Oroonoko Study Guide

Oroonoko by Aphra Behn

Contents

Plot Summary

The piece begins with a few paragraphs of commentary by the narrator in which she assures the reader that the story she is about to tell is a true one, its details having been recounted to her by the people who actually lived it.

The story proper begins with a detailed description of the South American country in which the first part of the action takes place: Coramantien, the name given by the author to what is now called Ghana. Narration describes the family history of the King of Coramantien and his grandson Oroonoko, apprenticed to a commander of the King's armies and achiever of his own substantial record of military success. Narration also describes Oronooko's love for his mentor's daughter Imoinda; the King's simultaneous (and immoral) desire for her; the King's efforts to keep her from Oroonoko; and Oroonoko's determined efforts to evade the King's security measures and be with Imoinda as both he and his beloved believe is meant to be. In this they are helped by a pair of the King's rebellious servants, and eventually manage to consummate their love.

When the King finds out, he sells Imoinda into slavery, but he tells Oroonoko that she is dead. Oroonoko falls into despair and depression, but is eventually roused to battle by an attack from a neighboring kingdom. He defeats the invaders and returns to the King's court, where he is celebrated as a hero.

Just as Oroonoko is slowly beginning to get over the loss of his beloved Imoinda, he is kidnapped into slavery by an unscrupulous slave trader. Upon arrival at the plantation where he is to serve, however, Oroonoko is renamed Caesar. He is then recognized as a prince and as a man of exceptional value by the plantation's owner, Mr. Trefry; and then recognizes another of Trefry's slaves as Imoinda. Trefry, who had been attracted to Imoinda himself, allows them to continue their relationship, and also to escape being treated as slaves.

Sometime later, Imoinda becomes pregnant, and both she and Caesar (Oroonoko) become afraid that the child will be born into slavery. Caesar makes plans to lead a slave revolt and receives the support of the other slaves. As he leads them to freedom, they are pursued by the corrupt Deputy Governor Byam, who manipulates both Caesar and Trefry into believing that Caesar will be pardoned for what he has done. After Caesar lays down his arms, however, he is arrested and imprisoned; separated from Imoinda and whipped.

As he recovers, Caesar becomes increasingly convinced that he, Imoinda, and their child are destined for a life of slavery and suffering. When he is well enough he resolves to take his revenge on the Deputy Governor by killing him, and also resolves to kill Imoinda (as well as her unborn child) and himself so that they will never be enslaved. When he shares his plan with Imoinda she happily agrees and allows herself to be killed by her beloved. Caesar's attempt to kill himself is interrupted by the Deputy Governor and his allies, who take him prisoner, then torture and kill him.

The story ends with the narrator’s comment that she hopes that in telling their story, the nobility and love of Oroonoko and Imoinda will survive “to all ages”.

Pages 1 – 14

Summary

After an introduction in which the narrator promises to tell her story with simple, clear, undecorated truth, the first part of this section is taken up with descriptions of how the native inhabitants of Surinam in the West Indies (where the action of the story is set) interact with the colonizers. There are lengthy lists of the trade that goes on between the two communities, and descriptions of the simple, uncorrupted, natural morality and behavior of the native community, contrasted glancingly with corruption caused by the religion and law of the colonizers. The narrator also describes how skilled the natives are at finding and hunting food, navigating various waterways, and shooting arrows – so skilled, he adds, that the colonizers “find it absolutely necessary to caress them as friends … nor dare we do otherwise, their numbers so far surpassing ours." This section concludes with a reference to how the colonizers keep slaves.

The narrator briefly describes the country from which most of those slaves were taken – Coramantien, a small country which seemed, the narrator adds, to be almost always at war with its neighbors: prisoners taken in those wars, she says, were traded by the King of Coramantien as slaves. This leads her into her first discussion of the King’s lifestyle (i.e. of having more than a hundred wives), of his having thirteen sons (of whom none survived the many wars), and of having, as his heir, the only grandson that those sons left behind – the Prince Oroonoko, trained in battle, appointed general after the death of the previous general (who had been an important mentor to him) and, in the opinion of the narrator, as perfect a combination of empathy, education, nobility, and physical beauty as could be possible or has ever lived.

Oroonoko, the narrator goes on to say, developed an affection for Imoinda, the beautiful and chaste daughter of the general who trained him. He paid court to her attentively and respectfully, the narrator says, and Imoinda soon returned his attentions and love. The narrator then reveals that the King heard of both Imoinda’s beauty and of Oroonoko’s attraction to her. Desiring her for himself, he sent a messenger to her posing as a messenger from Oroonoko and bearing a gift from “him”, the idea being that by hearing her reaction, he (the King) would be able to judge how true her feelings were for Oroonoko. When he hears that Imoinda received the gift graciously, and expressed her thanks “in terms so sweet, so soft and pretty, with an air of love and joy that could not be dissembled”, the King believed absolutely in her love for Oroonoko. He then decided to enforce her into marriage with him through insistence on her duty to her King.

In pursuit of his goal of possessing Imoinda, the King sent her The Royal Veil, a formal and symbolic invitation to become one of his wives, an invitation (the narrator comments) that could not be refused. Receiving it, Imoinda wept and considered refusing, but realized she had no choice and traveled to the King’s palace. There, she was met by the King in his bath-chamber, where he attempted to have sex with her, but she refused in the name of the man she loved. The King, knowing it was Oroonoko,

insisted that she actually speak that name: knowing that doing so would likely result in Oroonoko being attacked, Imoinda struggled to keep his name a secret, going so far as to reveal that the man in question was in fact her husband, but that she was still a virgin. The King, realizing exactly who she was talking about and not caring, went ahead and forced himself on her.

Analysis

This section introduces several important elements: the main characters (protagonist Oroonoko; love interest Imoinda; and the King as antagonist); the initial conflict (a love triangle involving the same three characters). Also introduced are several important themes including: references to slavery (which sets the stage for both plot-related and theme-related ways in which slavery is referenced throughout the narrative) and the two sides of trust (manifested primarily here in how the King behaves in an essentially untrustworthy faction, the first of many times throughout the story that he and other characters do so). There is also the introduction of the story's contemplation of the power of true love (developed through the Imoinda / Oroonoko relationship) and, perhaps most significantly, introductory moments in the story's thematic exploration of the power of human dignity. These come primarily in commentary by the narrator, in which she suggests that their embracing of what might best be called natural law (as opposed to what she identifies as human, Christianity-defined law) is an effective, fulfilling, just way to live. And here is an introduction of the last of the story's major themes: its evocation and exploration of what the narrator (and perhaps the author) sees as negative aspects of Christianity.

Other important elements introduced in this section include narrative style, of which there are several noteworthy components. The first is how the focus of narration, particularly in the early paragraphs (which describe the economy and culture of the country in which the story is set), give a sense of the narrator's identity without specifically discussing it. The narrator's age, gender, and ethno-cultural background are never specifically explained (all are revealed, to some degree, later on). On the other hand, the things that ARE spoken about (i.e. "native" habits and ways) and the manner in which they're spoken about (i.e. an uneasy blend of admiration, idealization, and subtle condescension) reveal that the narrator has the mentality and perspective of a colonizer. This sort of person is someone from a culture that sees / believes themselves to be superior but which acknowledges that the culture BEING colonized does have some positive qualities. Occasionally, this acknowledgement veers into outright condemnation of the "mother" culture: here, that condemnation glances at the corruption, and in some ways anti-human, attitudes of religion and law: as noted above, there is a clear anti-Christian perspective to the writing.

Also in terms of narrative style, it's notable how narration's use of first person perspective shades into and out of what amounts to third person storytelling (i.e. descriptions of the circumstances and events of Oroonoko's life). There are also, here and throughout the story, interjections of the narrator's opinion, sometimes (here and

elsewhere) delivered in a tone of narrative voice that sounds something like a lecture. This is the manner in which, for the most part, anti-Christian sentiments are delivered.

There are also clearly and vividly contrasting characters (i.e. the King and Oroonoko); suggestions of both fairy tale and fable in the descriptions of the characters and the situations in which they find themselves; and the presence of the Royal Veil, one of the story's most vividly developed symbols.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways might Imoinda's actions in response to the King develop the story's thematic interest in the power of human dignity?

