

# Oroonoko



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF APHRA BEHN

Much of Behn's life is a mystery. There are no records of her date and place of birth, though she was certainly British, and most of the other details of her life are also unknown. Some believe Behn herself obscured or destroyed records of her life. She may have lived for a time in the European sugar colony of Suriname, South America (perhaps as a spy for King Charles II), and was reportedly married to a Mr. Johan Behn. Upon returning to England, Behn became very poor, and she wrote to earn a living and to stay out of debtor's prison. She wrote extensively for almost two decades, and her corpus includes several plays, translations, and pieces of prose fiction. She is considered one of the first English novelists, and a notable dramatist of the 1600s. While alive, she was an active part of London's theatre society, and was friends with other famous playwrights like John Dryden. She died in London, and is buried in Westminster Abbey. She is best known for her short novel *Oroonoko*.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*Oroonoko* was published the same year as the Glorious Revolution, a bloodless revolution in England in which Parliament replaced King James II and installed James's daughter, Mary, and her husband, William, as joint-monarchs. Parliament consisted of two main parties, Whig and Tory, and Whig Parliamentarians disliked the fact that James was Catholic, were suspicious of his close ties with the French government, and wanted Protestant monarchs. Behn was a Tory Royalist, a supporter of James II who did not support the Whig party's idea of a constitutional monarchy, or one in which Parliament gained increasing power over the monarch, who previously had supreme authority over the country. Some scholars also believe Behn may have been Catholic. After the Glorious Revolution, the Tory party would later try to reclaim the throne on James II's behalf through a number of uprisings that ultimately failed. Additionally, England was a rising empire at this point. The English colony in Suriname was founded in 1650 and soon began importing slaves, especially the Akan people from the Gold Coast of Africa (modern-day Ghana) to supplement the low number of indentured servants coming from England to work the sugar plantations. By the time Behn wrote *Oroonoko*, King Charles II had already given Suriname to the Dutch in 1667, which Behn considered a mistake, given its gold mines, sugar cane, and other exotic resources. Slavery wasn't outlawed in the British Empire until 1833.

## RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like *Oroonoko*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) are both travel narratives told from the subjective perspective of an English character who doesn't always evaluate foreign cultures fairly. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), an extended essay examining the particular obstacles that female novelists must overcome to write, Virginia Woolf celebrates Aphra Behn as the woman whose work led other women to speak their minds.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Oroonoko; Or, the Royal Slave*
- **When Written:** Behn wrote *Oroonoko* towards the end of her life. She claims to have composed it in just a few hours.
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1688
- **Literary Period:** Restoration Literature
- **Genre:** Prose fiction, travel narrative, early English novel
- **Setting:** Coramantien and Suriname
- **Climax:** Oroonoko kills Imoinda and their unborn child.
- **Antagonist:** The King of Coramantien; Governor Byam
- **Point of View:** First-person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Unpaid spy work.** In 1665, Behn was probably a spy for King Charles II against the Dutch. However, because the king was lax about paying her, Behn had to petition to escape debtor's prison.

**Arrest.** In 1682, Behn was arrested for her harsh critique of the King's illegitimate son, the Whig duke of Monmouth.



## PLOT SUMMARY

*Oroonoko's* tale is told from the perspective of a female narrator, possibly Aphra Behn herself. The narrator claims to have known *Oroonoko* during his captivity in Suriname, South America. Suriname is a British colony at the time the narrative takes place (the 1660s). As the novel's full title announces, *Oroonoko* is not just any old slave—he is the last descendant of a royal line, and the prince of an African country called Coramantien (probably modern-day Ghana). Coramantien is a brave and warlike nation that participates in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, selling prisoners of war to Western ships.

*Oroonoko* has grown up away from the court, and has been

trained to be a great military leader by Imoinda's father. One day, during an intense battle, Imoinda's father takes a fatal arrow in the eye and saves Oroonoko's life. The seventeen-year-old Oroonoko becomes the new general, and returns to court an elegant and intelligent young man. The narrator spends much time describing Oroonoko's noble characteristics, and is particularly interested in detailing his exceedingly fine physical beauty, which is a blend of Roman and African traits.

While at court, Oroonoko visits the daughter of his foster father, the beautiful and pure Imoinda. They fall in love at first sight. They participate in a marriage ceremony but Oroonoko still has to ask his grandfather, the King, for his blessing, in keeping with the patriarchal customs of the society. However, the king, a lecherous old man, hears about Imoinda's beauty. After seeing her at court, he decides he wants her to become one of his concubines. While Oroonoko is off hunting, the king sends her the **royal veil**, a sign of invitation for attractive women to come to court. Imoinda is duty-bound to obey.

Separated from her true love, Imoinda is kept cloistered at the Otan, the King's pleasure palace. She is still a virgin and refuses, as much as she can, the King's advances. Due to the strict laws of the Otan, Oroonoko is prevented from seeing Imoinda until the King invites him.

Despite being persuaded otherwise by those around them, the lovers remain faithful to each other. Oroonoko confirms Imoinda's longing to return to him from Onahal, one of the King's old wives, and by exchanging secret glances with Imoinda when visiting the Otan.

Before Oroonoko leaves for war, he is determined to consummate his marriage to Imoinda. With the help of his good friend and fellow warrior, Aboan, he concocts a plan to do so. Aboan seduces Onahal, who quickly agrees to help the lovers, and Oroonoko and Imoinda spend the night together. Unfortunately, the King, who had been suspicious that something might happen, sends his guard to confront Oroonoko, but Oroonoko flees to the battlefield. As punishment for her perfidy, the King sells Imoinda into slavery, an ignoble punishment, but he tells Oroonoko he has executed her.

Upon hearing this, Oroonoko gives up his will to live and fight, and he abandons his troops, retiring to his tent. When they are about to lose, however, Oroonoko rouses himself from his lovesick stupor and leads his army to victory.

An English sea captain comes to Coramantien, and Oroonoko receives him as a royal guest. The Captain double-crosses Oroonoko, however, inviting him onboard his ship and then kidnapping him, along with a hundred of Oroonoko's attendants. The Captain brings Oroonoko across the Atlantic to Suriname, where he sells him to an intelligent and kind-hearted slave-owner named Trefry. Trefry gives Oroonoko the name "Caesar," and promises to help free him one day. Trefry

also unwittingly reunites Caesar with Imoinda, whom Trefry knows as "Clemene." Together at last, though in undesirable circumstances, "Caesar" and "Clemene" conceive a child and spend their days mingling with the white nobility, who immediately accept the couple because they are noble, virtuous, and beautiful.

As Imoinda's pregnancy develops, Caesar becomes increasingly restless and wants to take his new family back home. Though he esteems some white people, like Trefry and the narrator, he is also rightly suspicious of the lengthy delay regarding his release. He feels that he will once again be tricked and his family will remain in slavery. Indeed, this is exactly the plan of Deputy Governor Byam, who is part of the colonial government in Suriname and intends to keep Caesar a slave.

Because he is a man of action, Caesar determines to take matters into his own hands and convince the slaves to run away. Led by Caesar, they manage to escape, but their journey ends in disaster when the white colonists come after them. With the exception of Caesar's friend Tuscan, most of the slaves flee the group, leaving Caesar and a heavily pregnant Imoinda to confront the plantation owners. They all fight bravely and Imoinda wounds Byam in the shoulder with a poisoned arrow.

With the help of Trefry, Byam convinces Caesar to surrender peacefully and promises to fulfill all his demands. They write a contract, but Byam almost immediately breaks it. He sequesters Imoinda and brutally whips Tuscan and Caesar. Now that he is fully awakened to Byam's treachery, Caesar vows revenge. He murders Imoinda and their child, with Imoinda's permission and blessing, to save them from prolonged suffering. Caesar then fails to enact his revenge against Byam, however, when he succumbs to a debilitating grief beside his wife's corpse.

When the colonists come looking for Caesar, he is rescued against his will by his friends. Sick and dying, he tells them of his plan to kill Byam. They try to encourage him to abandon this idea and focus on recovery. One day, the ruthless Irishman Banister kidnaps Caesar at Byam's behest. Caesar is again tied to the stake, where he is slowly dismembered, dying without making a sound.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Prince Oroonoko** – The last descendant of the King of Coramantien, Oroonoko was raised away from the court to be a skillful warrior by Imoinda's father. The narrator stresses that he is extraordinarily handsome, intelligent, and honorable, *despite* being black. Oroonoko has strong notions of duty and perfectly follows the codes of his society, except when his love for Imoinda compels him to protect and honor their marriage

by taking her life to protect her and their unborn child. He mistakenly assumes that his notion of honor means the same thing to the white Christians he comes into contact with—a mistake that several times ends up depriving him of his freedom. Trefry christens Oroonoko as “Caesar,” and he is referred to as such from then on. Oroonoko/Caesar is also incredibly brave, and performs many skillful, daring feats while hunting game in Suriname.

**Imoinda (a.k.a Clemene)** – Imoinda is described as a “black Venus,” corresponding to Oroonoko as the “black Mars.” To the narrator, Imoinda perfectly complements Oroonoko in beauty and virtue. Her beauty often brings her unwanted attentions from men, however, even in the New World. This is a particularly big problem in Coramantien, where Imoinda catches the eye of the king. He takes her as his concubine, even though he knows she has pledged her love to Oroonoko and married him. Imoinda remains true to her husband, however, but this brings about her downfall when the king sells her into slavery. Not long after being reunited with Oroonoko in Suriname, Imoinda becomes pregnant. She then fights alongside Oroonoko to gain liberty and a better life for their unborn child. She is handy with a bow and arrow, and wounds Governor Byam during a slave uprising. Imoinda is also incredibly obedient to Oroonoko, and accepts her own death and her unborn child’s murder at his hands out of the abundance of her love for him.

**Narrator (Aphra Behn)** – The narrator is a female Englishwoman, and possibly the direct voice of the author, Aphra Behn, who lived in Suriname for a while and may have had similar experiences to the narrator. Almost the whole of *Oroonoko* is told in the narrator’s voice and from her perspective. For the most part, the narrator is open-minded (for her time) and not entirely bigoted in her opinions of the native peoples of the European colonies. She sees these “natives” as close descendants of Adam and Eve before the Fall of Man, but her opinions toward black Africans seems to be a bit murkier. While she highly esteems Oroonoko, there is a sense that he is the exception, not the rule, when it comes to African. While the narrator abhors how Oroonoko is treated, she never admits that she has a problem with the institution of slavery itself—the main injustice she decries is that a natural king like Oroonoko should be treated so disrespectfully. The narrator admires the foods and customs of the ethnic groups she comes into contact with, and in general she has a keen sense of adventure. She describes her health as poor, and is very sensitive to all kinds of odors. Her closest friends include Oroonoko and Imoinda, who often dine at her table.

**King of Coramantien** – Over 100 years old, the king is Oroonoko’s grandfather. He has many wives, both old and young. As the culture of his society is highly patriarchal, the king’s word is law, and his lust knows no limits. Even though he knows that Imoinda is married to Oroonoko, the king takes her

as his concubine, safe in the knowledge that it would be taboo for Oroonoko to ever take her back, even if the king himself dies. The king is generally portrayed as wicked and depraved, and as lacking Oroonoko’s sense of honor. He often forces himself on Imoinda, and though Imoinda returns to Oroonoko a virgin, the king’s relationship with her is understood to be sexual in nature: he is willing but unable to perform. The king also lies to Oroonoko, telling him that he had Imoinda put to death, when in reality he sold her into slavery—a much more demeaning sentence.

**Aboan** – A young warrior and good friend of Oroonoko, Aboan is basically Oroonoko’s “wingman.” He pretends to be in love with the much older Onahal, one of the king’s old wives, to help Oroonoko visit Imoinda while she is cloistered in the Otan. Aboan is extremely loyal to Oroonoko and a good liar, traits that help him seduce Onahal. Along with Oroonoko, he is captured and sent to Suriname as a slave.

**Onahal** – A former wife of the king, Onahal takes charge of Imoinda after she becomes a concubine. Onahal’s beauty has long since faded, and she is now sort of a head housekeeper of the Otan, the king’s private court and inner sanctum. Onahal’s job is to make sure everything is in order for the king’s entertainment, whether that involves arranging court dances or evening activities with young concubines in his bedroom. Onahal falls in love with Aboan.

**Jamoan** – Jamoan is the leader of the opposing army that besieges Oroonoko’s troops. For most of the fight, the lovesick Oroonoko pines for the presumed death of Imoinda. When Oroonoko returns to his senses, however, he helps defeat Jamoan’s army, seriously wounds Jamoan, and then retains him as an attendant. They become good friends, and Jamoan helps cure Oroonoko of his melancholy over losing Imoinda.

**The Captain** – A seemingly well-bred and genteel English sea captain, the Captain, as he is called, first pretends to be Oroonoko’s friend. The Captain is welcomed at the Coramantien court and treated like a royal guest. One day, he sets a trap to capture Oroonoko and 100 of his men, so that he can sell them into slavery. After throwing a party on his ship and getting the men drunk, the Captain chains up Oroonoko and his attendants. When Oroonoko and his band then refuse to eat, the Captain lies to Oroonoko, telling him that if he will eat, the Captain he will set everyone free at the next port. Ultimately the Captain delivers his prisoners to Suriname and sells them as slaves.

