Equiano extends an olive branch to his white European and American audience through demonstration of hard work, a positively viewed religious attitude, and a sense of God's mercy that was bestowed upon him.

Before analyzing Equiano's methods to appeal to his audience, his identity and background must be examined thoroughly. Equiano, being a slave ripped from his homeland in Africa, has a very rare and interesting personal identity. His identity changes multiple times throughout the course of his life, and some might even say it shifted dramatically by the time he settled in London. One interesting analysis done by George Boulukos looked at the two extreme portrayals of African identity at this time. One of which describes the slave trade as Europeans rescuing Africans from the kings that held them captive previously. According to William Snelgrave, "these kings... happily kill captives as human sacrifices and even for cannibal feasts" (Boulukos 249). The other depicted Africans as innocent primitives corrupted by Europeans. Clearly neither of these depictions are accurate but being that these were the two prominent views that Equiano's audience held about his identity, he must walk a fine line. He must balance two things, first, he doesn't want to change parts of his identity to better fit the expectations of

his audience, but secondly, he also needs to connect with his audience and help them understand the true African identity of this time period. This identity mold that Olaudah Equiano has crafted lays a solid foundation from which he uses other effective techniques to reach his intended audience.

One of the primary ways that Equiano captivated his audience was through his work ethic and drive to achieve what he wanted in life. Often those that reach their goals no matter the hardship they endure demand one's respect, no matter the preconceived stereotypes that one may have. From the effort he showed about his ship while working for his master, to the pains he went through while selling his only possessions, it was clear that Olaudah Equiano was a hard-working man. Right when Equiano was sold to his new master, Mr. King, King informed him that “ the reason he had bought me was on account of my good character; and as he had not the least doubt of my good behavior, I should be very well off with him...” (Levine 750). This was one of the first examples of Equiano seeing his hard work pay off. His master recognized his good character and work ethic, and therefore rewarded him for it. At this time in history, hard work was something understood by all, no matter your social status. Aboard his ship, Equiano was able to distinguish himself from his fellow slaves by increasing his utility. He eventually was performing gauging while aboard the ship, which was no small feat. One thing to note is that Equiano did not know how to gauge when he was sold to Mr. King, but when Equiano informed him that he had no prior knowledge of gauging, “ he said one of his clerks should teach me to gauge” (Levine 752). Here is yet another example of where Equiano's work ethic opened new doors for him to continue to move up in the world and acquire new skills.

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These accomplishments were rare for slaves, and I believe that the mention of examples like these earned Equiano respect from his intended audience, which made his entire message easier to swallow.

Secondly, Olaudah Equiano's religious attitude was an asset for his quest to appeal to the white audience. His transition to Christianity combined with his identity as a European was crucial in allowing for fellow Europeans and Americans to see him in a positive, respected light. In all of chapter 10, his mood and diction changes completely. For example, after returning from a voyage, Equiano says " I rejoice greatly; and heartily thanked the Lord for directing me to London, where I was determined to work on my own salvation, and, in so doing, procure a title to heaven, being the result of a mind blinded by ignorance and sin" (Equiano 262). This is one of the first times Equiano speaks of the " Lord" and Christ in this way. After coming to England, Equiano tried his best to assimilate with British Culture. He enjoyed England and took steps to get baptized (with the help of Miss Guerins) and attempted to get an education. Although he was lucky that his masters allowed him to have these things done, it was his conscious decision to take steps towards his goal. After meeting Daniel Queen, he furthered his religious journey, and although he did have to leave these things somewhat behind to sail with his master, he returned to his academic and spiritual education as a free man. As a free man, he became increasingly concerned with salvation and guaranteeing his spot in heaven. Particularly after consulting with other respected figures, he became more and more troubled with the idea that he may not ever be able to fully repent and reach heaven. This last point is incredibly important because many people during that time

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period were dealing with the same problems surrounding religion. This serves as a great connection point and allows for Equiano's white audience to relate to him, which is heading in the direction of seeing him as an equal, and not an ex-slave.

Furthermore, Equiano has an intense sense of what he sees as God's mercy that was bestowed upon him. Although he clearly faced horrors and hardships at every turn throughout his life, he is incredibly grateful for the opportunities that he did have, and eternally thankful for how his life turned out. At the very beginning of his narrative, Olaudah Equiano apologizes in advance to his readers for not having the most exciting story, but still hopes that it helps to change the ways slaves are treated in the future. So, we see from the very beginning that Equiano recognizes that although there is no doubt, he had an incredibly hard life, there were many slaves that had much worse treatment and lives overall. On page 733, Equiano says, " I might say my sufferings were great: but when I compare my lot with that of most of my countrymen, I regard myself as a particular favorite of Heaven, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life..." Equiano seems to consider himself lucky, which is somewhat true in the sense that he had access to many opportunities that were never even a thought for many slaves. I imagine the fact that he recognized this went a long way for his European and American audiences, and even the slaves and descendants of slaves that would eventually have the chance to read this narrative. This sense of extreme accountability is admirable, and I would imagine that his white audience is more tolerant of his message when the

author doesn't see himself as a victim. Also, the fact that the accountability stems from religious reasons earns him double points in his audience's book.