Discussion Question 2

What elements of the story introduced in this section do you think have a feeling of fairy tale about them, and why?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Imoinda made the right choice in going to the King? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

feign, adorn, brevity, tedious, gallant, amity, rarity, marmoset, prodigious, antiquary, tincture, inimitable, trinket, tranquility infamy, plurality, servitude, behoove, impassable, advantageous, continual, illustrious, deplorable, discourse, abhorrence, mien, barbarity, statuary, fetters, insensible, extoll, concubine, insinuate, numerous, chagrin, dissemble, impious, canopy, mantle, appease, fortification, irrecoverable, ignoble, breach, endeavor, exempt, dotage, condescension

Pages 14 – 16

Summary

The narrator describes how Oroonoko, upon learning of what his grandfather the King had done to Imoinda, fell into violent despair and had to be forced to not injure or kill himself. He felt that because the man who took his beloved was the King that he had no option but to accept what he had done: friends, however, told him that because he (Oroonoko) and Imoinda were married, the King was in the wrong, and Oroonoko had the legal right to take his wife back. Oroonoko is pleased to learn of this possibility and makes plans to make an effort to do so, those plans including getting into The Otan, the private and guarded pavilion of the King's wives.

Meanwhile, Oroonoko has been so successful at making it seem that he has forgotten Imoinda that he is invited to court. He visits with the King, and is shown into The Otan in the company of Aboan (a young and handsome courtier to the King) and Onahal (the King's most senior wife). The narrator describes how, when they saw each other, the eyes of Oroonoko and Imoinda revealed to each other the still-passionate depth of their love for each other, a love that for Oroonoko turned to rage when he saw the King lead Imoinda into a specially prepared bedchamber. He is talked out of his rage by Aboan and Onahal, who have both seen the love between him and Imoinda and resolve to help them be together, but how those plans were delayed by Oroonoko being sent away to command the King's armies.

Oroonoko and Aboan contrived to have Oroonoko again invited to the palace and again into The Otan. There, Oroonoko watched Imoinda dance with the other wives for the King, and Oroonoko was unable to hide his adoration of her from his eyes: neither was Imoinda able to hide hers. At one point in the dance Imoinda slipped and almost fell, but was caught by Oroonoko in an action that triggered in him a surge of loving feeling. Imoinda knew that it would be seen by the King, who could then end Oroonoko's life. She quickly moved away from him and went on with the dance as if nothing happened. The King, however, did notice: he angrily ended the dancing and took Imoinda back to her rooms, where she protested her innocence so strongly that he left in a rage.

The King then sent a messenger to find out what state of mind Oroonoko was in. The messenger reported back that Oroonoko was distracted and moody, and not at all prepared for impending battle. This convinced the King that Oroonoko was indeed still in love with Imoinda, and arranged to have Oroonoko both watched and followed. Later that night, Aboan and Onahal took Oroonoko to see Imoinda, and while Onahal was entertaining the somewhat reluctant Aboan in her bed, Oroonoko and Imoinda finally managed to make love. Their joyful intimacy, however, was interrupted by the arrival of soldiers, sent by the King after learning what was happening from the messenger assigned to follow Oroonoko. Oroonoko fended them off, exercising his authority as the King's General, and then, after enlisting the help of Onahal and Aboan in constructing a

false story to protect Imoida from the King's wrath, went off to join the other soldiers at war.

Analysis

The primary point to note about this section is its development of the story's main theme: specifically, its examination of the enduring power of human dignity. Over the course of the story, that examination essentially happens in two stages: later in the narrative, this theme is explored primarily in terms of the struggles of Oroonoko and others to live dignified lives outside the humanity-destroying circumstances of slavery. Here, however, the theme manifests in descriptions and/or narrative of how Oroonoko and Imoinda struggle to live and love according to their very human connection and longing for each other despite the humanity-destroying circumstances of the King's obsessive selfishness and control: in other words, in spite of being obstructed in their goals to be together by slavery to His Majesty's lust.

What's particularly noteworthy about how this theme is explored in this section is how other characters see the innate dignity of both Oroonoko and Imoinda and support them in their struggle. Aboan (portrayed as being ambitious and clever) and Onahal (portrayed as being older, bitter, and jealous of the younger wives, like Imoinda) both transcend their individual agendas to support those whose love and lives are not only truer for themselves as individuals, but represent some of the truer aspects of humanity in general. This is one of the ways in which the story resembles a fable, in addition to resembling a fairy tale. Fables tell stories that offer inspiration or guidance to the reader in terms of being a better human being. Here, the author is showing not only readers in general but the particular sort of reader she is targeting (i.e. conservative, controlling, racist colonizers) how to be better people.

This, in turn, can also be seen as a manifestation of one of the story's sub-themes: the power of true love, which can also be seen as another aspect of what influences Aboan and Onahal. The love of Oroonoko and Imoinda is apparent to everyone, and it's interesting to note how the various characters respond to that love: Aboan and Onahal with respect and support; the King with jealousy and rage; and Oroonoko and Imoinda with patience and courage. Ultimately, manifestations of that theme here, and throughout the story, can be seen as foreshadowing what is arguably the story's most vivid manifestation of true love – events during the story's climax, which include chosen death and the making of what might be called the ultimate sacrifice.

Discussion Question 1

How does the story's thematic interest in the destructive power of slavery manifest in this section?

Discussion Question 2

How does the story's thematic interest in the two sides of trust – being trustworthy vs. being UN-trustworthy – manifest in this section? Who trusts whom, and should? Who trusts whom, and shouldn't?

Discussion Question 3

Should Oroonoko have gone to The Otan at all? Should he have found another way to get to Imoinda? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

strive, divert, captivity, dalliance, deplorable, cordial, wanton, severity, pliable, esteem, divest, condescend, diversion, obstinate, pensive, negligent, complaisance, languish, liable

Pages 26 – 33

Summary

In his rage, the King confronted Imoinda and Onahal, who told him the story that Oroonoko had contrived: that Oroonoko, desperate to be with Imoinda, broke into The Otan and took her by force. The King believed them, and instead of condemning Imoinda to death for being unfaithful, sends her and Onahal into slavery. The narrator then describes how, in the aftermath of Imoinda's departure, the King began to second-guess and eventually regret his decision, coming to believe that he had dishonored Imoinda by not allowing her the dignity of an execution: narration reveals that among the King's people, an older man having relations with a woman who had had relations with a younger relative (i.e. Oroonoko). In order to avoid facing public retribution for his actions, the King then resolved to tell Oroonoko that Imoinda had, in fact, been put to death.

When Oroonoko received the news of Imoinda's "death", he immediately sank into a grieving, passive stupor from which all the pleas and demands of the soldiers and officers under his command could not wake him: in short, he refused to fight, which led the army that he was meant to command helpless in front of an enemy which, at first and in spite of Aboan's best efforts, seemed to take great advantage over Oroonoko's army and killed many of his soldiers. But when the battle came close to his tent and faced with approaching death, Oroonoko's mood changed. He put on his armor, took up his weapons, and went out to lead what remained of his army into what became a great victory. During that victory, narration comments, he made a prisoner of the enemy's commander, a warrior named Jamoan.

The narrator describes how Jamoan soon became a companion and friend to Oroonoko, being of a similar sort of integrity and capacity for learning. He never went back to his own country, but instead became devoted to his new friend and helped him out of his melancholy over what happened to Imoinda. At one point narration interjects a comment about "the French Governor" who had taught Oroonoko, referring in first person commentary on how good a man he was and how good for Oroonoko; how he (the Governor) was banished from his homeland for being a heretic; and that "though he was a man of very little religion, yet he had admirable morals, and a brave soul."

After this brief diversion, the narrator returns to the story of Oroonoko, and describes how after the battle, he remained in his tents for some time rather than returning to the palace – but how, after being brought out of himself and his melancholy by the efforts of his friends and servants (including Jamoan), and after having his raw emotions healed by the passing of (a relatively brief) time, he returned to the King's palace, where he was welcomed and treated like a hero.

Shortly afterwards, narration comments, an English ship arrived.