**Trefry** – Trefry is a young Cornish gentleman in Suriname. He is skilled in math and linguistics, and manages Governor Byam’s affairs. He also speaks French and Spanish. Trefry buys Oroonoko from the Captain and, after getting to know Oroonoko’s story, feels great sympathy for his plight. He gives Oroonoko the name Caesar and promises to help him back to his homeland. They become great friends, and Trefry always tries to look out for Oroonoko, though Oroonoko often gets

frustrated by the lack of progress toward achieving his liberty. Trefry introduces Oroonoko to a beautiful slave he knows as Clemene, but whom Oroonoko realizes is actually Imoinda. After Oroonoko is killed, Trefry begins to record his biography, but dies before he can finish it.

**Tuscan** – Tuscan is a slave in Suriname who stands out from his fellow slaves, not only because he is taller than the rest, but also because he has a “noble look” about him. He joins Oroonoko’s uprising and stays with Oroonoko and Imoinda to fight against the colonists after the other slaves surrender. Tuscan is whipped alongside Oroonoko as punishment for leading the band of runaway slaves, but he later reconciles with Byam. Tuscan finds Oroonoko lying beside Imoinda’s corpse, and he tries to save his starving friend from dying. Oroonoko stabs Tuscan in the arm for his disloyalty and for trying to intervene in his affairs.

**Governor Byam** – A deputy governor in Suriname, Byam is not afraid to use low and dishonorable tactics to keep things running smoothly on the sugar plantations. He is not well regarded amongst the colonists, who all love Caesar (Oroonoko) more and dislike the governor’s manipulation of him. Byam initially pretends to be a great friend to Caesar, and promises him that he will one day be free, along with his wife and child, but in actuality Byam never intends to liberate them. He even lies to Caesar during the standoff in the forest, promising Caesar his freedom, but later breaks the contract they sign. Before this betrayal, however, Imoinda wounds Byam in the shoulder with a poisoned arrow.

**Colonel Martin** – A British colonel in Suriname, he is very well-respected amongst the colonists and is a dear friend of Oroonoko, who trusts his judgment like a child trusts a parent. Colonel Martin deplores the actions Byam takes against Oroonoko and tries to encourage Oroonoko to give up his vendetta against Byam.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Imoinda’s father** – An old and acclaimed general of Coramantien, and the father to the beautiful Imoinda. The general saves Oroonoko’s life during a battle by stepping into the path of an arrow aimed at the prince. He dies, and Oroonoko becomes the next general.

**Frenchman** – Exiled from France for his heretical opinions, the Frenchman becomes Oroonoko’s tutor and teaches him morality, languages, and science. Though he is not very religious, the Frenchman is nevertheless very moral. He stays by Oroonoko’s side after Oroonoko is captured and sold into slavery.

**Banister** – A rich and uncouth Irishman, Banister carries out Byam’s orders to kidnap the recovering Oroonoko from Parham house and transport him to the whipping post. Banister is a member of the infamous Council, a body composed of

former convicts and other ruthless characters led by Byam.

**Lord Governor** – Though he never actually appears in the work, the Lord Governor is the head authority of the colony and is responsible for all the plantations. Oroonoko waits impatiently for his arrival to petition him to free him and his wife, but Oroonoko is murdered before he arrives.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### RACISM

Like with Shakespeare and his play *Othello* (1603), Behn’s racist perspectives on non-white cultures complicate her treatment of her subject—the tragic life of a royal slave trying to escape slavery. While it isn’t clear that the narrator’s tepid attitude toward slavery as a normal social practice matches Behn’s own ideas of the institution, what is clear is that *Oroonoko* itself does little to challenge what would have been the widely accepted view of its 17th-century audience, namely that slavery was integral to maintaining the outposts of the British Empire.

In the Suriname setting, racist attitudes are readily apparent and pervasive. All of Behn’s white colonist characters, from the blatantly racist—like Banister and Byam, who torture their slaves into submission—to the more enlightened—like Trefry and the narrator, who befriend Oroonoko as their equal—participate in and uphold the enslavement of blacks imported from Africa by either owning slaves or by silent assent.

The very hierarchy of the society reflects the attitudes of colonial Europe. White colonists place themselves at the top of the social ladder. In Suriname they are on friendly terms with the natives, but only because they outnumber the colonists. The English do not consider the natives their social equals, but rather a primitive and innocent people useful for sharing important survival skills and trading exotic goods. The black slaves then occupy the bottom rung of society. The colonists think the African people are somehow physically conditioned to better handle the grueling work of maintaining a plantation, and are “inferior” enough as a race to justify enslaving.

Oroonoko’s arrival then complicates this hierarchy and the racist attitudes that maintain it. Beautiful, passionate, intelligent, and noble, Oroonoko possesses every good trait that the common slave was thought not to have. However, even the colonists’ esteem of the prince is tainted because they admire his atypical qualities, or his non-blackness (descriptions

of Oroonoko heavily play up his Roman qualities). Importantly, Oroonoko and Imoinda represent the 17th-century English ideal of non-Western beauty—that is, an impossible amalgamation of outlying physical traits representative of both Eastern and Western culture. In effect, Behn actually whitewashes her black hero and heroine to make them more likeable to her Western audience.

Though the topmost tier of white gentility instantly accepts Oroonoko as royalty, and he never does the work of a slave, he is still not in possession of his own liberty. He is treated like nobility, but is still very much a slave, even if, as the narrator rationalizes, he's a slave in "name only." The fact that he waits through almost the entirety of the piece for permission to return to his home only drives home the point that being a slave "in name only" is still enough to deprive someone of his natural rights.



## BETRAYAL

The plot of *Oroonoko* is almost entirely driven by betrayal, a theme with close ties to what Aphra Behn saw happening within the shifting political climate in 17th-century England. Around the time that *Oroonoko* was published, England's Queen Mary and her Dutch husband, William III, replaced Mary's father, King James II. Royalists like Behn were outraged at what they considered a betrayal of the rightful monarch, James, by the controlling force Parliament was becoming. Thus in *Oroonoko*, Behn's thoughts are very much focused on what happens when natural kingship is circumvented. Each of the three sections of *Oroonoko* revolve around some aspect of Oroonoko's betrayal by an oppositional power.

The King's betrayal of Oroonoko, his only heir, by first stealing his wife, Imoinda, and then selling her into slavery, sets off a chain of lifelong betrayals that test Oroonoko's commitments to his honor, his freedom, and his love for Imoinda. This initial betrayal sows the first of several discontents in Oroonoko's life, as he learns that men, even those he loves and admires, are not always to be trusted, and are certainly not as ethical as he is.

Besides experiencing the betrayal of a blood relation, Oroonoko is also betrayed by so-called friends, particularly by the Captain, who figures strongly in the middle section of the narrative, and by Byam, whose betrayal closes *Oroonoko*. Like the King, these men use Oroonoko's strong sense of honor against him, entrapping him in binding promises that make him complicit in his own enslavement. The Captain's betrayal takes place when he invites Oroonoko and his men to a party on his ship, and then kidnaps them to be sold into slavery. (It's important to note that Behn portrays this as a monstrous act not because slavery is inherently evil, but because Oroonoko considered the Captain a friend, and because it is wrong for a "natural" monarch—even an African one—to be robbed of his

throne.) The Captain then engages in more insidious forms of betrayal during the trip to Suriname. By pretending to be a pious Christian who will release his slave cargo, the Captain tricks Oroonoko into making promises, which to Oroonoko are sacred and inviolable, that will help the Captain safely bring to port a healthy cargo.

In Suriname, Oroonoko, now more suspicious of the colonists but still susceptible to their trickery, is again betrayed by powerful white men (like Byam, whose lack of honor makes them essentially invincible against Oroonoko. Oroonoko is portrayed as more noble and powerful than those who enslave him, but because he binds himself to his word of honor, they are able to get the upper hand against him by lying. Even when Oroonoko tries to play by the colonists' rules and avoid more betrayal, he still ultimately loses out to the white villains—like Byam and the Captain—who get what they want through treachery and deceit.



## LOVE AND OBEDIENCE

In *Oroonoko*, the question of how love relates to obedience is one with different answers for different characters, and a theme which allows love triangles to develop, fuels power conflicts, and even leads to death.

Oroonoko himself struggles greatly throughout his life to find a balance between these two ideals. Conditioned to ethical and social obedience by being raised in a strict culture that expects him to become his country's next general and future king, Oroonoko then learns a different kind of obedience through his love for Imoinda, which teaches him to obey his heart. Not only does he learn the language of love and how to express his passion, but by continuing to love Imoinda even after the King has taken her as his concubine, Oroonoko disobeys his unjust grandfather and his society's traditions. He thus learns to prioritize and protect his love for Imoinda above his obedience to cultural norms and to his treacherous grandfather, the King. In the colony, then, Oroonoko's patience with being obedient wears thin, as the colonists urge him to continue waiting for his freedom, which will never come. It is again his love for Imoinda and their unborn child that guides his decision to try to break free of the yoke of slavery, no matter the cost. Eventually, it is that same love that compels him to accept the harsh reality that he will never be a free man again, and to take dire action to secure freedom through death.

For Imoinda, obedience seems to be a natural requirement of love, especially given the social expectations in Coramantien society that women revere their husbands like gods. However, when the King brings her to court to be his concubine, Imoinda realizes that obedience is not always a form of love when free will is not present. As the King's consort and Oroonoko's wife, Imoinda has to obey the King and perform loving actions, while also disobeying her heart and her husband. By the tale's end,

however, she is able to reconcile her understanding of the relationship between love and obedience. She willingly accepts her murder at Oroonoko's hand, happy to be able to prove her faithfulness and pleased that he has chosen a culturally honorable means to end their tragic love story.

The King's understanding of love and obedience is much less familiar to Western audiences (especially as he is essentially an African caricature created by Behn). A polygamist who has unlimited power and assumes he will have his own way in everything, the King expects love to spring abundantly from his people, who must obey him without fail. Imoinda's resistance to his advances thus confuses and angers him, as does Oroonoko's disobedience, because it rocks his worldview that someone could dare to refuse him or deny him the love he expects to receive.



### FREEDOM AND SLAVERY

Some important questions that Behn's work asks us to consider are: do some people deserve freedom? And do others, then, deserve to be enslaved?

Though to our modern sensibility, the answer is obvious that freedom is an inalienable human right, this wasn't so clear to Behn's 17th-century British audience. British readers would already be accustomed to rigid social stratification, even amongst whites (the divine right of kings to rule others, for example), and would have generally assumed that slavery was an appropriate state for races they considered to be "inferior," like Africans. Indeed, at that time slavery was a common practice amongst whites and blacks alike, and Oroonoko's transition from a slave owner to a slave himself attests to this historical occurrence.

When Behn presents the slave-holding traditions of Coramantien and Suriname, she offers little commentary as to whether she considered the institution itself morally right or wrong. In fact, her narrator explicitly says that she wants to let readers decide for themselves what they think about the Captain's betrayal of Oroonoko into slavery. To this end, the narrator doesn't sugarcoat the practices that the English and the Coramantien people engaged in to perpetuate slavery. She gives illuminating period detail of how families are separated, how rival African tribes sold their prisoners of war to Europeans, and even how slave traders made money selling human chattel.

Despite this, the narrator also goes to great lengths to indicate that Oroonoko is too special and too good to be a slave. The colonists also think about Oroonoko's wife, Imoinda, in this way. Even before they find out she is royalty, they give her special treatment because they admire her beauty and poise.

At first, Oroonoko rejects the notion that he deserves better treatment, and he resigns himself to be treated like the other slaves—but this never happens, of course. The narrator and

Oroonoko's (relatively) kind slave owner, Trefry, both promise to help Oroonoko achieve his liberty after they get to know him and admire his nobility, his intelligence, and his physical beauty. Oroonoko then carves out an uncertain position for himself as a gentlemanly slave. He trades Trefry his fine, princely robes for simple slave garments, and demands that the other slaves treat him like a commoner (when they begin to bow at his feet), but he also spends most of his time with the upper-class colonists, hunting and dining with them.

After Oroonoko grows tired of waiting for the Lord Governor's permission to return to Coramantien, he uses his position as a natural leader within the slave community to incite his fellow slaves to arm themselves and run away to freedom with him. Oroonoko thus seems to have replaced his uncertain status in the colony and developed a position against slavery. As the leader of the slaves, he argues that no man, woman, or child should ever be enslaved, and that the slaves should unite to become a free and supportive community.

When the armed colonists come after them, however, Oroonoko is abandoned by his fearful followers. Oroonoko then seems to lose his faith in humanity, and returns to the English (and Coramantien) way of thinking about slavery—namely that some people deserve freedom (like whites and non-white royalty) and some people deserve to be slaves (like "common" blacks or prisoners of war). Oroonoko even apologizes to Byam for his rash belief that he could make free the men and women who are innately servile.



### HONOR

Of all Oroonoko's traits, his sense of honor, of knowing what is right and just, makes him most similar to Classical Roman and Greek heroes and

renders him most admirable and familiar to a Western audience. Honor is even the overarching theme of Oroonoko's life. It is drilled into him from the strict customs of Coramantien and he stays true to its principles even up to his gruesome death, which he bravely embraces.