Equiano's interactions with the society he lives in are interesting to say the least. Although the sea-based society that he was a part of for most of his adult life was more democratic than its land-based counterpart, Equiano was harshly reminded of his true status as a slave each time he returned to Land. He was lucky enough to have been bought by a more lenient owner, and aboard his ship one's status was defined by their utility as a sailor, not solely as a slave. This philosophy proved vital to Equiano, who was able to distinguish himself as a sailor, enough to at one point buy his way to freedom. Unfortunately, long before that day ever came, Equiano clashed with the land-based society every time he would return from the ship's journeys. Having to practically beg to trade what little he had for money, he was continuously made aware of how low on the society chain of command he was at that time. For example, during one of the times he and another slave were attempting to barter their goods, two white men came and stole their items. They begged for their materials but to no avail, as Equiano says " They not only refused to return them, but swore at us, and threatened if we did not immediately depart they would flog us well" (Levine 757).

Immediately here they were reminded of their status, and the fact that they were seen as sub-human. Eventually they were able to recover about ½ of their supplies, and Equiano ended up sharing his goods with his companion, as the only half that was returned was that of Equiano. Olaudah Equiano was in a very particular and special place when it came to his place in society. It was almost as if he was leading two separate lives during his time as a slave,

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there was his life with a reasonable and somewhat pleasant master out at sea, and there was also the harsh reality of life on land as an oppressed African American.

One specific example of how difficult it was for Olaudah Equiano to live his life post slavery was analyzed by Cathy Davidson. There is no doubt that Equiano's life as a slave was incredibly arduous, but his life post-slavery is equally as interesting to analyze. While Equiano was sailing as a free man, but still under British rule, he technically was still a fugitive. Just because Equiano bought his freedom does not mean that slavery did not exist in the British Empire. Because of this, Davidson describes how "watchfulness is a precondition of Equiano's existence" (19). Equiano's life was a true struggle, both when living and then writing his autobiography, particularly because of the controversial goal of his narrative, and where he chose to live. Even though he was not a slave, he had to constantly look over his shoulder and watch his own back, because oppression was constant for his people, whether you purchased your freedom or not. Davidson also investigated the psychological effects of the institution of slavery not only on Africans, but also Americans and Europeans. Davidson argues that for whites, they operated off of the protection of their property, not a sense of humanity. Throughout the narrative, Equiano received next to no help from the Europeans around him, and although he did have a "humane" owner, the fact that he was owned shows how backwards this institution truly was. The psychological effects of slavery ran so deep that Davidson argues that it "dehumanizes the slaver as much as the slave" (21). Olaudah Equiano went through eternal struggles while living his life and writing his narrative, and <https://assignbuster.com/interesting-narrative-by-olaudah-equiano-an-olive-branch-to-the-white-audience/>

thankfully it finally became clear to the world how terrible a system slavery truly was.

One interesting take on Equiano's life came from Geraldine Murphy, who analyzed how over the course of his life, Olaudah Equiano transformed himself from the "traveree ripped from his family and culture... and becomes a traveler himself when he grows up, observing Europe" (Murphy, 552). Murphy argues that Equiano saw both sides of life in his time on this Earth, going from a slave to a free man who lived relatively well near the end of his life. This paradox of lifestyle may have contributed to Equiano's ability to connect with multiple audiences and argue for something that was very controversial. Because he has seen both sides of the coin of life, and lived both extremes, he is better equipped to tackle slavery and its horrors. And what better way to argue that point than to provide a narrative of his life, including the horrific lifestyle as a slave, and transitioning to a free man who has found God, and is looking to change his path in the afterlife and leave a legacy for his family? Olaudah Equiano's Narrative served as the perfect "transcultural" or hybrid work, beginning to merge to very different viewpoints, and bringing them closer to a decision that would change the course of human history forever.

To conclude, with the goal of convincing his white audience that slavery is wrong, Olaudah Equiano extends an olive branch to his white European and American audience. He does this throughout his narrative with demonstration of hard work, a positively viewed religious attitude, and a sense of God's mercy that was bestowed upon him. His life was extremely



unusual, some might even say lucky, living through slavery and also experiencing life as a free man. He took full advantage of all of his opportunities and was able to use his African identity to better connect his intended audience with his past and his history. His attempts are very successful, and Olaudah Equiano's Interesting Narrative was extremely influential and important regarding the treatment of slaves in the future. In a time period where slavery ran the world, Equiano chose to start the conversation surrounding the dehumanizing institution that is slavery, and successfully used his life to demonstrate why a change needed to happen around the world.