Analysis

Significant elements in this section include the first active manifestation of slavery, and its effect on the characters, in the story: up to this point it has only been present as a circumstance, as an element of context, or in variation (i.e. the “slavery” of Oroonoko and Imoinda to the King’s lust). Here, it manifests actively and in its most traditionally defined sense, with characters being captured, dehumanized, and treated like possessions. This is the first of several occasions throughout the narrative in which this perspective plays a particular, defining role in the action.

Other important points to note about this section include the introduction of Jamoan, a character who seems important but who virtually disappears from the narrative at this point. This is not to say that his appearance here is irrelevant: it is, in fact, a foreshadowing of a similar relationship into which Oroonoko enters later in the narrative. Another key piece of foreshadowing: specifically, the King’s musing on Imoinda being allowed the dignity of death, which foreshadows similar musings made by another character later in the narrative. There is also the passing reference to the French governor having “very little religion [but] admirable morals”, which can be seen as a subtle but pointed reference to the story’s thematically significant comments on the negative side of Christianity (i.e. religion); and the significant reference to the English ship. Here it must be noted that there are no chapters and/or delineated sections in this story: the reference to the ship, therefore, does not necessarily mark a new chapter or even a place where a page must be turned. It is, however, a clearly intended foreshadowing and/or turning point of events to come.

Finally, there is the continuing, deepening sense of Oroonoko’s moodiness and capacity for deep, powerful emotions. There have been indications of such depth of feeling in him earlier, but in this section they seem to have an even more significant impact. Here, as elsewhere in the book, the appearance of such strong feelings foreshadows moments later in the narrative when his powerful emotions lead him into confrontation, extreme action, and ultimately death.

Discussion Question 1

Which do you think is worse, slavery or death? Do you think Imoinda being put to death instead of being sent into slavery would allow her more dignity? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does the story’s thematic interest in the power of true love manifest in this section?

Discussion Question 3

At this point, given the sense of fairy tale that sometimes manifests in this story, what do you think will happen to Oroonoko and Imoinda?

Vocabulary

perfidy, upbraid, prostrate, falsity, affront, abate, pavilion, affliction, adjudge, continual, supplication, constitute, ominous, presage, amorous, sally (v.), countenance, ardor, ingenuity, infuse, heretical, chagrin

Pages 33 - 47

Summary

Narration describes how the arriving English ship was captained by a well-regarded slave trader, educated and sophisticated, to whom Oroonoko had sold many slaves (i.e. prisoners of war) in the past. The captain and Oroonoko exchanged entertainments and gifts, but while Oroonoko and several others (including “the Frenchman”, the governor / teacher referred to in the previous section) were at a party on the ship, they were made drunk, put in chains, and thrown into the hold (the bottom of the ship where the slaves were kept). The captain then set sail, narration revealing his intentions to sell Oroonoko and the others as slaves.

Oroonoko, however, in response to this ill treatment, refused to eat or drink, and the other captives followed his example. The captain, desperate to not lose his investment, negotiated with increasing urgency with Oroonoko, eventually convincing him that he (the captain) had made a mistake which he deeply regretted, and that he would enable Oroonoko and his people to return to their home country as soon as possible. Oroonoko insisted that he and his people be released, and the captain agreed, narration making it clear that he made an oath upon his faith and practices as a Christian. As a result, Oroonoko encouraged his people to believe what the captain had said, which they eventually did. Oroonoko’s thoughts, however, continued to be dominated by memories of, and longings for, Imoinda.

Eventually, the ship arrived in Surinam, then a British colony, and was met by a group of plantation owners eager to see and take possession of not only new slaves in general, but of Caesar (Oroonoko) in particular, whose reputation had preceded him. The narrator comments in passing that she was among those waiting, and that encountering Caesar (Oroonoko) there was the beginning of their relationship. Caesar is bought by a Mr. Trefry, whom narration describes as being intelligent, learned, wise, and compassionate, to the point where he immediately recognized Caesar’s qualities and treating him more like a friend and comrade than a slave. After a sharply barbed farewell towards the traitorous sea captain, Caesar accepted the reality of his situation, inspired his fellow slaves to do the same, and journeyed with Mr. Trefry to the latter’s plantation where Caesar was given the name Caesar (by which name he is referred to in narration from this point on), and given a house and lands that Mr. Trefry believed was appropriate to his status as a prince.

The other slaves on the plantation, narration reveals, who had been sent into slavery by Caesar, came to pay their respects and to honor him. In spite of Caesar’s discomfort with their praise, and in spite of saying he was in fact no better than they were, they prepared a huge party and banquet in his honor. While at the banquet, Mr. Trefry told Caesar of a beautiful female slave with whom all the young male slaves were infatuated, and for whom he himself (Trefry) felt a powerful attraction. He said the young woman was named Clemene; that she was gentle, quiet, and apparently in love with

another man; and that while he felt he could very easily dominate her with a show of force (i.e. physical, financial, or moral), he had so much respect for her that he chose not to. Caesar commented with respect on Mr. Trefry's restraint, and narration describes how the two of them had a comfortable, companionable evening.

Shortly afterwards, on a visit to Clemene in the company of Mr. Trefry, Caesar was elated to discover that she was actually Imoinda. Their reunion was intense and emotional, the two of them telling each other their stories, proclaiming their love, promising to never again be parted, and to live together in Imoinda/Clemene's little house, which Caesar/Oroonoko insisted was perfect for him. Mr. Trefry was pleased with this turn of events, and did everything he could to make sure the couple was happy together.

Analysis

Both the events of the plot and the story's thematic emphasis in this section are defined by slavery: specifically, Oronooko's experience of being captured and enslaved which, in spite of what he finds when he is taken to Trefry's home (Parham Plantation) and how he's treated there, still robs him of his freedom. Here it's important to note how the changing of his name has multiple levels of function. On one level, it is a stark, vivid example of how slavery robs people of their individual identities and humanity. On another level, and in spite of the sense that it is given by Trefry in recognition of Oroonoko's status, the name is significantly ironic, "Caesar" being the name given historically to great leaders, most specifically in Ancient Rome. At this point in the story, Oroonoko/Caesar is about as far from a place of leadership as he could be. Finally, though, the name is also important foreshadowing: later in the narrative, he DOES find himself in a place of leadership, a situation that ultimately leads to tragedy. Finally, the slavery-defined events in this section mark the beginning of the second phase of the story's consideration of the enduring power of human dignity. Up to this point, this theme had manifested primarily in terms of the struggle of Oroonoko and Imoinda to love as they chose / choose: with this section, however, the struggle for human dignity takes place within a context not of love (as true as the love between Oroonoko and Imoinda is), but of slavery.

Other important elements in this section include the actions of the sea captain in convincing Oronooko of his plans. There are two important points here. First, there is the fact that the captain promises one thing and delivers the opposite. This is clear foreshadowing of moments near the story's climax in which another character does almost exactly the same thing to the still-trusting Oroonoko. Second, there is the passing reference to the captain making an oath as a Christian, another of the several thematically significant attacks on Christianity incorporated into the story by the author.

There is also a clear and vivid contrast between the characters, attitudes, and actions of Trefry and the sea captain, each of whom behaves very differently towards Oroonoko despite them each having status and power, albeit different types of each. Additionally, there is an important piece of foreshadowing in the slaves' welcoming of Oroonoko, a

foreshadowing of events later in the narrative when they adopt him as their leader even more strongly. Then: the events at the end of this section (the description of how Caesar and Clemene are allowed to live) can be seen as again manifesting the story's thematic interest in human dignity, but can also be seen as foreshadowing of moments later in the narrative when the life afforded them in the comfort and company of Trefry's plantation is simply not enough.

Finally, it's important to note that this is one of the few occasions in the narrative at which the narrator reveals something of her identity; of the circumstances of her relationship with Oroonoko; and of why she is telling this story. Again, she is a very lightly sketched character, ultimately coming across as the very thinly disguised voice of the outspoken author.

Discussion Question 1

How does the story's thematic exploration of trust manifest in this section?

Discussion Question 2

"Clemene" can be seen as a variation on the word "clemency", which means mercy or compassion. How might Imoinda's new name relate to the situations in which she and Oroonoko find themselves?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Mr. Trefry not simply return Oroonoko / Caesar and Imoinda to their home?