Through the plot, the narrator examines the sustainability of Oroonoko's all-or-nothing approach to honor (in Coramantien and Suriname) and how these notions of honor set him up for his disastrous end. Regardless of location, Oroonoko's particular understanding of honor is predicated on a refusal to compromise, which leads to varying outcomes, depending on whether those around him value honor as well. In Coramantien, honor is a relatively well-understood principle and is highly regarded amongst the men—even by those like the King, who has no honor left and abuse those that do. Indeed, what separates regular men, like Aboan, from exceptional men, like Oroonoko, is that the average Coramantien recognizes that at times he must do things half-heartedly—like Aboan sleeping with Onahal in exchange for political favors—but also is able rise to the occasion and demonstrate his heroism when he can,

such as when Aboan leads the troops in a losing battle.

Oroonoko, on the other hand, lives a much more unstable life because he is so totally committed to being honorable in every action that he is forced to make extremely tough decisions between bad alternatives: Let Imoinda live and be raped by white colonists or kill her to prevent her dishonor. Try to kill Byam and be murdered or live a slave until death. Oroonoko's preoccupation with following his strict code of honor and always keeping promises makes him vulnerable against those who harbor weak morals, mainly his grandfather, the Captain, and Byam—men who are able to lie to Oroonoko and cheat him. Oroonoko's strong sense of honor also makes him more depressed about being enslaved than others, even though the colonists treat him more like a gentleman than a slave. He does none of the work of a slave, but to be owned by another man seems to him the height of dishonor, and so he is especially concerned that his child should never be born into slavery—it would be better for the child to die instead.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## THE ROYAL VEIL

The **royal veil** is sent by the King of Coramantien to beautiful women he desires. To its recipients, it is a symbol of both a man's sexual invitation and a woman's sexual submission. When the king sends Imoinda the royal veil, there is no note that explains what he wants from Imoinda, as the meaning of this sign is already well known to all the king's subjects, both men and women. Imoinda also knows, probably

from the stories of previous recipients of the veil, that to refuse the royal veil is considered an act of impious disobedience to the King, and is punishable by death. The royal veil is also a conspicuous sign to other men that the king has claimed this woman as his "property," so they should "back off." The veil's recipient is supposed to immediately cover herself with the cloth and return to the king. Any man who sees a woman thus robed would recognize that she is one of the king's chosen ones, and so is no longer sexually available.



## ONAHAL'S PEARL EARRINGS

Onahal initially tries to give Aboan her large and expensive **pearl earrings** as a token of her love for him. Aboan, however, makes it clear that he does not want *just* Onahal's earrings—he also desires to share her bed. After Aboan clarifies this, Onahal's actions and worldly attitude change the meaning behind the gift. She notably forces the pearls into Aboan's hands, and then whispers plans for their rendezvous. Clearly, her intentions behind the gift were never innocent at all. Onahal is an older and more sexually experienced woman, and her gift of the pearl earrings represents these qualities. Her "pearls" are not new—that is, she is not a virgin—but the gift represents what a valuable "conquest" she is. Not only does Onahal have the power and prestige to help advance Aboan's career, but she also has the capacity to help Oroonoko and Imoinda reunite.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Oroonoko* published in 2004.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## 1. OROONOKO IN CORAMANTIEN

In the beginning of *Oroonoko*, the narrator (an unnamed Englishwoman) directly addresses the reader to explain that the tale she is about to recount is completely true. She claims that she was an eyewitness to many of the events that took place in Suriname, South America. At the time (the 1660s), Suriname was a British colony. The narrator insists that anything she didn't see, Oroonoko told her.

Before she begins the story of Oroonoko's life, the narrator makes one further aside. She explains that it is necessary to first give the reader a historical and cultural account of the native people of Suriname. This, she says, will reveal why slaves are imported into the colony.

According to the narrator, the white colonists in Suriname apparently live with the natives in "perfect amity," and don't "command" them, but instead treat them with "brotherly and friendly affection." The natives and the whites have established a robust economy with each other, trading goods which are considered foreign and exotic to each respective culture.

Next, the narrator details what the natives look like. Their exotic beauty, which is so different from the European idea of beauty, captivates her. She says that the natives "have all that is called beauty, except the color" and are "extreme modest and bashful, very shy, and nice of being touched." They are also mostly naked (they wear loincloths), but because they are so used to seeing each other this way, partial nudity does not excite sexual feelings between men and women: "where there is no novelty, there can be no curiosity."

*Oroonoko* is one of the first novels ever written in English, and so the genre was still being invented at the time. Thus Behn conflates fiction with autobiography, claiming that her account is true while also clearly inventing most of it. Little is known of Behn's life, so we can't be sure how many of the events come from firsthand experience, but certainly it is fictional at its core. The character of the narrator, then, is a hazy one, and probably a fictionalized version of Behn herself.



The narrator clearly has no problem with the institution of slavery itself. While reprehensible, these views were the norm in the West at the time—slaves were seen as a necessary economic component of Britain as a colonial power, and non-white races were seen as inferior, and so deserving of being enslaved. We must then read the novel while keeping in mind the narrator's inherently skewed, racist perspective.



Here the narrator makes the white colonists seem benevolent and tolerant towards the natives, in contrast to their treatment of black slaves. But the basis of this relationship is economic as well—the colonists need to act friendly to keep trade going, and to continue making a profit off of the natives.



Even when ostensibly complimenting the natives, the narrator always shows her prejudice toward non-European cultures, as she uses traditional white beauty as the standard to judge the natives. Furthermore, she treats them as though they are not fully human or deserving of her respect—they are like children.





For the narrator, the natives represent “an absolute idea of the first state of innocence, before man knew how to sin.” She proclaims that religion would only destroy their peace, which they naturally possess through “ignorance,” and laws would only teach them how to cause offense.

The narrator relates an important anecdote that illustrates the strong moral code governing the simple but virtuous society of the natives of Suriname. Apparently an English governor promised to come visit the natives on a certain day, but failed to show up or send an excuse for his absence. The natives believed that he must have died, because this was the only reason why someone would ever break a promise in their culture. When the governor finally came to them, the natives asked what the English thought of a man who broke his promise. Not realizing the natives were referring to him, the governor responded that that man would be considered “a liar,” saying that this was a word of “infamy” to gentlemen. The natives then accused the governor of being a liar, and guilty of that infamy. The narrator proclaims that “native justice” is far superior to the laws white men have to offer, and those laws would only teach the natives “vice” and “cunning.”

The narrator wraps up her digression on the customs and cultures of the natives of Suriname by explaining that the English colonists rely on the natives for information about the foods to eat and trade. She reiterates that their relationship is one of friendship, but also adds that the natives outnumber the whites. Because the natives cannot be enslaved, she explains, the colony imports African slaves to work the sugar plantations.

The narrator then briefly explains how the slave trade works. Those looking to purchase slaves make a deal with a ship’s captain to pay him so much per slave. The slaves on the ships are organized into lots of about ten people, three to four men and the rest women and children. The buyer cannot choose his lot, but has to be content with what the captain gives him. The colony in Suriname buys slaves that are prisoners of war—those captured by the army of Coramantien, the brave and warlike African nation from which Oroonoko came.

*Despite her skewed perspective on beauty and color, the narrator seems to be open-minded and have a large capacity for cultural understanding (like Behn herself, in writing this novel). She is awake to the vices of her own society, and though she sees the natives as childlike, she sees the West as generally corrupt.*



*This anecdote brings up the ideas of honor and betrayal, important themes in the work. The narrator clearly does not approve of how this English governor interacts with the natives, and her inclusion of this unflattering story suggests that there could be disharmony amongst the colonists concerning the treatment of non-whites. By not honoring his promises toward the natives, the governor reveals that he does not consider them his equals, and he would certainly have been shocked to hear them correct him according to his own English standards of decorum. This story also prefigures other instances in the events to come, in which non-Westerners (notably Oroonoko himself) will be shocked at the natural deceitfulness and dishonesty of whites.*



*The real reason for the friendship between the natives and the colonists is not just profit-driven, but also to ensure the survival and security of the colony. Because the natives teach the English how to survive, while the colonists offer very little in return, and in fact encroach upon the natives’ land, the colonists also have to keep the natives happy to prevent a rebellion, which the outnumbered colonists would certainly lose.*



*This detailed account of how the slave trade works reveals how the institution of slavery dehumanizes everyone involved. Since Coramantien also participates in the slave trade, making money from selling prisoners, this suggests that the relationship between Oroonoko’s people and the whites might be similar to the profit-driven relationship between the natives of Suriname and the colonists.*



With this background, the narrator at last comes to the story of Oroonoko's life. She begins by outlining his royal lineage, warrior upbringing, and the events that brought him to the West Indies (Caribbean). As the last living male descendant and the grandson of the King of Coramantien, a man with many wives, Oroonoko is sent away from court to learn the arts of war when he is five. He is trained by the country's best and oldest general, the father of Imoinda, who becomes Oroonoko's foster-father. By age 17, Oroonoko has become an expert captain, one of the best and bravest soldiers of the army, and is beautiful and admired by his people. However, tragedy strikes when his foster-father saves his life in battle, taking a fatal arrow in the eye that had been aimed at Oroonoko. Greatly saddened by this event, Oroonoko becomes the new general, finishes the war, and comes back to court.

Here the narrator makes another digression from the narrative to describe Oroonoko's intelligence, morality, and beauty—the traits he was most admired for in the West Indies. She explains that Oroonoko grew up with a background in Western education due to his French tutor, an intelligent expatriate who taught him languages, morals, and science. Oroonoko also had an innate desire to learn about Western cultures. He learned English and Spanish by mingling with the English and Spanish slave traders he sold his prisoners to.

The narrator assures readers of the truth of Oroonoko's merits by describing her own impressions of him, and the details of their first meeting. After hearing so much about him, she had been eager to see him, and was extremely surprised at how handsome he seemed to her—for a black man. His features are all the more remarkable to the narrator because they are not exactly like what she has seen of his race. His skin is "perfect ebony" instead "brown rusty black," and his nose is "Roman, instead of African and flat." Based on his fine appearance, she decides he must be a good ruler with a beautiful soul. His ability to speak intelligently about a number of subjects only confirms these opinions. Because Oroonoko is so beautiful both inside and out, the narrator also thinks him capable of "the highest degree of love," which only the greatest souls can experience.

*Like many heroes, Oroonoko is typically superlative in all areas. The English would have drawn parallels between Oroonoko and Classical Greek or Roman heroes, who were great and noble warriors and who likewise often had tragic fates. Readers would also have been impressed by Oroonoko's strong emotional response to the death of his foster-father—something which makes him seem more likeable and honorable, rather than weak.*



*The narrator suggests that Oroonoko became so noble and admirable because of the Western influences of his education, another sign that she views Western culture as inherently superior to all others. Furthermore, the narrator attempts to paint the slave trade in a positive light by pointing out the language benefits Oroonoko gained from it, in addition to the economic ones.*



*Knowing that Oroonoko's merits would sound unbelievable to her audience, the narrator still endorses them—but Oroonoko himself is, of course, an invented fictional character (though he may have been based on an acquaintance of Behn's). This becomes more apparent in the description of Oroonoko's beauty, which is an impossible mixture of pure African blood somehow "corrected" with European traits, like a Roman nose. The narrator's admiration of Oroonoko is also heavily predicated on his Western traits and education. Overall, Behn's description emphasizes that Oroonoko is beautiful and noble despite being black, and also suggests that his "white" qualities are his best ones. We will see this capacity for "great love" as the narrative progresses.*



Slipping back into the chronological sequence of the narrative, the narrator reminds readers that the death of Oroonoko's mentor (Imoinda's father) has huge consequences other than just bringing Oroonoko back to court. Apparently the old general had a daughter, the last of his line, who is as beautiful and virtuous as Oroonoko himself. Once back at court, Oroonoko pays Imoinda (the general's daughter) a visit to offer his condolences, and to give her a present of the slaves the army captured from her father's last battle. Immediately Oroonoko is struck by Imoinda's unparalleled beauty, and she by his. Each falls for the other. Oroonoko leaves smitten. In conversations with friends afterwards, he doesn't even have to bring her up, because she is all they talk about.

Not much time passes before Oroonoko pays a second visit to the fair Imoinda. Shortly thereafter, the brave warrior, unused to talking with women, professes his love for her in a speech inspired by an "unknown power [that] instructed his heart and tongue in the language of love." Imoinda is likewise inspired to relate her passion to him.

Importantly, Oroonoko vows that Imoinda will be the only woman he marries, "contrary to the custom of his country." Even when she's old, wrinkly, and no longer beautiful, he promises that he will still see and love the eternal youth and beauty of her soul. Imoinda accepts his proposal and receives him "as the greatest honor the gods could do her." The couple hold a ceremony, which the narrator forgets "to ask how 'twas performed," and both decide that they need the blessing of the King (Oroonoko's grandfather). "Resignation to the monarch" and filial piety are both important virtues in their society.

The narrator then provides some details about the old King, who is not like Oroonoko at all. Though he is almost one hundred years old, the King is still interested in women, and has many wives and concubines. When he hears of Imoinda's beauty, the King immediately decides that he has to find out if she is worth adding to his legion of concubines. Before inviting her to court for his "private use," the King has some reconnaissance work done. He discovers, to his chagrin, that Imoinda is Oroonoko's "mistress."