Vocabulary

predecessor, abundance, discourse, familiarity, condescend, sullen, heathen, contemptible, perpetual, cognizance, circumvent, ignominious, obstinate, besought, oracle, melancholy, linguist, abhorrence, maxim, venerate, replenish, amorous, perpetual, recompense

Pages 47 - 66

Summary

The narrator describes how she became a close friend of Caesar and Clemene, entertaining them in her home and talking with them of faith and other intellectual things. The narrator also describes how much everyone in and around Mr. Trefry's plantation was glad when Clemene soon announced that she was going to have a baby, but that Caesar became increasingly nervous (almost to the point of being paranoid) that the child was going to be taken into slavery as well. Both the narrator and Trefry attempted to reassure him, saying that once the Lord Governor came to see Caesar and his family, he (Caesar) would be granted his freedom. The narrator describes how he and other members of the plantation community strove to kept Caesar busy and preoccupied, and then introduces a series of detailed descriptions of the country in which they all lived; her own personal history (as the daughter of a British governor who died at sea who was forced by circumstances to continue with the journey as planned); and the activities with which she and others distracted Caesar. These include two notable tiger hunts: on one occasion, Caesar was seriously wounded by a mother tiger protecting her cub, which he presented to the narrator; on another, he discovered that the tiger he killed, long rumored to be un-killable, had several bullets lodged in its heart. There was also, the narrator says, an encounter with a dangerous eel, rumored to have the ability to paralyze anyone who grasped it. Caesar, she says, didn't believe the rumors, but fell victim to the eel when he grabbed it, was paralyzed, and almost drowned.

At around this time, the narrator says, the community became concerned about rumors of conflict between the Indians and the English. These rumors, she says, kept many at the plantation and in the area from exploring the Indian colonies, something she says many people wanted to do. She describes arrangements made for herself and a few others (including her brother and a maid) to visit one of the Indian colonies, accompanied by Caesar; how first the white people and then Caesar were welcomed and shown the colony; how she and the others learned the ways of both the Indian warriors and the Indian priests; and how, at the end of the visit, they encountered some Indian traders who came back with gold that, they said, could be found "streaming in little small channels down the high mountains". The narrator reports that because so many people wanted to go after the gold, the Lord Governor decreed that they were not to be allowed to, setting a guard at the mouth of the river (the Amazon) below the mountain. The narrator then comments that as the result of a combination of circumstances, the British lost control of the area to the Dutch, and that loss was to be "bemoaned".

The narrator describes how, as her pregnancy advanced, Imoinda / Clemene became more and more worried that her child would be born into slavery, and that she and Oroonoko / Caesar would be forced to remain slaves. Caesar, narration goes on to say, also became more and more concerned, to the point that one Sunday, which was traditionally the day that the white overseers had a day off and got drink, he gathered all

the male slaves together and passionately inspired them to escape. He was challenged at times by one particular slave named Tuscan, who was concerned about what would happen to his family. But Caesar rose to that challenge, detailing his plan (to lead the slaves to the coast; to wait for an opportunity to take over a ship; and to use that ship to get back home) and inspiring the slaves to think of themselves as men again. The other slaves (including Imoinda/Clemene and Tuscan) agreed, and shortly afterwards, they all left.

Analysis

There are several points to note about this section. Some are structural / story based: the sense of building momentum and escalating narrative tension as the story builds to its climactic confrontations in the following section; and the interjections made by the narrator into the story, some of which seem to have little or no relevance to the plot and others (i.e. the stories of the tiger and the eel) which, upon further consideration, have significant metaphoric value. Another important point related to those interjections: they mark one of the few times in the narrative where the narrator's identity and situation are developed. There have been frequent interjections of her opinions (specifically in relationship to her attitudes towards both Christians, which tend to be negative, and the people being colonized / enslaved, which tend to be positive), but up to this point, there have been relatively few glimpses of who she is as a person.

Another important point about this section has to do with the seemingly passing reference to gold. In the real-world historical context of this story, gold was indeed a powerful motivating factor in the colonization of the north-eastern part of South America where the story is set. The fact that it is downplayed to the point of being referred to very briefly suggests that the morality of gold exploitation was of less significance to the author than the morality of slave / human exploitation – in other words, the theme of living in dignity was more important to her than the theme of inappropriate and damaging confiscation of natural resources.

At the end of this section, which marks the beginning of the end for both Oroonoko/Caesar and the story, there is a powerful sense of impending confrontation and ultimately doom, a sense that both the plot and the various thematic considerations entwined with it are coming, as noted above, to a point of climax.

Discussion Question 1

What are the metaphoric / symbolic parallels between the tigers killed by Caesar and Caesar himself?

Discussion Question 2

What is the metaphoric / symbolic parallel between the paralyzing eel and the situation in which Caesar finds himself?

Discussion Question 3

How do the story's various themes manifest in the decision of the slaves (including Imoinda) to follow Oroonoko in an attempt at freedom?

Vocabulary

allay, destitute, bewail, grandeur, loth, complaisance, perpetual, nosegay, intrinsic, purling, forage, apace, ravenous, whelp (n.), commode, consecrate, legerdemain

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Summary

When the disappearance of the slaves was discovered, the narrator says, the white members of the colony set off in pursuit of them, led by Deputy-Governor Byam, described by narration as lying, manipulative, and untrustworthy. Mr. Trefry went along, in hopes of mediating between Caesar and Byam. The white pursuers quickly caught up with the escaping slaves, and a battle soon began. At first, the narrator says, the slaves fought well, but then their women and children became fearful and interfered, causing most of the slaves to fall back and leaving only Caesar, Tuscan, and Imoinda / Clemene fighting. They were eventually captured, but as the defiant Caesar vowed to continue to fight, Byam attempted to persuade him that he and the other slaves would have their concerns heard and would be treated respectfully. Byam, narration comments, pledged an oath as a Christian that he was telling the truth. Mr. Trefy, narration comments, believed Byam and supported him. Caesar allowed himself to be convinced, and after the dead on both sides of the battle were buried, the slaves returned home, led by their white owners.

No sooner had they arrived back at Parham Plantation that Caesar and Tuscan were tied to whipping posts and severely beaten (Imoinda, narration comments, was hidden away so that she wouldn't see what happened – not for any compassionate reason, but because the whites were concerned that both she and her unborn child would suffer so much shock that they would be useless as slaves). After the beating (which, the narrator reveals, took place while she and the other white women were being kept safe some distance away), Caesar was left to suffer, but was released and cared for by the narrator upon her return. Caesar, she says, forgave Trefry (who Caesar believed to have been manipulated), but vowed revenge on Byam.

Over a few days, and as he recovered, Caesar formulated a plan: to kill Byam, and to kill Imoinda, so that she would escape the inevitable punishment that would fall on her after Byam's death. He took Imoinda (who had not yet had her baby) into the woods and revealed his plan, and was glad and honored when she agreed. After exchanging last words of love, Caesar killed and buried his wife … and then fell into a lengthy period of such intense grief that for a while, he was unable to follow through on the rest of his plan (i.e. to kill Byam) and lay in the woods near Imoinda's body.

As the days passed, the whites at Farham Plantation became more anxious about what happened to Caesar, and eventually set off in search of him. Drawn to an increasingly intense odor, they found both Imoinda's makeshift grave and an emaciated and deranged Caesar, who threatened to kill himself if anyone comes near him. As he cut into himself, an impulsive young planter tried to stop him, but was killed. Tuscan (who, narration comments, had reconciled with Byam), then also tried, but Caesar was too weak to defend himself, and was captured. He was taken back to Farham, where doctors and sympathetic whites (including the narrator) made an effort to help him

recover, but the doctors assured him (much to his own satisfaction) that he was going to die. The narrator, unwilling and/or able to be witness to his deterioration, left, and heard about what happened afterwards: that an unscrupulous ally of Byam's snuck into the house where Caesar was staying, took him captive, and led him back to the whipping post. There the calmly defiant Caesar endured being mutilated and killed.

The narrator concludes her story with the hope that her writing will enable Caesar's "glorious name" to live on throughout time.

Analysis

This section contains the climaxes of both the story's plot and its themes, the former tightly entwined with the latter – specifically, the story's thematic interest in both ensuring human dignity (which is the primary thematic element in Oroonoko's decisions and actions) and in slavery (the obstacle against which Oroonoko, Imoinda, and the other slaves all struggle in order to attain / hold onto their dignity). Then there are manifestations of the story's other themes: the power of true love (evident in the decisions of both Imoinda and Oroonoko); negative aspects of Christianity (evident in the hypocrisy and lies of Byam); and, perhaps most intriguingly, the two sides of trust.

Other important elements include the introduction of the aforementioned Byam (who appears only in this section but who makes a powerful impression, both as a character and a figure in the plot); the participation of the narrator in the plot (i.e. in terms of her offering help to Oroonoko – up to this point, she had been primarily an observer and commentator); the capitulation / betrayal of Tuscan (whose strength and courage in the earlier section, it seems, was fleeting at best); and, of course, the deaths of first Imoinda and then Oroonoko.

With those deaths, the author manages an extremely interesting piece of writing. Two themes climax in these moments: the story's examination of the destructive power of slavery (manifest here in the most destructive way possible) and its examination of the power of human dignity, manifest here in what the author clearly intends to be the most affirming way possible. In choosing the manner of their deaths, Oroonoko and Imoinda are choosing to die on their own terms in the same way as, earlier in the narrative, they chose to love on their own terms (which they seem to be doing again here) – with honor, integrity, and truth. The fact that Oroonoko doesn't in fact succeed in killing himself and is, in fact, tortured and mutilated before he actually does die makes no difference: his victory, the story suggests, is a moral one, his integrity and dignity transcending the IN-dignities perpetrated on him by Byam and the other embodiments of slavery's destructive power. This, in turn, can be seen as a specific example of a point the narrator makes early in the story: specifically, about the transcendent, morally powerful / just natural law at work in non-colonizing cultures, and how it contrasts with the physically powerful but morally reprehensible human (Christian) law that defines the culture, perspectives, and actions of the slavers.

Discussion Question 1

Is Oronooko/Caesar's decision about Imoinda justified? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways is the story's thematic interest in both sides of trust developed in this section?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the actions of the narrator in this section. How do you respond to what she says about herself? What was done to her? Her relative passivity? Do you think she could / should / would have done more? What response to you think she would have faced? How might the story have ended differently if the narrator had "walked her talk", as it were, and defended Oroonoko more strongly?

Vocabulary

debauch, scabbard, harangue, ignominy, fortitude, promiscuous, infamous, sordid, impassable, assent, dexterity, inevitable, cordial (adj.), ratify, deplorable, dissipate, burlesque (v.), notorious, contradict, insupportable, ascendant, noisome, impertinent

Characters

Oroonoko

Oroonoko is the story's central character and protagonist. Born and living in the mid-1600's, he is a South American prince and warrior, portrayed as having exceptional physical beauty; a broad and implicitly European education; and a capacity for strong emotions, particularly love, loyalty, and morality. Over the course of the narrative, he undergoes a journey of transformation that, in many ways, has more outward manifestations than inner ones: that is, his external circumstances (respected general, respected slave, leader of a slave revolt, tortured victim of jealousy and fear) change more than does his inner identity. From beginning to end, he remains a figure of courage, integrity, and dignity, which is particularly significant given that he does so while clearly remaining outside the boundaries of so-called "Christian" attitudes, behavior, and morality. Ultimately, though, there is the very strong sense about the story, arising primarily from this aspect of its central character, that Oroonoko's essentially unchanged inner, psychological, and spiritual identity is central to its primary theme: the enduring power of human dignity. It could be argued that his killing of Imoinda countermands this aspect of his character and of the story: it could also be argued, though, that this particular action is the ultimate expression of courage and integrity, given that he does what he does out of a desire to save his beloved from suffering and the loss of her dignity.

In many ways, and as several scholars have noted, he bears several aspects of resemblance to Othello, the title character in a play by William Shakespeare which also features a noble, educated, non-white warrior. While Oroonoko is South American and Othello is a "Moor" (i.e. African), the characters share several common elements: both Oroonoko and Othello (note the similarities in the names) fall desperately and passionately in love; that love, and the relationship that springs from it, are challenged by jealous outsiders (in Oroonoko's case, the King: in Othello's case, Iago); and both kill their wives. In Oronooko's case, his beloved (Imoinda) dies as a result of his loving desire to protect her from being enslaved: in Othello's case, his beloved (Desdemona) dies as a result of her husband's jealousy. Perhaps the most important point to note about the similarity between these two characters is that their race is less of a determining factor in their story and relationships than are other aspects of their character - primarily, their nobility and integrity. Meanwhile, perhaps the most important point to note about the differences between the two is that Othello, through his jealousy-defined actions, loses both his nobility and integrity, while Oroonoko, as noted above, retains his until the end of his life.

The Narrator

The story's unnamed narrator is a white woman, a colonist in the South American country of Surinam. Her age is never explicitly defined, but there is the sense that she is

relatively young, perhaps in her mid-late twenties (this sense rises partly from there being no mention of her having a husband). She is educated, relatively well-to-do (the daughter of a high-ranking politician), inquisitive, adventurous, and above all loyal to both Oroonoko and the ideals he represents.

In the same way as scholars and researchers have noted that Oroonoko bears similarities to Othello, there has been extensive discussion of just how much the portrait of the narrator is a self-portrait of the story's author, Aphra Benn. While there are certain similarities (all of which are primarily grounded in a sense of independence not common to many - most? - women of the era), research tends to suggest that those similarities are relatively superficial: that both the character of the narrator and the story she tells are highly fictionalized.

Imoinda

Imoinda is the beautiful, gentle, and quietly passionate love of Oroonoko's life. The daughter of a military officer who was Oroonoko's mentor, Imoinda is at times strong willed and independent (i.e. when she struggles against the imposed wishes / desires of the King of Coramantien - see below), and at other times compliant and submissive (i.e. when Oroonoko presents her with his plan to kill her). She, like Oroonoko, is desperate to live according to the internal dictates of her heart and what she believes to be true and right; she displays a similar degree of courage to her husband (as portrayed in the slave rebellion, in which she, despite her pregnancy, is one of the two people who fight alongside Oroonoko against the white slavers); but ultimately, she dies in what is arguably a better death than his. While his death is slow and painful, hers is quick and merciful - and where his comes at the hands of people who hate him, hers comes at the hands of the man who loves her more than his own life.

The King of Coramantien

The King rules the country (now known as Ghana) in which Oroonoko and Imoinda initially make their home. He is portrayed as selfish, insensitive, jealous, a liar, and a manipulator. His greedy, acquisitive desire for Imoinda is a difficult obstacle for her and Oroonoko to overcome, but overcome it they do, much to the King's anger.

Onahal

This middle-aged woman appears in the first third of the narrative. She is one of the oldest of the King's many wives, and is portrayed as being initially jealous of both Inoinda's beauty and of the King's longing for her. Eventually, though, both her admiration of Imoinda's pure love and her longing for male attention lead Onahal into becoming an ally for Oroonoko and Imoinda as they struggle to be together.

Aboan

Aboan, like Onahal, appears in the first third of the narrative. Young and ambitious, he is a courtier to the King, but is smart enough to recognize that Oroonoko has both power and influence which he (Aboan) can use to his own advantage. He becomes an ally in Oroonoko's desire to be with Imoinda, and cleverly manipulates Onahal (who is generally desperate for male attention) into also becoming an ally.

Jamoan

This character appears, and is referred to, very briefly. He is the leader of an army defeated by Oroonoko, but instead of being sold into slavery (as, the narrator says, soldiers in conquered armies generally were), Oroonoko recognizes him as an educated kindred spirit, and adopts him as a friend and confidante into his circle of intimates. After this takes place, however, he disappears from the narrative.

The French Governor

This unnamed character is referred to in passing on a few occasions. Educated and banished from his home country for being a heretic, he is sketched in as being a friend and mentor to Oroonoko; is accidentally captured in the same traitorous attack from the slave trader (see below) as Oroonoko; and is eventually released into a relatively happy living situation among the other white citizens of the plantation to which Oroonoko is eventually sent.

The Slave Captain

This character initially appears as a respected white trader, but eventually reveals his treachery as he captures Oroonoko and his friends / comrades / allies, transporting and selling them into slavery.