The King is hardly dissuaded by this news, however. One day when Oroonoko is out hunting, he brings Imoinda to the palace, wanting to discreetly observe her and her feelings towards Oroonoko. One of the King's attendants brings Imoinda to the palace to give her a present. He tells her the present is from Oroonoko, but actually it is just the King's bait.

*The fact that Oroonoko and Imoinda are both the last of their noble lines gives a strong indication that they are somehow meant for each other—both of them impossibly beautiful, intelligent, and virtuous. Later on in Suriname, both characters will be given new, Christian names—but the narrator will continue to call Imoinda "Imoinda," while Oroonoko will become "Caesar." In fact, "Imoinda" is the last word of the novel, which further suggests that the name carries an important resonance. Unlike the supposedly innocent, childlike natives of Suriname, the people of Coramantien deal in slavery and warfare just like the English.*



*The love between Oroonoko and Imoinda is epic and almost supernaturally inspired, as Behn creates an "exoticized" version of traditional Western heroic love stories.*



*Oroonoko's decision to take Imoinda as his only wife is portrayed as unusual in his country, again proving that he is not a typical Coramantien man, but one who holds values similar to Westerners (and is therefore more sympathetic to Behn's readers). At the same time, Coramantien is a morally rigid, patriarchal society that upholds ideals similar to those of English royalists—like resignation to a monarch's total authority. Though Behn was a royalist herself, she may also be using Coramantien to point out the corruption she sees in her own government.*



*The King is a foil and antagonist to Oroonoko, which automatically foreshadows trouble. He also clearly does not value Imoinda or any of his wives, and is unable to experience the true romantic love that Oroonoko and Imoinda share—instead he is a collector of women, abusing his complete authority over his subjects. The King is essentially a caricature of a corrupt monarch, with an "exotic" twist of having his own personal harem.*



*The King is clearly crafty and is also used to treating people like pawns, from his attendants to Imoinda, who is an unwitting participant in his game. This is meant to starkly contrast with the honorable, idealistic Oroonoko, who could never even begin to act this way.*



Suspecting nothing, Imoinda is naturally overjoyed to receive what she thinks is Oroonoko's gift. She expresses her feelings for Oroonoko in no uncertain way before the King. Seeing Imoinda's beauty, however, the King resolves that he must have her, even though she loves Oroonoko. He is slightly upset to discover that Imoinda is truly in love with Oroonoko, but he reassures himself that Imoinda will surely accept his proposition. He knows that his people must obey their king like a god, so Imoinda's sense of duty will surely override her love for Oroonoko and compel her to be his concubine.

*Imoinda is proud of the gift giver (Oroonoko, or so she thinks), not of the gift itself, and her purity and simplicity make the king seem even more like a villain. It is clear that the king will get his way in the end, however, because women are not safe in such a patriarchal society—one in which the wishes of a man will always override the free will of a woman. Here Behn also emphasizes the themes of love and obedience, as Imoinda and Oroonoko will soon be forced to struggle between the conflicting demands of these two virtues.*



Decided on this plan, the King immediately sends the **royal veil** to Imoinda. In Coramantien this is a universally understood symbol that denotes “the ceremony of invitation,” and decrees that Imoinda should cover herself with the veil and come to the King's bed. Disobeying this signal, the narrator warns, is not only an immediate cause for execution, but also “a most impious disobedience.”

*This second gift from the King is no gift at all, but a command. As in Shakespeare's Othello, a piece of fabric signals a woman's doom. It is ironic that a delicate veil can be a symbol of such brutal power and oppression, and can wreak such havoc on a person's life.*



When Imoinda receives the **veil**, she is horrified, but she also knows that “delays in these cases are dangerous, and pleading worse than treason.” Trembling and faint with fear, Imoinda dons the veil and departs for the Otan: the King's private pleasure palace.

*Imoinda seems to know quite a bit about what can go wrong in similar cases, which suggests that the King has done this to many other reluctant women. Imoinda is forced to bow to the demands of obedience to her monarch, even when these conflict with her love for and obedience to her husband.*



Meanwhile, the King has ordered a bath to be prepared, and he is sitting in the tub when Imoinda finally arrives. He coarsely tells her to take off her clothes and come to his arms. However, Imoinda starts crying and falls to the edge of the bathtub, pleading with the King to listen to her.

*The image of a man more than a hundred years old sitting in a bath tub to seduce someone might be comedic if his intentions weren't so tragic for Imoinda, and his control over her fate so complete.*



Imoinda explains that she is still a virgin, and says that she would gladly give her virginity to the King, except that it is not hers to bestow on any man but her husband. She also reminds the King that their country's laws and his own sense of honor would prevent him from sleeping with her, as well. Imoinda finishes her speech by telling the King that she does not want to “be the occasion of making him commit a great sin” by hiding her married state.

*Though Behn's invented Coramantien people are not Christians, some of their theology contains Christological themes, such as the idea that a woman should remain chaste until marriage, and that certain sins can be “great,” or grave and mortal, rather than slight or venial.*



The King is furious that Imoinda is trying to deny him, and she is terrified to be doing so. To make her shut up and comply, the King demands that she reveal the name of her husband. Imoinda is about to tell him when the King purposely interrupts her, threatening death to whomever she names as her husband, even if it be Oroonoko himself! The King demands that Imoinda deny her marriage and swear herself a virgin, the latter of which she has to do, since she has not actually slept with Oroonoko yet. The King is satisfied with this assurance and leads an unresisting but miserable Imoinda into the bath.

Oroonoko returns from his hunt and finds Imoinda missing. When he finds out that she has been presented with the **royal veil**, he is so distraught that he wants to hurt himself, but he is stopped by his attendants. After calming down, Oroonoko begins to despair to his friends over the hopelessness of ever getting Imoinda back from the King. For even when the king dies, it would be taboo for Oroonoko to marry a woman who had been his grandfather's consort. And even if Oroonoko ignores the custom, he would dishonor his successors. It would be better, he laments, if he and Imoinda could escape to "some unknown world [that had] never heard our story."

Oroonoko's friends try to comfort him by telling him that his grandfather is in the wrong, and the law is on his side. Oroonoko takes some comfort in this idea, and decides that he has to see Imoinda to find out if she is still a virgin. However, getting into the Otan to see her won't be easy. Oroonoko knows that he can only enter if the King invites him—to trespass is death. Lacking an immediate plan to gain an invitation, he can only wait and suffer.

In the meantime, the King is suffering, too. Not only does he feel bad about taking away Imoinda from his noble grandson, but every time he is with Imoinda, her weeping reminds him of his treachery. When she is with the King, Imoinda is bold enough to speak often about her husband, something the King allows because he still dotes on Oroonoko.

To make matters worse for Oroonoko, the King has been asking his friends and attendants how he's been coping with the loss of Imoinda. Concerned about Oroonoko's safety, they all lie and tell the King what he wants to hear: Oroonoko has gotten over Imoinda and fills his time studying, hunting, and training his army. The King is pleased by this news, and gloats about it to Imoinda, hoping to get her to stop pining for her lover and properly attend to the King instead. Imoinda pretends to be unconcerned whenever the King starts gloating, but inside her heart is breaking. She is only happy when she can be alone and give vent to her grief.

*Words and names clearly carry a certain power in the novel, as here Oroonoko will die if he is named. In setting up these ultimatums for Imoinda, the King reveals that his idea of love is totally authoritarian and commanding, and matches his use of language.*



*Like Imoinda, Oroonoko also immediately understands what the presentation of the royal veil means for a woman, another indication that it is a well-known symbol in the culture. Oroonoko's line of thinking—that he will never be able to be with Imoinda because of the taboos and repercussions on his name—reveals that honor, and other people's perceptions of him, is hugely important to Oroonoko. His preoccupation with honor will be his downfall later, when he is faced with the deceitful, treacherous colonists.*



*In their patriarchal society the King circumvents the laws, so it is cold comfort for Oroonoko to know that justice is on his side when in reality no one would dare oppose the king. For a woman, virginity before marriage is essential in Coramantien culture. It is what makes Imoinda so appealing to the King and, to a lesser degree, to Oroonoko.*



*It is Imoinda's small revenge that the King's pleasure turns into guilt when he hears about Oroonoko. The King clearly doesn't have Oroonoko's sense of honor, but he is at least capable of feeling guilty for so cruelly betraying his grandson.*



*In trying to protect Oroonoko, his friends only reinforce the King's mistaken belief that what he did to his grandson was not so wrong because Oroonoko never cared much for Imoinda. Because of this, the King's sense of triumph grows. However, Imoinda is also lying to the King by hiding her grief in order to lessen his gloating. It is also ironic that she feels happiest when she is able to fully express her sadness about being separated from Oroonoko. Only in private can she act honestly and also honor her husband.*



In time, Oroonoko and the King have a number of meetings. By carefully hiding his true feelings, Oroonoko convinces the King that he is no longer in love with Imoinda. Eventually Oroonoko is invited to the Otan to dine.

Despite being able to fool the King, when Oroonoko sees Imoinda for the first time since she's been taken away, he blushes deeply and almost faints. The narrator interrupts to confirm that it is indeed possible for dark-skinned people to blush—she's seen it. Luckily for Oroonoko, his good friend, Aboan, is there to support him, and the King happens to look away at the right moment.

Imoinda is overjoyed to see Oroonoko so pained, because now she knows that he still loves her. While caressing the King, she steals several glances at Oroonoko. Whenever their eyes meet, Imoinda's pained expression tells him that she doesn't want to be there either. They continue speaking through their eyes until Onahal, one of the King's older wives and Imoinda's keeper, opens a door, and Oroonoko sees she has decorated the bed. The King then rises and leads Imoinda off to the bedroom. Oroonoko is so upset that he cannot control his rage, and he falls to the floor, groaning for a long time.

When Onahal finishes attending to the King and his concubine, she exits the bedroom and retires to wait until she is called. She passes by the room where Oroonoko is still lying on the floor, and hears his moaning. She administers cordials to restore him to his senses, but then realizes that lovesickness is what ails him. Onahal changes her tactics and tries to console Oroonoko by telling him that the King cannot do Imoinda any real harm, because the King cannot perform when he tries to have sex with her. Onahal tells Oroonoko that Imoinda still loves him.

Oroonoko's friend Aboan, who has presumably been with Oroonoko the entire time, agrees with Onahal's assessment. Soon, all three sit down and Oroonoko tries to convince Onahal to help him. She agrees to act as messenger for the lovers.

The talk with Onahal gives Oroonoko new hope, and allows him to act unconcerned when the King and Imoinda emerge from the bedroom. The King requests entertainment, and his concubines and young wives all dance. Oroonoko watches only Imoinda, the most graceful of the dancers. In the meantime, Onahal and Aboan retire to a secluded window seat.

*Oroonoko plays along with the ruse that the King has been fed in order to be with Imoinda—proving that Oroonoko has now clearly prioritized his love for Imoinda over his obedience to his grandfather.*



*While trying to be a worldly ambassador with her fresh colonial insights, the narrator (again) reveals her deeply ingrained racist thinking because she feels compelled to justify her story with her own eyewitness account, rather than letting her description (which she imagines sounds unrealistic) stand on its own merit.*



*That the lovers communicate their feelings through their eyes suggests a number of old, well-known adages, such as “the eyes are the window to the soul.” In addition to helping him “speak” to Imoinda, Oroonoko's vision also reveals the ugly truth of their situation when he sees the bedroom she shares with the King. We will come to see that as a “great soul,” Oroonoko is prone to these overwhelming, debilitating fits of emotion—whether grief or, in this case, anger.*



*Like Greek and Roman heroes, Oroonoko feels emotions powerfully and acutely, and they wreak havoc on his health. Though Oroonoko's love sickness has caused him to be physically ill, cordials don't help—only getting Imoinda back would completely heal him. Since this is impossible, hearing Onahal's comforting admissions is the next best restorative.*



*As before, Aboan performs the role of “wingman.” The fact that he and Onahal immediately agree to help Oroonoko disobey the King shows that the King's injustices are well-known and unpopular.*



*The King gives no thought to the pain that his rendezvous with Imoinda causes Oroonoko, as he calls for music and dance immediately afterward. He also may be flaunting his power over Oroonoko and Imoinda by doing this.*



The narrator again interrupts the narrative to describe Onahal's position in the court. No longer beautiful, she has been cast off by the King and is in charge of instructing the young wives and concubines, as a sort of governess. The narrator imagines what Onahal must think and feel about her new role, and decides that she must feel badly used. For his part, Oroonoko too fears that Onahal might be unwilling to help him because the King no longer desires her.

Returning to the narrative, the narrator describes what transpires between Aboan and Onahal in the window seat. Aboan is a beautiful and virtuous man, like Oroonoko, and because he has visited the Otan often, he has captured Onahal's interest. The narrator points out that even though she is old, Onahal is still capable of love.

Aboan is no fool, and he knows that Onahal likes him. He recognizes that courting her could help advance his career, and he's not vain enough to be picky about the appearance of a woman who is sexually available. Plus, knowing of Oroonoko's longing to be with Imoinda, he sees an opportunity to help his friend by seducing Onahal. Aboan flirts with Onahal in the window seat, and finds her receptive to his advances.