Mr. Trefry

Trefry is the plantation owner into whose service Oroonoko is eventually sold. He is portrayed as being sensitive to Oroonoko's good and noble qualities; as so respectful of those qualities that he frees Oroonoko (and eventually Imoinda) from a slave's life; and as an advocate for justice when Oroonoko first leads the slave rebellion and is later captured.

Tuscan

This character appears in the latter third of the story. He is initially opposed to, or at least very wary of, the slave rebellion as outlined by Oroonoko. Eventually, however,

Oroonoko wins him over, and Tuscan not only aids him in the rebellion, but is one of the few slaves who stands with Oroonoko to fight with the white slavers who pursue them. Later, however, Tuscan betrays Oroonoko by confessing and repenting to Deputy Governor Byam and therefore escaping punishment.

Byam

Byam is the Deputy Governor of Surinam. When confronted with the slave rebellion, he is ruthless, devious, and destructive, manipulating both the well-intentioned Trefry and the rebellious Oronooko to the point where the rebellion is crushed and Oroonoko is eventually destroyed.

Symbols and Symbolism

Slavery

Throughout the narrative, slavery is portrayed as a symbol of almost the ultimate destructive force. As both a concept and a practice, its controlling and soul-corrosive qualities represent all that the author, the narrator, and the protagonist (Oroonoko), as well as other characters, strive to both survive and transcend.

Christianity

Again throughout the narrative, Christianity is portrayed as a belief system that, like slavery, represents oppression and control. There is also the sense that, again as both a concept and a practice, it represents almost an unnatural set of boundaries and limits on free expression of the human soul.

Colonialism

Colonialism is a practice in which a dominant - often white, often European - culture exerts social, economic, and political control over an indigenous population. In this story and in the history of the practice, colonialism is often linked to both slavery and Christianity, all three ultimately being defined by the shared values of oppression and exploitation.

The Royal Veil

Early in the narrative, the King of Coramantien sends a long veil to Imoinda that symbolizes his intention to make her his wife. Its usage is portrayed as something of a ritual for him, and as something that Imoinda, and any other potential wives, are unable to resist, given his power and status.

The Otan

In the King's Court, the Otan is the name given to what might otherwise be known as the harem - the place where his wives and concubines live, and are kept away from both the world at large and from other men who might tempt them away from the King. As such, the Otan and the security and traditions surrounding it become a symbol of all the obstacles that Oroonoko has to overcome in order to be with his beloved Imoinda.

Tigers

About two thirds of the way through the story, the narrative takes something of an extended detour into an exploration of some of the activities undertaken by the white plantation residents to distract Oroonoko from both his status as a slave and from his preoccupation with his and Imoinda's unborn child. Some of those activities involve tiger hunting, the stories of which can be seen as having clear and vivid symbolic parallels to aspects of Oroonoko's situation and experiences.

The Paralyzing Eel

Like the tigers referenced above, the story of the paralyzing eel appears as part of the narrative detour into the diversions offered to Oroonoko. Also like the tigers, the story of the eel - which paralyzes anything that grabs it - can be seen as having symbolic parallels to what's happening to Oroonoko.

Gold

One final important symbolic influence in the narrative also occurs in the so-called "diversion" section: specifically, gold dust, as referred to in a story of mountain-climbing natives who returned with stories of finding such dust; as referred to in subsequent commentary about the well-intentioned governor's intent to keep it isolated and protected; and as referred to in even further subsequent commentary that reveals that that intent never succeeded, and that that gold became a sought-after and exploited resource. Gold here can be seen as symbolically evocative of the same sort of human greed that causes slavery, i.e. the exploitation of human lives.

Imoinda's Unborn Child

Imoinda's child, fathered by Oroonoko, represents hope and the possibility of freedom to its parents, to its parents' fellow slaves, and to the white allies of them all. The death of the baby, occurring as the result of Imoinda's death, can be seen as symbolically representing the death of that hope.

The Whipping Post

The post to which Oroonoko is tied to be whipped as punishment for leading the slave rebellion can be seen as symbolically representing slavery. In the same way as Oroonoko's life ends as the result of being tied to the immovable situation of being a slave, so too does it end as the result of being tied to the immovable, unforgiving post of wood as he is being destructively, savagely whipped.

Settings

The Mid-1600's

The primary action of the narrative is set in the mid-1600's at a time when British colonialism was arguably at its peak, both in terms of amount that was taking place and its destructive qualities. Those qualities are vividly portrayed, perhaps even exemplified, in the destructive treatment and attitudes experienced by Oroonoko and the other slaves in this story.

Coramantien

Coramantien is the name of the South American kingdom in which most of the first third of the novel takes place. Now known as Ghana, the country is small, warlike, and ruled by a selfish, corrupt king.

The King's Court

The court of the King of Coramantien is the more specific setting for much of the story's action - most significantly, of Oroonoko's repeated and increasingly desperate attempts to be with his beloved, Imoinda. An important part of the King's Court is The Otan, where the King keeps his wives and concubines, including Imoinda.

Surinam

This is the small South African country where the second two thirds of the novel takes place. It is the country to which Oroonoko and Imoinda are taken when captured and sold as slaves. Under British control at the time the story takes place, it eventually (as narration describes) came under the control of the Dutch, who controlled it for several decades.

Parham Plantation

When Oroonoko eventually arrives in Surinam, after being kidnapped and enslaved, he is taken to Parham Plantation, where the owner, Mr. Trefry, recognizes his status and affords him the treatment (i.e. as a guest) he feels Oroonoko deserves. By contrast, Parham Plantation (the home of the narrator) is also the setting for Oroonoko's torture and execution, following his leading of the slave rebellion.

Themes and Motifs

The Enduring Power of Human Dignity

This is the story' central thematic consideration as evoked or manifested by the action of its primary narrative line, or plot, as well as by its protagonist, Oroonoko. From his first appearance to his last, from when he is described as being a person of integrity and wisdom, to the point when his physical life comes to an end but his inner life (i.e. that integrity and wisdom, now tempered by experience) lives on in the narrator's telling of his story, Oroonoko is portrayed as a living embodiment of a life being defined by living true to oneself, one's values and ideals. These ideals, as defined in the narrative, are ultimately defined by the goal of being respected as, and respecting another as, a human being worthy of freedom and dignity. This is true not only in Oroonoko's case and also in the case of his wife Imoinda, whom Oroonoko murders to save her from the IN-dignity of being a true slave, but also in the case of other important characters: the narrator and Mr. Trefry being the most notable.

Here it's important to note that dignity, at least in the context of this particular narrative, includes not only physical freedom and freedom of action, but also the freedom to love as one feels driven to. The primary example of this aspect of dignity and freedom can be found in the relationship of Oroonoko and Imoinda, which is defined by physical attraction, yes, but more significantly by other qualities. In fact, the physical passion between the two of them is both downplayed to a significant degree, and ultimately defined as an expression of their shared morality, spirituality, and emotional connections. In other words, the narrative clearly makes the thematic suggestion that human dignity endures as a result of loving with both physical integrity (as evidenced in Imoinda's repeated rejection of the King's sexual advances) and emotional and spiritual integrity (as evidenced by the ostensibly loving sacrifices endured by both Oroonoko and Imoinda throughout the story).

Meanwhile, the exploration of this theme is set in motion within the context of the story's simultaneous thematic exploration of one of the most inhumane, undignified, soul-destroying socio-political-economic systems in human history: slavery.

The Destructive Power of Slavery

If there is such a thing as a thematic obstacle – that is, a thematic exploration that acts in, or is portrayed as being in, opposition to a principal theme – then slavery is, in this story, a thematic obstacle to the primary theme. Throughout the narrative, the struggles of Oroonoko and the other characters to achieve and retain their dignity as human beings are defined by their being opposed by slavery. Significantly, and almost universally, that obstacle is overcome by the characters' ability to defy, and insistence upon defying, slavery's destructive and relentless influence. The only capitulation to slavery comes in Oroonoko's death, when his physical body is destroyed by those who

have adopted the practices of slavery as their guiding principles. Ultimately, however – and this, as suggested above, is the story's primary thematic point – slavery as an obstacle proves futile: Oroonoko, in his death, shows that, in the author / narrator's mind, not even being viewed or treated like the disposable possession of another human being can destroy the true experience of a human being who holds himself with dignity and integrity.