When the King breaks up the festivities to retire, Aboan returns to Oroonoko with the news of his success with Onahal. Oroonoko asks Aboan to continue to seduce Onahal so that Aboan can ask her to help orchestrate a secret meeting between Oroonoko and Imoinda. Aboan readily agrees, and the two are both impatient to return to the Otan.

Soon a war has broken out, however, and Oroonoko must go to the front lines. He vows to meet with Imoinda the next time he goes to the Otan before he leaves. Though Oroonoko doesn't realize it, spies have informed the King about the persistent love between his grandson and favorite concubine. This is why Oroonoko's deployment is being hastened.

*Onahal is neither the heroine nor a particularly important character, but she is intriguingly human and three-dimensional in a work where good and evil are usually clear-cut. The narrator, herself living in a patriarchal society, clearly feels some sympathy for Onahal's plight.*



*Onahal, like the King, is mostly attracted to youthful beauty, which suggests a similarly superficial view of love—in contrast to the idealized romance between Oroonoko and Imoinda, who promised to love each other even when they get old.*



*Aboan's thoughts about starting an affair with Onahal are mercenary and practical. He clearly doesn't share Oroonoko's uncompromising sense of honor, but this also makes Aboan more practically useful in situations like this. Onahal is again an intriguing character, as a woman in a patriarchal society who is acting similarly to a powerful man, and using her authority in exchange for sex.*



*Oroonoko is not troubled by the ethical implications of Aboan seducing Onahal, because it means that he will be closer to his love. In essence, Oroonoko sacrifices Aboan's honor for what he sees as a greater purpose: being with Imoinda. Aboan, for his part, isn't too upset about being used by his friend, because he stands to gain from both Oroonoko and Onahal.*



*The simultaneous existence of two plots—Oroonoko's plot to meet Imoinda and the King's plot to spoil Oroonoko's opportunities to be with Imoinda—creates increasing tension within the narrative about what's going to happen next. Behn is here developing a sense of suspense and a narrative complexity that was incredibly innovative for her time.*



When an invitation to return to the Otan arrives, Oroonoko senses that this will be his last chance to be with Imoinda before they are separated again. He urges Aboan to do his best with Onahal. At the Otan, the women again dance to entertain the King, while Onahal and Aboan slip off to a corner. When they are alone, Onahal confesses that she wants to take only one lover: Aboan. Aboan charms her, telling her that he wants her too. He also asks for proof of her love.

Onahal is overjoyed to hear this. She tries to give Aboan her **pearl earrings**, but he tells her that instead he wants an hour alone with her—implying that he wants to sleep with her. Giving him the pearls anyway, Onahal whispers instructions: she will meet him at the gates of the orange groves behind the Otan at midnight.

All this time, the King is engrossed in the dancing and focuses on Imoinda, who seems prettier than ever because Onahal has been giving her news about Oroonoko. Oroonoko too watches Imoinda, and she watches him. Unfortunately, as she dances closer to the prince, she is distracted from her steps and loses her balance. Oroonoko leaps up and catches her before she falls.

Everyone in the court sees how happy Oroonoko is to hold Imoinda. He is so excited to have her in his arms that he clasps her close, forgetting that doing so means certain death. Imoinda, however, is much more sensible of the danger Oroonoko is in. To protect him, she springs from his arms and continues dancing, as though nothing had happened.

Seeing this exchange, the King's jealousy flares. He stops the entertainment and drags Imoinda away, sending word behind him that the Prince must depart for war immediately—if Oroonoko stays another night, he will die for his disobedience. Meanwhile Onahal, recognizing that her happiness with Aboan depends on prolonging Oroonoko's stay, tells them both to come to the gate before they leave the Otan.

Behind closed doors, the King confronts Imoinda. He thinks she and Oroonoko planned her fall, and he doesn't listen when Imoinda protests her innocence. The King leaves Imoinda in her apartments and returns to his own. He then dispatches an attendant to check if Oroonoko is getting ready to leave for battle. Upon hearing that Oroonoko is not making any preparations, the King orders his guard to spy on Oroonoko and send a report of his movements to him.

*Because she is no longer desirable, Onahal has much more freedom of movement than the King's favorite mistresses, whom he keeps close to him. Likewise Aboan, who is not a general (like Oroonoko) or the King's kin, can move around without fear of being watched. This quality of being overlooked allows the two to hold important private discussions.*



*Onahal can match Aboan's flirtation, and demonstrates her wealth and power by giving him the earrings, a token of her love. Though Aboan may have initiated the affair, Onahal will clearly be in charge from now on, as her instructions and her enthusiasm indicate.*



*Oroonoko and Imoinda certainly couldn't have picked a worse time to be overly attentive to one another. The already suspicious King has noticed improvements in Imoinda's mood and appearance, and is no doubt interested to know the reason behind the change in his favorite mistress.*



*Imoinda's dance reveals her skill at manipulating both her body and her emotions. Not only does she improvise recovery steps for her dance after her trip gains her an unexpected dance partner, but unlike Oroonoko, she has better control over her emotions during their surprise encounter.*



*The King's counterplan seems to set up impossible obstacles for Oroonoko's mission to reunite with Imoinda. However, Onahal's interest in Aboan gives Oroonoko a unique advantage that the king lacks: a sympathetic "insider" ally to scheme with.*



*The King is no longer thinking rationally, and is clearly paranoid about losing his authority in this struggle with his grandson. Oroonoko no longer feels compelled to hide his disobedience or pretend to be a dutiful grandson, because his meeting with Imoinda is now approaching.*





At midnight, spies watch Oroonoko and Aboan arrive at the Otan's back gate, where Onahal lets them in. They relay this information to the King. Meanwhile Onahal leads Oroonoko to Imoinda's apartment, and then drags Aboan to her own.

Oroonoko approaches the sleeping Imoinda and awakens her with his caresses. Imoinda is still a virgin, and this, the narrator says, makes the ensuing consummation of their marriage all the sweeter.

As the couple lay in bed, they hear a great commotion in the Otan. Hearing the voices of many men outside Imoinda's chambers, Oroonoko springs out of bed and grabs his battleax to fend off the intruders. He yells at them that he, the Prince, demands them to stand back or else he will kill the first to enter. Recognizing his voice, the men respond that the King has ordered them to investigate the break in. Before departing, they give Oroonoko a friendly warning to leave quickly before he is killed. Oroonoko and Imoinda say a quick, sad goodbye, and Oroonoko leaves for camp.

Shortly thereafter, the enraged King confronts Imoinda and Onahal. Hoping to buy Oroonoko time and save his life, both women lie and say that Oroonoko broke in and raped Imoinda. Because Imoinda has been "ravished," and by the King's own kin at that, she is now a "polluted thing" that the King no longer wants and can no longer have. He cannot simply give Imoinda back to Oroonoko, however, because she was given the **royal veil**. The King feels spiteful, and decides against executing Imoinda (a noble punishment). Though both women plead for death, he decides to instead sell them as slaves to a far-off land—an ignoble punishment for anyone of high status.

After executing this plan, the King does feel some remorse. He recognizes for the first time that he has infringed upon great love, the purity of which his courtiers now all openly testify to. He also admits that Oroonoko had good reason to do all he did. But the King mostly repents of his cruelty to Imoinda out of fear of retribution from Oroonoko. He knows that in selling her he acted rashly, and that Oroonoko could hurt himself in his grief—or worse, hurt the King as revenge. The king dispatches a messenger to lie to Oroonoko and tell him that Imoinda was executed.

*Notably, the spies don't stop Oroonoko from entering. This could be because they weren't given instructions to do so, or because they want to catch Oroonoko committing a more damning crime against the King.*



*Despite spending many nights with the King, Imoinda is still a virgin. The narrator implies that this is possible because the king is unable to "perform"—he is still lustful and can molest his concubines, but his aged body is impotent and he is no longer able to have sex. Thus Imoinda is technically still a virgin, and was never unfaithful to Oroonoko.*



*While Oroonoko backs up his show of bravado by grabbing for his weapon, what really saves him is his royal identity. The conflicted guards clearly still feel some sense of allegiance for the Prince (or dislike for the King), as they tell him to run rather than immediately attacking him. Oroonoko has put his love for Imoinda above all else, but he still must obey the King by going to fight for him.*



*The women do not seem to have the same qualms about honor as Oroonoko does, as they immediately lie to save both him and themselves. The King has always considered Imoinda his property, and now that she has been "used" without his permission, he decides to throw her away, belittling her status and objectifying her even further by selling her as a form of human property: a slave. It is notable that execution is seen as a more honorable punishment than slavery—this is clearly an idea that Oroonoko shares, as we will see.*



*As is usually the case in tragedies, the King's regret comes too little and too late. The sincerity of his guilt is all the more questionable as he continues on his path of deception by lying to Oroonoko about Imoinda's fate. This lie sets up the couple for a surprise reunion later on, however, as Behn builds more narrative suspense.*



The messenger arrives as Oroonoko is preparing for battle. Oroonoko guesses that Imoinda is dead from the messenger's downcast looks. The messenger also informs Oroonoko of the King's sorrow and guilt. Oroonoko promises not to seek revenge, because death will be coming for the King soon anyway, thus serving a quicker justice than Oroonoko could. Oroonoko falls into a deep depression and refuses to fight. Because of this, his army, now led by Aboan, does poorly in battle and is close to losing.

When they are about to lose, Oroonoko's fighting spirit gets the best of his grief. He storms into battle and gravely wounds the leader of the opposition, a man named Jamoan, and wins the war. He later takes Jamoan as a slave.

*Oroonoko again acts like an Ancient Greek or Roman hero in his debilitating grief. The deep depression he experiences—which will soon turn into a desire for revenge, despite his promise here—is similar to the Greek hero Achilles' reaction upon hearing about the death of his good friend, Patroclus, during the Trojan War (as told in Homer's epic poem the Iliad).*



*Even with his personal life in shambles, Oroonoko cannot turn away from his duties to the living. His sense of honor overcomes his grief, and we see an example of just how powerful he is as a warrior.*



## 2. KIDNAPPED

After the war, Oroonoko decides to stay in his camp rather than return to court, the site of his grief. Jamoan, his French tutor, Aboan, and all his troops try to cheer Oroonoko up. In time, his heartache lessens. After ignoring numerous summonses from the King to come home, Oroonoko reluctantly returns. He is received with great pomp, and is honored for his victory. Now a changed man, the prince is not interested in "any sort of amour" anymore.

Not long after Oroonoko's return, an English slave trader arrives in Coramantien's port. The Captain of the ship has a good rapport with the generals of Coramantien, having purchased many slaves from them before. The Captain is also friends with Oroonoko, who esteems his intelligence and elegance, and receives him as a royal guest. The Captain's visit continues for some time, and both men seem to genuinely enjoy each other's company.

As the date for the Captain's departure draws near, he invites Oroonoko to dine with him onboard his ship, in order to repay the prince's generosity. Oroonoko accepts the invitation, and the Captain prepares the ship for a royal reception. Oroonoko, his French tutor, Aboan, Jamoan, and around 100 of the noblest male courtiers come aboard the ship that night. The Captain plies them all heavily with wine.

*By staying in camp, Oroonoko is avoiding his memories of Imoinda and their last night, which are associated with the court. Furthermore, he no doubt feels anger towards his grandfather, who ruined his life in the first place. But in returning in his own time and on his own terms, he regains some of his independence and sense of dignity.*



*The Captain's arrival marks the second section of the narrative, during which betrayal again changes Oroonoko's life. Despite their different races, the Captain and Oroonoko seem to view each other as equals and friends. The Captain deals in the slave trade, but we have seen that Oroonoko himself takes slaves as well. It is noteworthy, however, that in Coramantien people are not enslaved because of their race, but because they have been defeated in battle.*



*Oroonoko is too trusting to believe that the Captain could be capable of great evil. In addition to his respect and esteem for the Captain, his love of learning about the West likely influences his decision to accept the invitation to tour the slave ship. No matter how nicely it might be decorated, nothing could disguise the ship as anything but transportation for an evil institution.*



The Coramantiens get drunk and explore the ship with delight. Suddenly, the Captain gives a signal, and his sailors seize all the guests and chain them up. The ship then sets sail, bound for the New World, where the Captain plans to sell the kidnapped men into slavery.

The narrator notes that some readers might consider the Captain's act "brave," but she leaves out her opinion, letting her reader "judge as he pleases."

During the journey, Oroonoko is kept apart from his men and is tightly bound to prevent his escape. Greatly resentful of this treatment, he refuses to eat. His men do the same, and they begin to starve to death, resolved to die rather than become slaves. This hunger strike vexes the Captain, who stands to lose a fortune if his cargo dies. He sends a sailor to apologize to Oroonoko, because the Captain is too ashamed to see him himself. On the Captain's orders, the sailor lies to the Prince, telling him that the Captain has decided to release the men at the next port, if they will promise to eat.

Believing that the Captain will keep his promise, Oroonoko agrees and swears an oath. Oroonoko is a man of honor and would never break a promise—something the Captain has planned for. For his part, Oroonoko expects that in making this promise, he will be freed from his shackles. But the Captain denies him this, because he doesn't trust that the Prince won't try to take revenge. Oroonoko then makes another promise: that he will be friendly and obey the Captain if he can be released from his chains.