It's important to note that this is not just economic slavery (i.e. the keeping of virtually unpaid, poorly treated, massively exploited servants) but also slavery to desire. The King of Coramantien, who acts out of an increasingly frustrated sexual longing for Imoinda, can be seen as being slave not only to his physical desire but his desire to control: in the same way as slaves in the narrative (and throughout history) serve their economic and socio-cultural masters, the King serves the mastery of his sexual frustration and his ego-defined lust for power. In reality, there is very little separating the King (in terms of his attitudes towards Imoinda) and Byam (in terms of his attitudes towards Oroonoko): while both are desperate to enslave others, they are ultimately portrayed as, and revealed to be, slaves to the darker sides of themselves.

Negative Portraits of Christianity

At the same time as it overtly and vividly condemns slavery, through both action and implication, the narrative also condemns Christianity. While there are no actively and/or maliciously Christian characters in the narrative (as there are active and malicious slave owners / traders), there are frequent references in narration to Christianity's destructive, limited attitudes. These references range from comments on how restrictive and limited Christianity's rules and laws are (particularly when juxtaposed with the seemingly more humane, more community-defined laws of non-Christian indigenous communities and cultures) to the drawing of connections, moral and otherwise, between those who simultaneously practice Christianity and slavery. There is, in fact, the sense throughout the narrative that slavers act the way they do at least in part as a result of their Christian beliefs.

Here it's important to note that the novel was written at a time in world history in general, when British history in particular was defined, or dominated, by Christian beliefs. The negative attitudes towards Christianity as manifested in the story were in many ways in the significant minority. They might even be described, by more conservative readers or commentators, as being heretical, a perspective perhaps compounded by the fact that both the narrator and the author putting forward those opinions were women, at a time when women were, for the most part, expected to be silent, respectful, virtually ornamental (except when it came to producing children / heirs), and arguably free of any kind of cultural, political, or religious thinking. In short, the story's thoughts and perspectives on Christianity were, at the time it was first written and published, were unusual in an extreme, particularly in terms of how the story presented Christianity as being morally and culturally inferior to the "heathen" practices of un-colonized, uneducated, un-converted "natives".

The Power of True Love

In vivid contrast to the oppressive and destructive power of slavery; in similarly vivid contrast to the seemingly perverse sorts of love practiced and professed, at least according to the narrative, by Christianity; and as a primary weapon employed by the central characters against that power, the narrative places the power of true love. As noted above, having the freedom to love as one is inclined is a key component of the story's central theme. The lengths to which Oroonoko and Imoinda go to protect and preserve the dignity, the honesty, and the beauty of their love for each other are thoroughly entwined with their simultaneous desire to live freely and as human beings, as opposed to sexual possessions (in Imoinda's case) or military ones (in Oroonoko's case).

Then: the love of Oroonoko and Imoinda for each other is portrayed as being so strong, so true, and so worthy of admiration that it leads several characters to actions that they would not otherwise take. In the early stages of the story, loyal subjects to the King like Onahal and Aboan break the rules of the palace and ultimately take risks with their lives in order to make the reunion of Oroonoko and Imoinda possible: later in the story, Mr. Trefry sees not only the individual dignity of both Oroonoko and Imoinda, but also recognizes the purity of their love, allowing them to live on his plantation under the name of "slave", but in reality with the freedom and dignity of free people. Indeed, the narrator repeats throughout the narrative that the love of Oroonoko and Imoinda for each other, and eventually of their unborn child is an inspiration to her.

The ultimate expression of the transcendent power of true love in the story appears quite late in the story – specifically, in Oroonoko's decision to kill Imoinda (and, by extension, their unborn child) so that they won't face the unloving indignity of truly being treated like a slave. He does what he does, what many would consider a truly heinous act out of what he believes to be true, deep, compassionate love: Imoinda acquiesces with this act for the same reason. Whether their choices are in fact the result of love or the result of cowardice is debatable: the fact remains that THEY see it is love; the author / narrator see it as love; and the reader is intended to see it as love … love giving the characters transcendent dignity, even in death.

Two Sides of Trust

In contrast to the loving trust, or the trusting love, found in the relationship between Oroonoko and Imoinda, the narrative places several examples of trust betrayed. Both Oroonoko and Imoinda have complete, if sometimes wavering, trust in each other's fidelity, loyalty, and courage: this trust, a manifestation of their true and spiritual love for each other, is vividly contrasted with the actions of several characters who initially offer trust but who ultimately turn out to be self-interested, lying betrayers of that trust.

The first and most vivid example of this is the relationship between Oroonoko and the King, in which Oroonoko trusts the King treat him with respect (particularly after he wins yet ANOTHER war in his name) but has that trust betrayed when the King's lust for

Imoinda drives him (the King) to betraying actions of lusty greed. In the same vein are the actions of the untrustworthy slave trader / captain, who professes to be an ally of the King and a respecter of Oroonoko, but who betrays the trust of both by capturing Oroonoko and others of the King's court and taking them into slavery. Here again, it's important to remember that these incidents are juxtaposed with ongoing references in narration to Oroonoko's and Imoinda's ongoing fidelity and longing.

Finally, there are two betrayals of trust associated with the end of the slave rebellion. The first comes in the actions of Deputy Governor Byam, whom slave ally Mr. Trefry trusts to deal honestly with Oroonoko and the other rebellious slaves but who turns out to be lying, perfidious, and entirely untrustworthy. Then, and once Oroonoko has been captured, there are the actions of Tuscan, his fellow slave and fellow warrior who, in spite of the attitudes he has shown in the past (i.e. standing with Oroonoko against the onslaught of the white slavers), turns traitor and, ostensibly to save his skin, aligns himself with Byam when it comes to Oroonoko's trial. Once more, these actions are ironically juxtaposed with those of Oroonoko and Imoinda – Oroonoko in his loving trust that Imoinda will see the situation (i.e. a potential life of slavery) as he does, and perhaps even more tellingly, in Imoinda's similarly loving trust that her husband is right … that death will be preferable, truer, and more dignified than life as a slave.

Styles

Point of View

The story's primary point of view is that of its unnamed, first-person narrator: a white, female, British colonist in the South American country where much of the story takes place. She is telling a story not her own: a story that, she says in her narration, was told to her by its central character, the slave / prince Oroonoko. While this gives the story an air of being second-hand information, it's important to note that as part of her telling the story, the narrator includes not only information and commentary based on her own perspective (see below) but also information about the thoughts, feelings, and impressions of Oroonoko and other characters, information that she claims to have had directly from them. She is not by any means an omniscient narrator: she doesn't know, or communicate, everything about every character. However, neither is she entirely limited in her perspective, as many / most first person narrators are: she incorporates, as noted, insights into / analysis of the inner lives of other characters. Thus the story's overall point of view is a blend of outright storytelling, first and second hand interpretation of the events of the story, and narrative opinion: the narrator is far from objective.

Further to that point: there are several instances in the story at which the author interjects commentary that, in many ways, can be seen as reflecting the attitudes and beliefs of the story's author. The most notable of these have to do with the frequent negative references to Christianity. In contrast, there are also positive comments on the genuine, earthy humanity of the non-Christian "natives" in the story (inevitably connected to the aforementioned negative comments on Christianity), again which seem to reflect the attitudes and beliefs of the author, a woman who, at a time when women were neither believed, nor allowed, nor encouraged to have any sort of opinion at all, had marked opinions and no qualms about expressing them. Here it's possible to see that the narrative voice / point of view is, in many ways, also that of the author.

Language and Meaning

There are several points to note about the story's use of language. The first and most apparent is that it is written in the style that was appropriate for the literature of the time at which it was written (the mid-1600's). There is an ornateness to the sentence / paragraph structure (some paragraphs go on for pages), a complexity to the vocabulary, and indeed several words / phrases that are no longer in common usage. While not as challenging for contemporary readers to comprehend as the writings of Shakespeare or Chaucer or even Jane Austen can be, there is a sense that the language used in the telling of this story has a formality, a density, and a borderline pretentiousness that can make it something of a challenge to both read and understand.