The back-and-forth between Oroonoko, the messenger, and the Captain continues. The Captain again refuses to release Oroonoko, saying that he can't trust the oath of a non-Christian. Oroonoko is sorry to hear that the Captain does not know "to credit as he would be credited." Oroonoko explains that to break an oath in his religion means he would be considered dishonorable for the rest of his life, and would experience eternal torment in the afterlife. After explaining this, Oroonoko refuses to negotiate through the messenger anymore.

*The curiosity and confidence of the drunken free men prove to be their undoing, as another great betrayal affects Oroonoko's life. The Captain's long con of Oroonoko—months of winning his trust—has lost him a trading partner, so he must think the potential profits from Oroonoko and his men will be quite significant.*



*Though the narrator loses a great opportunity to decry slavery here, her pointed silence regarding this scene (particularly after idealizing Oroonoko so much) suggests that she does not agree the Captain was right—contrary to the prevailing views of her day.*



*With no opportunity of escaping, choosing death over slavery gives the captured men a greater degree of agency than passively accepting their uncertain future as human property. Having stayed with Oroonoko for a while and observed Coramantien customs, the Captain knows that the men are serious about whatever they set their minds to accomplish, and that they find death a far better fate than being enslaved.*



*In his dealings with the Captain, Oroonoko experiences an early form of slavery by making binding promises that limit his freedom and give the Captain ultimate authority. Oroonoko's rigid sense of honor makes him extremely vulnerable against the Captain, who is deceitful and conniving and can use Oroonoko's moral code against him.*



*Though he is a "heathen," Oroonoko upholds many Christian principles, such as the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." His beliefs also resemble the Christian notion of the afterlife, namely that there is a place of paradise for good people and eternal torment for bad people. The Captain, who claims to be a pious Christian, is actually much further from practicing Christian virtues than Oroonoko.*



Realizing that he has no choice but to free Oroonoko if he is to sell healthy slaves, the Captain relents. He also concludes that Oroonoko must be able to visit his men in order to keep up their morale. Meanwhile the Frenchman has been secured to prevent him from aiding the Prince, but the Captain does not consider him a prisoner because he is white.

The Captain finally visits Oroonoko and removes his irons, leaving him to rest and eat, but encouraging him to visit his men. The Captain reassures Oroonoko of his word. The Prince, who has no reason to suspect further treachery, visits his men, and they rejoice at the sight of him. They are not released from their chains, but they bear their load bravely and with more ease, knowing that their dear leader is safe.

After this all the captured men eat, and the Prince's attendants are even "pleased with their captivity" because by it, they hope to redeem the Prince. Oroonoko, however, considers his capture to be punishment for leaving Imoinda behind to be murdered. Needless to say, the Captain reneges on his promise to free the men.

Finally the ship arrives in Suriname, an English colony in South America. Oroonoko and each of his men are put in separate lots along with other slaves. A man named Trefry buys the first lot, which contains Oroonoko and 17 more slaves.

On his way off the ship, Oroonoko gives the Captain a furious look, which makes the Captain blush. Oroonoko shouts that he now knows the truth about the Captain and the gods he swears by. As he leaps into Trefry's boat, Oroonoko urges his fellow slaves to not resist, because they might "meet with more honor and honesty" in the New World.

### 3. SLAVERY IN SURINAME

During Oroonoko's boat ride, the narrator describes Trefry, the young Cornish gentleman who has purchased Oroonoko. Trefry manages the plantation of an unnamed Lord. He is very good at math and linguistics and, like Oroonoko, can speak several languages.

*The Captain uses Oroonoko as bait to keep the other slaves healthy because he knows that Oroonoko has complete authority over his men, just as the Captain now has authority over Oroonoko. As the crew gets closer to the New World, any equality between whites and blacks disappears, as the Captain's treatment of the Frenchman demonstrates.*



*The Captain's plan works so well because of the trusting nature of Oroonoko and the complete, unquestioning faith Oroonoko's men have in him. The Captain's betrayal cuts all the more deeply because he undermines the trust the Coramantien people have for each other.*



*While Oroonoko's men are happy despite still being physically chained, Oroonoko is free but still emotionally shackled to his guilt over Imoinda's death.*



*As was common with the slave trade, the Coramantien men are separated to prevent them from organizing an insurrection or running away. Separation also demonstrated to the slaves the power of their new masters.*



*Oroonoko now realizes just how treacherous white men can be, but he still clings to his own inflexible code of honor. With the act of jumping into Trefry's boat, Oroonoko surrenders to his new and unknown future. His last princely act—issuing words of comfort to his men—further demonstrates his moral superiority to the Captain.*



*Though Trefry holds similar intellectual interests to Oroonoko, this in itself does not mean that Oroonoko has met a better future just yet. After all, the Captain, too, initially treated Oroonoko like a friend and equal.*



Trefry immediately recognizes that Oroonoko is different from the average slave, due to his fancy garb and his regal attitude. Upon discovering that Oroonoko can speak English, Trefry guesses that Oroonoko is more exceptional than what he confesses to be. This assumption causes Trefry to admire Oroonoko, and to treat him with great civility.

Trefry's behavior and their discovered common interests help Oroonoko relax on the boat ride. The two men engage in a mutually enjoyable conversation, and Oroonoko thinks that slavery under such an intelligent master might not be so bad. By the end of the ride upriver, Oroonoko has confided his story to Trefry and pledged his fortune and service to him. Trefry abhors the Captain's antics, and promises to help conduct Oroonoko back to his homeland. He also pledges to find out about the condition and location of Oroonoko's men, whom the prince is worried about.

Because of his fresh experiences with betrayal, Oroonoko doesn't really believe that the promises of this "backeary," or white person, are necessarily creditable. But he also sees sincerity in Trefry's face, and is impressed enough by his wisdom to have some hope in his new master.

While they have been travelling upriver, Trefry has periodically stopped in at great riverside estates for refreshments. At these stops, large crowds have gathered on the banks to see Oroonoko, whose fame has preceded him. Oroonoko is uncomfortable with this attention, and asks Trefry to give him simpler clothes. But even in wearing clothes befitting a slave, crowds of admirers still gather and easily pick him out. People "could not help treating him after a different manner, without designing it," even when they don't know he is a prince.

Also during the journey to the plantation, Trefry gives Oroonoko a Christian name, a common practice amongst slave owners. For the rest of the tale Oroonoko is referred to as "Caesar," a name chosen to reflect his martial and leadership skills. The narrator remarks that Caesar's "misfortune" was to come to an obscure world, a world in which many died or were banished after the Dutch took control of Suriname years later. This left only the narrator's "female pen" to record the story of the royal slave, Oroonoko. In another aside, she says that Trefry never even had the chance to begin telling this story.

*There is a sense that Oroonoko's nobility is an inextricable part of him, and even defines him. This connects to Behn's royalist beliefs, that kings are inherently different from other men, and have the right to rule over them.*



*Things seem to brighten somewhat for Oroonoko here, because Trefry seems so different from the Captain. This helps make slavery more palatable to Oroonoko, who begins to see that not all white men are the same. Trefry's understanding of slavery is complex, and seemingly similar to that of the narrator/Behn. While he does not condemn slavery, and even participates in the slave trade, he thinks it is immoral to enslave those who are by nature exceptional or royal—like Oroonoko.*



*Oroonoko initially uses Coramantien language to further distance himself from his new owner, whose race he does not like or trust. However, he is still able to judge Trefry as an individual.*



*Oroonoko cannot hide the fact that he is royalty, any more than he can hide his skin color. That the colonists are able to see his nobility just like Trefry, even when he tries to disguise it with slave garments, further demonstrates the complicated understanding the colonists have of slavery. Furthermore, the great numbers of colonists who go out of their way just to see Oroonoko suggest that he still holds some princely power, even if it is only as an object of admiration.*



*In the New World, Oroonoko not only loses his freedom but also his African identity. Though Imoinda is also given a Christian name, the narrator always refers to her as "Imoinda," rather than "Clemene," once her true identity is revealed. It is unclear why this is, except that the narrator/Behn seems to feel a special sympathy for Imoinda (as opposed to a worshipful attitude towards Oroonoko). Oroonoko is again associated with ancient heroes through his new name—Caesar—the title of the emperors of Rome.*



Back in the narrative, Caesar comes to Parham House, the great house of the plantation, where he is received as a governor rather than a slave. He stays there for a few days, and even receives guests. He is really a slave in name only, and does not do any of the work an ordinary slave might do. When Caesar finally visits the part of the plantation where the slaves stay, they flock to see him and pay him homage.

Some white gentleman who accompany Caesar watch this spectacle with intrigue, because it confirms Trefry's hunch that Caesar is not ordinary. Caesar doesn't like this attention, however, and urges the kneeling people to treat him like a fellow slave. Instead, the slaves hold a banquet for him, which he and a few whites attend.

During the dinner, Trefry, who "loves to talk of love," tells Caesar about Clemene, the beautiful "she-slave" whom everyone, white men included, is in love with. Trefry thinks that she is languishing for some lost love. Caesar, who because of his own tragic love story still cares about the topic, is surprised to hear that she denies herself to everyone, even her own kind. He admires her virtue.

The next day, Trefry and Caesar go on a walk, and Trefry points out Clemene's house. Suddenly, a little dog runs out, followed by Clemene. Clemene tries to run back inside to avoid the men, but Trefry grabs her hand and introduces her to Caesar. Though Clemene doesn't look either man in the eye, Caesar immediately recognizes her—it's Imoinda! When Imoinda finally does look at Caesar, she faints, and he catches her. When she awakens, the joy on both their faces is palpable.

Trefry is happy to have reunited the couple, and while they relate their misfortunes and pledge their love to each other, he rushes back to Parham House to tell the narrator the good news. The narrator is then impatient to meet Caesar's love and befriend her. She remarks that after this incident, the colonists now pay Imoinda a "treble respect." Before, they had respected her for being beautiful and virtuous, but now that they know she is Caesar's beloved, they admire her even more.

*Despite his change of location, Caesar is still treated like royalty. People admire his intelligence, beauty, and virtue, but he also presumably has some quality that only kings have, and that others can recognize. It is important to keep in mind that being a slave "in name only" is still to be a slave—Oroonoko doesn't have to labor, but he still isn't in control of his own life, and is considered another man's property.*



*Caesar would prefer to be treated just like the other slaves, because the way he is currently treated, as a gentleman who is honored but also owned by another man, is confusing to his sense of self. He is also presumably still feeling guilty about Imoinda.*



*Both Trefry and Oroonoko are great romantics, further adding to their sense of kinship. The description of the black female slave should remind readers of Imoinda, who also was extremely "virtuous" (chaste) when the King tried to have his way with her.*



*By detaining her when she clearly wants to get away, Trefry treats Clemene as property—he is kind, but he is still a slave owner. This second collapse presents an inversion of Imoinda's misstep at the Otan. Under the King's watchful eyes, neither Oroonoko nor Imoinda were completely free to act on their impulses when Imoinda tripped, but in Suriname, the enslaved pair are at least free to be together.*



*Caesar helps improve the way the colonists treat Imoinda, who, presumably because she has no royal blood, was not instantly recognized as intrinsically different from other slaves in the way that Oroonoko was. As Caesar's wife, she now has higher social capital.*



Soon after reuniting, Caesar and Imoinda get married “to the general joy of all people.” Not long after, they conceive a child, which makes Caesar “more impatient of liberty.” He petitions Trefry to release him and Clemene, promising either gold or a vast quantity of slaves to be paid to him before their release, on the condition that Caesar would be certain of being released after paying the ransom.

Trefry and other colonists make daily promises to Caesar, hoping to delay his departure until the Lord Governor can come to Suriname and assess the situation. Caesar, meanwhile, suspects that they are delaying his release so that their baby will be born into slavery. This idea makes Caesar very sullen, and some colonists fear that he will lead the other slaves, who greatly outnumber the whites, to rebel. They tell the narrator to placate Caesar, and so she comes to spend much time entertaining the two royal slaves.

The narrator tells Caesar and Imoinda stories about the lives of the Romans, which Caesar enjoys, and she also tries to convert them to Christianity. She is unsuccessful with Caesar, who makes fun of the idea of the Trinity, but she seems to have more success with Clemene, who enjoys hearing stories about nuns.

Through these conversations, the narrator gets to know Caesar much better. She realizes that he likes the company of women more than that of men, because he cannot handle alcohol. She also notices that he grows less content the more Imoinda’s pregnancy develops, as he doesn’t want his child born a slave. He assuage the narrator’s fears that he would take up arms, however, and promises that he “could do nothing that honor did not dictate.” The narrator also learns that Caesar’s love for Imoinda alone helps him endure bondage.

Before Caesar leaves the narrator that day, she makes him promise to be patient a little while longer until the Lord Governor arrives. However, she and the rest of the colonists no longer think it safe to leave Caesar unaccompanied. They decide to have him accompanied by attendants who act as spies, particularly when he visits the slaves’ quarters.

*Caesar and Imoinda now have the romantic freedom that they should have had in Coramantien—but this is the only kind of freedom they have. Imoinda’s pregnancy, while welcome news for the couple (especially as the baby could continue Oroonoko’s royal line), increases the pressure on Caesar to win back his freedom. He now has one more person whose freedom he must bargain for.*



*Though colonists denounce Caesar’s enslavement, they don’t do anything substantial to change his circumstances, other than cautioning him to wait. In fact, the colonists expend more energy keeping Caesar content with his current circumstances than they do trying to free him. It’s unclear why this is, as they aren’t getting any economical benefit from his enslavement.*



*Caesar may like learning about Western culture, but he is not ready to surrender to a Western religion. This is understandable, given the bad example set by the Christians he has been exposed to (like the Captain). The narrator now takes a more active role, suggesting more autobiographical elements to Behn’s account.*



*Caesar might also prefer the company of white females to white males because the females don’t have direct connections to the slave trade. As to his promise, it notably does not preclude violence altogether, and thus foreshadows Caesar’s later martial action against the slaveholders. As usual, Caesar’s sense of honor and his love for Imoinda remain steadfast and strong.*



*Though the colonists claim to like Caesar, they do not value their friendship with him enough to have full faith and confidence in his loyalty to them. In fact, their precautions indicate that they believe him to be a credible threat to their security, despite his honorable and non-threatening demeanor.*



These precautions are implemented for some time. Caesar doesn't realize he's being watched, but instead thinks that colonists are showing him increased respect, particularly as more gentlemen come to pay him visits. The narrator takes an important role in babysitting Caesar as well, planning several expeditions that allow him to channel his aggression and energy into hunting game.

Caesar once steals a tiger cub from a tigress, slaying the beast when it tries to attack the party. Another time, he kills an elusive tiger that had been poaching livestock from the plantations. Caesar also finds out that he cannot overcome the challenge of capturing an electric eel with his bare hands, and he is briefly ashamed to discover that he too succumbs to the numbing sickness that almost causes him to drown.

With Caesar in tow, the narrator and her friends search for "wonderful and strange things," from exotic, aromatic flowers to new and delicious foods, like "aramadilly." Reflecting on the richness and beauty of Suriname (the natives find gold flakes in the river) and her luxurious lifestyle (she lives in a fancy house near a waterfall), she suggests that if the English King had ever visited, he would not have ended up giving the colony to the Dutch.

During their excursions, the company also visits Indian villages to learn more about the natives. The relations between the British and the Indians are somewhat strained at this point, and some colonists fear the natives will attack. This later happens under the Dutch, the narrator notes. In retribution for their mistreatment, the natives invade the Dutch settlement, hanging women and children.

With Caesar acting as guard on these ambassadorial missions, however, the English crew feel safe enough to enter the villages, even during a feud between the English and natives. They also take a bilingual Native fisherman along as guide.

*Caesar is unfortunately still blind to the ruses of whites, particularly their double-dealing. This is partially due to his own high personal standards, which he assumes the people he most admires must also hold. The narrator's choice of diversions is meant to sublimate Caesar's martial tendencies into a productive activity that keeps him "safe."*



*Caesar is a skilled hunter and can do many things the average colonist cannot, but his pride in his hunting skills also leads him to test the limits of his strength, which he mistakenly thinks are superhuman. As the eel episode proves, he is still fallible, and his limitations are more similar to other men than he might care to admit.*



*Aphra Behn's political opinions appear in the narrator's claim that the King made a mistake in giving up the colony. Behind the narrator's admiration for the paradisiacal Suriname lies the colonial agenda, which Behn herself supports. This agenda mostly involves making money, even if that means brutally exploiting natural resources and native people for English profit, prestige, and pleasure.*



*The narrator suggests that the British are far more benevolent colonizers in comparison to the Dutch. However, she overlooks the exploitation of the natives under British rule, and gives a one-sided impression of the relationship between the British and natives, which should give readers pause once they learn that the relationship is not as perfect as she initially suggested.*



*The English are comfortable with Caesar's fighting prowess as long as it benefits them. They are still exploiting him, although in a different way from the other slaves.*





The friendliness, ignorance, and simplicity of the natives, whom the English allow to touch their body parts, charm the narrator, and the natives likewise admire the white visitors. Through the interpreter, they learn about each other's cultures and affairs. Caesar is curious to know why so many of the native soldiers are disfigured and heavily scarred: some are missing noses, ears, and lips. He is then impressed and a little shocked to learn that according to their art of war, to decide who should be general, two soldiers compete before a panel of judges. They are asked to prove their merit as generals, and each man silently responds by cutting off a piece of flesh from his own body until one gives up. Several die from this "passive valor they show [to] prove their activity."

#### 4. OROONOKO'S REVOLT

The narrator diverts Caesar through these outings for some time. However, as Imoinda enters the late stages of her pregnancy, Caesar grows more restless. One Sunday, while the whites, including Caesar's spies, are drunk, Caesar steals away to visit the slave houses. He organizes a feast for them, during which he picks out 150 men able to bear arms. The narrator notes that few colonists have functioning weapons. Most do not oil their swords, which quickly rust because of the humidity, and most guns are corroded, unless they are brand-new from England. The slaves, on the other hand, are handy at using a bow and arrow, just like the natives.

At the feast, Caesar gives a passionate speech about the evils of slavery, its dehumanizing effects, and the dishonor of working for a corrupt race. He asks the slaves if they are content to suffer "the lash," and they reply "no" in unison. Then Tuscan, the tallest and most elegant-looking slave of the crowd, interrupts Caesar's speech. Bowing at Caesar's feet, he reminds Caesar that most men have wives and children who would find it difficult to undertake the required journey through the harsh terrain to escape slavery. Caesar replies that "honor was the first principle in nature to be obeyed." Under his plan, he would also lead all who desired freedom, women and children included. Only "degenerate" women, who were too afraid to follow their husbands and would rather remain slaves, would be left behind.

Everyone agrees to this plan, and Caesar adds that they can help one another on the journey. Men can take turns carrying tired children, and they can collectively gather food. Tuscan then asks what they should do. Caesar replies that they will travel towards the sea and form a new colony, which they will defend from attack until they can find a ship to seize. The ship will take them all back to their respective countries. The men vow to follow him to death.

*Whereas the colonists find the Coramantien arts of war and social customs strange, Caesar finds the martial practices of the natives bizarre. This suggests that anything that is not familiar has the ability to shock and amaze, and even to be considered barbaric or inferior. In including positive and negative perceptions of other people's cultures from white and non-white perspectives alike, Behn's "female pen" demonstrates its capacity for introspection and understanding.*



*The English clearly have no real way of protecting their colony. The weapons they do have are mostly for show, and few are actually functioning. The poor condition of the weapons not only suggests that their authority has gone untested until now, but also that their power over the slaves rests on empty threats, tradition, and fear. The natives and slaves outnumber the English and have the martial skills to defeat their oppressors, but they do not realize their advantages.*



*Whereas before, Caesar believed that some blacks deserved to be enslaved (particularly his prisoners of war), after experiencing the effects of slavery firsthand, he now feels a strong sense of sympathy and brotherhood for his fellow slaves. This then influences his escape plan, which calls for teamwork and cooperation among all the slaves. The character Tuscan represents the voice of the "common" slaves—and once again Behn associates physical characteristics (his height and "elegance") with leadership qualities. Caesar, as usual, places honor above all else.*



*Caesar essentially reprises his military leader role in Coramantien as the leader of the escape in Suriname. The slaves naturally accept him in this role, as they have already tried to deify him ever since his arrival. After hearing his passionate speech, they come to believe in their own self-worth as well as to further respect Caesar as a great man.*



That very night, the men return to their homes and prepare for their departure, making weapons and gathering supplies. The enslaved men, women, and children then depart early Monday morning. Later that day, when the overseers arrive to collect the slaves for work, they are astonished to see their dwelling places empty.

Six hundred so-called militia men, a rag tag group of whites, prepare to pursue the fugitives. The narrator notes that no “men of fashion” concern themselves with the affair, even though it could have fatal consequences for the whites. The reason is that these conscientious objectors are friends of Caesar, and some may have even helped him plan his escape. They also deplore the Parhamites, a faction of those who belong to the Parham House who don’t love the Lord Governor and who want to keep Caesar in slavery.

Deputy Governor Byam, the leader of the Parhamites, leads a band carrying whips, rusted guns (for show), and clubs into the jungle after Caesar. The narrator thinks Byam is a detestable person. He is the only leader who wants to use violence against Caesar, though he has before pretended to befriend him. Trefry also joins the group to act as a mediator. He foresees a grim ending to the slaves’ freedom run, and he hopes to get them to surrender peacefully and prevent them from committing suicide. Byam, the narrator notes, has different plans.

The Parhamites easily find the slaves’ trail, which has been well cleared by the hundreds of runaways. Caesar soon realizes he is being pursued, and he adopts a “posture of defense.” The women and children file to the back and the men come forward. The slaves don’t waste time trying to “parley” with the English—instead they begin fighting immediately, guerilla style.

Seeing their husbands being hurt and people dying all around, the enslaved women become frightened. When the English cry out, “Yield and live, yield and be pardoned,” wives and children rush into the fray and cling to their husbands and fathers, urging them to yield and leave the fighting to Caesar. Soon, only two fighters remain beside Caesar, Tuscan, and Imoinda. The rest have fled.

*The slaves organize their departure quickly and efficiently. This “escape” is remarkably easy—the difficult part will be defending their freedom against the colonists’ guns.*



*The colonists are apparently divided on the issue of slavery. While some may be quiet abolitionists, most of Caesar’s friends hold an inconsistent view of slavery, believing that Caesar should be free, but slavery itself is permissible. The Parhamites, on the other hand, are more consistent in their attitudes toward slavery: they think that all blacks should be enslaved, including the royal Caesar. However, the Parhamites hide this view from Caesar himself (just like the Captain did).*



*Byam becomes the new villainous figure to betray Caesar in this final section, following Caesar’s betrayals by the King and the Captain. Not only does Byam trick Caesar, but he is also able to trick fellow white colonists like Trefry. In going after Caesar with violent intentions, Byam shows his true colors: he has always hated Caesar, and he wants to punish the figurehead of the slaves’ rebellion.*



*Despite Caesar’s practical defense strategies, the slaves are basically sitting ducks. There are too many of them, and the English search party is too close on their heels for them to run and hide. Fighting is their best and only option to escape.*



*Apparently the fearful women and their husbands are what Caesar referred to as “degenerates”—those who would rather live as slaves than die in the pursuit of freedom. This is another kind of betrayal for Caesar, and a reflection of the narrator’s view that for some races, slavery and subservience are only natural—Caesar is the exception, not the rule.*



Imoinda is quite skilled with her bow. She wounds several of the whites with her poisoned arrows, including Byam. The narrator notes that he would have died if his Indian mistress had not sucked the poison out of his wound. Caesar, Tuscan, and Imoinda all resolve to die fighting rather than surrender and be captured. Recognizing this and now thirsting for a more exacting revenge against Caesar, Byam changes tactics and tries to negotiate.

Byam tells Caesar that his decision to revolt was rash, and that Byam's men have stopped fighting because they esteem Caesar. Byam then promises to abide by any terms Caesar demands, and says that if his child is born on the island, he or she will be free. Byam also promises to put Caesar and his wife on the next passing ship and send them back to Coramantien. Caesar agrees that he acted rashly—saying that he should not have tried to free those who are by nature slaves—but he tells Byam that he has no faith in the white men or their gods anymore. Trefry believes Byam to mean what he says, however, and he privately persuades Caesar to surrender and name his conditions. Trefry even cries a little. Overcome by Trefry's emotions and considering his wife's condition, Caesar relents and signs a treaty with Byam. He also asks that Tuscan be pardoned.

After this is done, the colonists and the three slaves walk back toward the plantation. Upon reaching the place where slaves are whipped, however, the Parhamites grab Caesar and Tuscan, who are both surprised and exhausted. The colonists bind the men tightly and proceed to whip them, while Byam looks on.

During his lashing, Caesar makes no sound and does not struggle. He only looks angrily at Byam, and at each one of the runaway slaves who now take turns whipping him. The Parhamites then untie Caesar, and he falls to the ground, weak from the loss of blood. Next, they weigh him down with iron chains, rub Indian pepper on his skin to aggravate his wounds, and tie him to the ground, so he cannot move.

*Imoinda is not only a pretty face and Caesar's love interest—she is also resourceful and skilled at fighting. This is a departure from the typical representation of women in the seventeenth century as gentle and delicate creatures. Byam, like the Captain, relies on his deceitful nature to coerce Caesar into surrendering.*



*Byam realizes that Caesar does not know how to defend himself against psychological warfare, and so he uses Caesar's weakness—his rigid code of honor—to his advantage. By telling Caesar what he wants to hear, he slowly regains Caesar's trust and lulls him into a false sense of security. Byam is such a skillful liar that even Trefry believes him too. Still reeling from the betrayal of his fellow slaves, Caesar now gives up his optimistic view of mankind. He now returns to the idea that slavery is a necessary institution for those unworthy of freedom, because it is the only way he can reconcile the fearful actions of the slaves. This also plays into colonial beliefs, of course.*



*For a prince in his own country, a whipping would have been unheard of. But in the New World, Caesar can be treated like just another slave. The whipping itself emphasizes the magnitude and gravity of his change in fortune. Again, Behn deplores this violence not for its own sake, but because it involves subjecting a natural-born king to a great indignity.*



*The whipping is not only physically painful, but the Parhamites go out of their way to make sure it is especially humiliating for Caesar by making his deserters deal him the blows they themselves might have received for running away. The betrayals Caesar has faced now seem numberless, and he has lost all hope in the rest of humanity.*



Imoinda has not seen Caesar's punishment, as the Parhamites made sure to lock her up inside Parham House to prevent her from the miscarriage that seeing such a gruesome sight would likely induce. Meanwhile, the narrator and the other English women have been evacuated upriver, after hearing of Caesar's flight earlier that day. They have no inkling that Caesar has been captured and horribly mistreated. They believe that he has overcome the white colonists and will return to slit their throats. Reflecting on the unfortunate events that took place, the narrator laments that she was not present at the time, because she had the power and authority to stop the violence against Caesar.

*Hiding Caesar's whipping from Imoinda is no act of mercy. The Parhamites are a calculating, mercenary group that wants the mother and child to survive for their own purposes. Though clearly their survival ensures the growth of the slave population, it is also possible that the Parhamites could stoop to using the pair as leverage against Caesar. Caesar's women friends are now apparently more swayed by gossip than by their past impressions of Caesar as a brave and noble man, suggesting that they never really trusted him in the first place, or else merely viewed him as an admirable but dangerous curiosity.*



## 5. OROONOKO'S REVENGE

The women do not travel very far when the news of Caesar's whipping reaches them. On the river, they meet Colonel Martin, a great friend of Caesar's, who is very angry to hear about his mistreatment. The women transport him back to Parham House to intervene on Caesar's behalf. When they arrive, they find Caesar in great pain. While they nurse him back to health, he confides his plan to kill Byam, whatever it takes. Caesar pledges to do no harm to the women and Trefry, who had no idea of Byam's evil plans. They try to talk him out of this idea, but fail.

*As fast as gossip spreads through the colony, truth travels just as fast. No doubt the women feel outraged at the turn of events, and may even feel some shame for abandoning their victimized friend. Caesar has lost hope in returning home or living happily with Imoinda, and now only hopes to avenge his honor by killing his enemy.*



Byam, meanwhile, has been recovering from Imoinda's poisoned arrow, and has also been planning his own revenge against Caesar. He calls his council, which is made up of men whom the narrator describes as "notorious villains" and ex-convicts. They conclude that Caesar must be made an example of to all the other slaves, so that they submit to their masters. They make a plan to hang Caesar.

*The Parhamites reason that killing Caesar would send the ultimate message to the slaves, especially since he is their leader and a symbol of hope to the slave community. They do not believe that slaves will respond to kindness, unlike more merciful masters like Trefry. Behn again suggests a hierarchy even among the white colonists, with Parham's gang consisting of convicts and lower-class "villains," while the nobility are portrayed as more virtuous.*



At the same time, Trefry goes to Byam and tells him to stay away from his Lord's servants (meaning Caesar) and that his authority does not extend to the plantation—Parham is a sanctuary. Trefry reminds Byam that men with more authority than Byam have an interest in Caesar, and would not let anything happen to him. Trefry has Byam's council kicked out of Parham House, where they had been convening, and a guard is posted to only allow in friends of Caesar. Byam is allowed to stay until he is recovered.

*The meeting of the Parhamites is the foil to the gathering of Caesar's friends. While the former want Caesar dead, the latter are trying to keep him alive. Importantly, both of these meetings are taking place in Parham House, now a house divided against itself over the issue of a slave's life.*



As Caesar recovers, he begins to think about his next move. He realizes that he will never go back home to Coramantien, and accepts that he will be killed for murdering Byam. These thoughts do not trouble him, but what makes him truly sorrowful is thinking about what will happen to Imoinda and his child. He imagines that Imoinda will be raped by all the men and then killed. Caesar vows to prevent this from happening. He resolves himself to commit a dire act—a deed that first horrifies the narrator, but which she later comes to think is “brave and just.”

To carry out his plan, Caesar gets Trefry to let him take a walk with Imoinda, alone. They walk to a secluded forest, where Caesar gazes at his wife longingly. Then, crying heavily, he tells her of his plan—he is going to kill her to protect her from a disgraceful fate after he kills Byam. Hearing this news, Imoinda kneels before Caesar and begs him not to leave her a prey to his enemies. Caesar embraces her and then pulls out his knife. While he cries, Imoinda looks at him with joy because, as the narrator relates, she reveres Caesar like a deity. In their culture, when a man has any occasion to quit his wife, if he loves her, he kills her (if not, he sells her).

Caesar stabs Imoinda, and then lays her body on a heap of leaves and flowers. His grief swells into a rage and he turns the knife on himself. He wants to follow Imoinda into the afterlife, but only stops when he thinks of his vendetta against Byam—which cost him the life of his beloved.

Though still bent on revenge, Caesar finds that he cannot leave Imoinda’s side. He lies down beside her and does not stir for two days. He is slowly weakened by hunger, thirst, and—most of all—grief. Six more days pass.

Back at the plantation, the colonists begin to worry when Caesar and Imoinda don’t return from their walk. They think that some accident has befallen the pair. A search party heads out, including Tuscan, who is now perfectly reconciled with Byam. They don’t travel far when the powerful stench of Imoinda’s rotting corpse leads them to Caesar. As they get closer to the source of the smell, they think they will find Caesar dead.

*Though the narrator leaves readers in suspense as to what Caesar is planning to do, it is easy to guess from the tone of the narrative and the narrator’s apprehension that Caesar is planning to take a dire and irreversible step: murdering his wife and unborn child, rather than leaving them to the mercy of their enemies.*



*Both Caesar and Imoinda’s reactions to Caesar’s plan are surprising. Caesar, who has usually been stoic and strong, reveals his emotional vulnerability in a way he never has before, despite the many tragedies of his life. Imoinda, rather than being shocked and horrified, as a British woman might be, is supportive and encouraging. Imoinda’s calmness more than Caesar’s meltdown demonstrates how vastly different Coramantien culture is from British culture—or else shows how Imoinda is truly Caesar’s partner, and the only one who shares his strict sense of honor, virtue, and courage. This is the ultimate reconciliation of love and obedience for Imoinda.*



*Caesar’s vendetta is now the driving force behind his will to live. Whereas killing Imoinda was an act of love, killing Byam will be an act of justice, which he needs to complete so that Imoinda’s death was not in vain.*



*Once again, Caesar’s emotional distress wreaks havoc on his physical health. Unlike his previous bouts of malaise, however, he has finally reached his breaking point because now he has lost everything. His grief, like everything else about him, is epic in proportion.*



*Tuscan’s reconciliation with Byam proves that Tuscan to is a “degenerate” like the other slaves. This is yet another kind of betrayal, and means that any hope for a future resistance (without Caesar) is gone.*



Hearing the search party approach, Caesar is finally able to stand up, having failed to do so for the past eight days. He staggers to a tree to support himself, and calls out to the search party not to come closer. The men are shocked to see the state Caesar is in, and inquire what he has done to Imoinda. He points to the pile of leaves, and they call him a monster for murdering her. Ignoring their questions, Caesar tells them to go back, and to tell Byam that he is lucky that Caesar's body is too weak to exact revenge.

When the search party returns, Byam's Council decides that now is the perfect time to seize Caesar and carry out their plan. They return to the forest, but are wary of approaching him, and ask which man will dare try to capture him. Caesar warns that he will kill any one who approaches. He cuts off part of his own throat and throws it at the men. Caesar tells them he knows he is dying and won't achieve his revenge, and will be whipped again. A bold Englishman then tries to capture Caesar, but Caesar kills him with his knife.

Tuscan is moved by Caesar's determination, and cries out that he loves him and won't let him die. He runs toward Caesar and tries to take him in his arms, but Caesar stabs Tuscan in the arm. Then six men carry Caesar back to Parham House and have a surgeon attend to his wounds. Caesar's friends rush to his side, but only see a disfigured and decrepit man who hardly resembles their beloved Caesar.

Six days later, because of the diligent care of his friends, Caesar is able to talk again. He demands that they let him die, or else he will cause death to a great many others. While his friends try to encourage him to live, the surgeon comforts Caesar by informing him that he won't survive.

Around this time, the narrator falls ill and leaves Parham House to stay at Colonel Martin's. While she is away, Byam sends Trefry on a hoax errand upriver. Then a wild Irishman named Banister, who is a member of Byam's Council, kidnaps Caesar from Parham house. He brings Caesar back to the same whipping post as before. The Council ties Caesar up and lights a great fire before him.

*Though Caesar may look the part of a monster, Behn suggests that Byam is the true monster because of his treachery and sadistic cruelty. Caesar's overwhelming grief has sabotaged his own quest for revenge, but even in his weakened state he is still dangerous.*



*Again Behn emphasizes the moral degeneracy of the Parhamites by showing their cowardice here—they are afraid to attack Caesar even in his weakened state. Caesar apparently adopts the war practices of the natives to prove his fearlessness, or else he has just been driven mad by rage and grief, and wants to destroy something, even if it is himself.*



*Tuscan's apology for his disloyalty comes too late. Caesar has never before had the chance to confront someone who has double-crossed him and the fact that he tries to kill Tuscan by whatever means he can shows that Caesar considers betrayal the greatest possible offense. Tuscan, for his part, at least shows remorse and redeems himself through this act of desperate courage.*



*Caesar won't survive his wounds, but the surgeon keeps him alive long enough for him to be tortured again. At this point Caesar only wants to die, hoping to avoid further indignity and to be reunited with Imoinda.*



*It is interesting that the only man willing to take preliminary action in Caesar's death is Irish, not English. This could be indicative of Behn's prejudice against the Irish, or a stereotype of them as "wild" or violent. The whipping post and the fire are ominous signs that Caesar's end is near. Once again Byam tricks even his fellow colonists as part of his vendetta against Caesar.*



Banister tells Caesar that he is going to die like the dog he is. Caesar responds that this is the “first piece of bravery Banister ever did,” and he says that Banister is the only white person he’s met who told him the truth.

*Banister is now openly hostile towards Caesar, which Caesar ironically appreciates after all the deceitful white colonists he has met. Banister leaves Caesar no doubt about his fate, and this is a comfort the dying man.*



Turning to his persecutors, Caesar asks them if he is going to be whipped or killed. The men of Byam’s Council cry out that he won’t escape with only a whipping. Caesar blesses their decision, and promises to stand still without flinching for his execution. But, he warns, if they intend to whip him, they should bind him tightly.

*Caesar wants to be murdered both because he longs for death and because accepting his death with honor is the last way he can rebel against his captors. That he is able to goad his captors by warning them to bind him demonstrates his calmness and his pride even in such a dire situation.*



Before the Council begins to torture Caesar, he asks for a pipe (he has learned to smoke while in Suriname). Caesar smokes as the executioner first cuts off his genitals and throws them onto the fire. He continues smoking calmly as the executioner then uses an “ill-favored knife” to cut off his ears and nose, throwing both into the fire. Caesar continues to smoke even after they cut off one of his arms. After they cut off the other arm, however, Caesar stops smoking and his head sinks. He dies without a groan or a word of reproach.

*Caesar’s last act is to defy Western culture by showing up the colonists and mocking their leisurely pursuits. By smoking a pipe while the executioner slowly cuts him up, he proves his bravado and courage even through passive action. The “ill-favored” knife the executioner uses is likely rusty and dull, probably chosen by Byam to cause Caesar the most pain possible.*



The narrator’s mother and sister remain by Caesar’s side during his execution, but they don’t dare to intervene because the Council is so wild and angry. The Council later makes the women pay dearly for their “insolence,” but the narrator does not say how.

*Though Byam is ruthless and cruel, the punishment he inflicts on the women won’t be as bad as what he could inflict on a slave. After all, the women are English subjects with human rights.*



To conclude their barbarity, the Council cuts Caesar’s body into quarters, and then sends the sections of his body to the chief plantations of the colony—hoping to scare the other slaves into subservience. Colonel Martin, for his part, refuses his share of Caesar’s body, and swears he would rather have a quarter of Banister’s body instead. Besides, Colonel Martin argues that he can govern his slaves perfectly well without scaring them with the body of a “mangled king.”

*While he was alive, Caesar’s body represented the pinnacle of beauty and nobility, and people flocked to see his beauty. Now that he is dead, however, his body has become a tool to repulse and instill fear in others. Though the kinder slave-owners deplore these scare tactics, Caesar’s death is still not enough to make them reconsider their participation in slavery.*



The narrator concludes her story by expressing her hope that her tale will preserve Caesar's "glorious name," as well as that of "the brave, the beautiful, and the constant Imoinda."

*Ironically, the narrator ends her narrative by continuing to call Oroonoko "Caesar," despite the title of the work and her proclaimed quest to preserve his "glorious name." The name "Imoinda," on the other hand, the narrator uses consistently throughout, and even chooses as the last word of her work. Perhaps this is Behn's way of subtly commenting on a surprising difference between her hero and heroine: Imoinda is, in some ways, even braver and more constant than Caesar himself. Once again, Behn makes no effort to condemn slavery as a whole, but only deplores Caesar's fate as a tragedy because he was so "glorious" and royal.*







## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Beiner, Suzannah. "Oroonoko." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Jan 2016. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Beiner, Suzannah. "Oroonoko." LitCharts LLC, January 20, 2016. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/oroonoko>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Oroonoko* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Behn, Aphra. *Oroonoko*. Penguin Classics. 2004.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Behn, Aphra. *Oroonoko*. New York: Penguin Classics. 2004.