Another point to note about the use of language in this piece is that it is tied closely to point of view. Specifically, it is the language of an educated person; of a woman; of an open-minded liberal; and, perhaps most significantly, of a colonizer. In spite of apparent efforts to make the piece's narrative voice compassionate and enlightened, there is a strong sense of the lecture about it (i.e. that the narrator / author is instructing the reader on a form of morality), of the condescending and the patronizing. There is also the concurrent sense of agenda in the narration: that she is writing not necessarily to enlighten and not even to instruct, but on some level to shame – specifically, to shame those who think like the less-enlightened (primarily white) characters in the story into feeling badly about what was done to Oroonoko and, by extension, individuals in the non-narrative world who are treated in the same way … as dehumanized slaves.

This, in turn, leads to one final point about language and meaning: the ebb-and-flowing feel of Bible story about the piece, that it is being told with the goal of preaching to and transforming the hearer as it is about simply communicating events and / or making the hearer feel something. This sensibility (ironic, in that there are so many negative references to Christianity) filters through the narration of what happened to Oroonoko and Imoinda: the reader might be forgiven if s/he anticipates Biblical-sounding language like "And so it came to pass …" at certain points in the storytelling.

Structure

There are several points to note about the piece's structure. The first is that for the most part, the main section of the story (the narrative of what happened to Oroonoko and Imoinda) unfolds in fairly straightforward fashion: Event A leads to Event B leads to Event C; action leads to reaction leads to action … and so on, as the narrative builds to its simultaneous narrative and thematic climax: the death of Oroonoko. A related point is that there are exceptions to this general principle / structural orientation.

The first of these can be found in the piece's opening moments – specifically, with what might today be called a "disclaimer", the narrator's contention that the story about to be told is the truth in spite of what might seem to a reader as its somewhat fantastical elements and events. Second: there is a diversion, which the narrator herself describes as such, about two thirds of the way through, in which the narrator describes the circumstances and some of the events that she and other white colonists employed to keep Oroonoko distracted from his cares. What's interesting about this sequence is that while it does take the characters and the reader out of the purely forward (i.e. horizontal) motion of the narrative, it does offer relevant images and story elements that take the reader and the narrative down into character and image (i.e. vertical movement), offering a degree of symbolic / metaphoric understanding and interpretation.

Finally, and as noted above, there are narrative diversions into commentary, which tend to interrupt the forward motion of the story as the narrator steps out of the story to offer

opinions to the reader of what happened / is happening. Here there are two points to note: that these interjections are sometimes jarring, in that they jump into the narrative after several pages of absence in which the narrator focuses entirely on Oroonoko; and that they tend to take the reader's focus away from the experiences of the central characters and into what the narrator seems to expect the reader to think about, and learn from, those experiences. Again, they tend to turn the story more in the direction of a lecture than a straightforward narrative.

Quotes

And though they are all thus naked, if one lives forever among them, there is not to be seen an indecent action, or glance: and being continually used to see one another so unadorned, so like our first parents before the fall, it seems as if they had no wishes, there being nothing to heighten curiosity.
-- The Narrator (Section 1)

Importance: In this quote, in describing the natural innocence and freedom of the natives of the West Indies, the narrator references the innocence of the Biblical Adam and Eve, suggesting that the natives were as pure and free from corrupting knowledge as they were.

And 'tis most evident and plain, that simple Nature is the most harmless, inoffensive, and virtuous mistress. It is she alone, if she were permitted, that better instructs the world, than all the inventions of man: religion would here but destroy that tranquility they possess by ignorance; and laws would but teach them to know offenses, of which now they have no notion.
-- The Narrator (Section 1)

Importance: Here the narrator makes a somewhat moralizing pronouncement regarding the purity and value of the innocence and freedom of the native community. The reference to the potentially corrupting and disruptive influence of religion and laws is one of several statements made by the narrator throughout the narrative that tend to condemn restrictive, judgmental human law.

...it was amazing to imagine where it was he learned so much humanity; or to give his accomplishments a juster name, where it was he got that real greatness of soul, those refined notions of true honor, that absolute generosity, and that softness that was capable of the highest passions of love and gallantry, whose objects were almost continually fighting men, or those mangled or dead, who heard no sounds but those of war and groans.
-- The Narrator (Section 1)

Importance: The narrator here speaks with a combination of wonder and curiosity about Oroonoko, speculating on how, after a childhood and youth spent mostly on the battlefield, he developed such a transcendent sense of compassion and humanity.

...as he knew no vice, his flame aimed at nothing but honor, if such a distinction may be made in love; and especially in that country, where men take to themselves as many as they can maintain; and where the only crime and sin against a woman is to turn her off, to abandon her to want, shame, and misery; such ill morals are only practiced in Christian countries, where they prefer the bare name of religion; and without religion or morality, think that sufficient."
-- The Narrator (Section 1)

Importance: Here again the narrator makes a pointed comment about the limitations and prejudices of Christianity, now including its treatment of women in her sphere of contemplation and condemnation.

It is not to be imagined the satisfaction of these two young lovers; nor the vows she made him, that she remained a spotless maid till that night ... the transports he suffered while he listened to a discourse so charming from her loved lips ... it was thus, between a thousand caresses, that both bemoaned the hard fate of youth and beauty ...
-- The Narrator (Section 2)

Importance: In the midst of describing the physical pleasure experienced by Oroonoko and Imoinda during the consummation of their love, narration also refers to how they spoke intimately, honestly, and with searching pain of their longing for each other and their frustration at not being able to act on that longing.

... henceforth he would never lift a weapon, or draw a bow, but abandon the small remains of his life to sighs and tears, and the continual thoughts of what his lord and grandfather had thought good to send out of the world, with all that youth, that innocence, and beauty.
-- The Narrator (Section 3)

Importance: Here the narrator sums up Oroonoko's reaction to being told that Imoinda is dead: he will no longer be the General, no longer be the man he had to this point lived to be, but will instead withdraw to grieve the loss of his true love.

'Farewell, sir, 'tis worth my sufferings to gain so true a knowledge, both of you and of your gods, by whom you swear.
-- Oronooko (Section 4)

Importance: With this parting comment made to the traitorous sea captain / slaver, Oroonoko reveals his contempt for both the man and the faith that enabled him to behave so treacherously.

Caesar ... made a harangue to them of the miseries and ignominies of slavery; counting up all their toils and sufferings, under such loads, burdens and drudgeries, as were fitter for beasts than men; senseless brutes, than human souls. He told them it was not for days, months or years, but for eternity; there was no end to be of their misfortunes. They suffered not like men, who might find a glory and fortitude in oppression; but like dogs, that loved the whip and bell, and fawned the more they were beaten; that they had lost the divine quality of men ...
-- The Narrator (Section 6)

Importance: Here the narrator describes the speech made by Caesar (Oroonoko) to his fellow slaves, a speech that inspired them to rebellion.

But Caesar told him there was no faith in the white men, or the gods they adored; who instructed them in principles so false, that honest men could not live amongst them;

though no people professed so much, none performed so little; that he knew what he had to do when he dealt with men of honor; but with them a man ought to be eternally on his guard, and never to eat and drink with Christians, without his weapon of defense in his hand; and, for his own security, never to credit one word they spoke.
-- The Narrator (Section 6)

Importance: Here the narrator sums up Oroonoko's / Caesar's attitude towards the proposal offered by the white deputy governor, an attitude that sums up the general attitude of the short story towards "Christians".

When they thought they were sufficiently revenged on him, they untied him, almost fainting with loss of blood from a thousand wounds all over his body ... and led him bleeding and naked as he was, and loaded him all over with irons; and then rubbed his wounds, to complete their cruelty, with Indian pepper ... and, in this condition, made him so fast to the ground, that he could not stir, if his pains and wounds would have given him leave.
-- The Narrator (Section 6)

Importance: This quote describes Oroonoko's / Caesar's condition after being whipped for leading the slave rebellion. Its phrasing and imagery have clear echoes of the description of Christ in the hours before his crucifixion ... ironic, in that at so many other places in the narrative, the narrator is condemning of Christianity. Here Oroonoko is clearly set up as a martyr for his beliefs.

He (grieved to death) yet pleased at her noble resolution, took her up, and embracing of her with all the passion and languishment of a dying lover, drew his knife to kill this treasure of his soul, this pleasure of his eyes; while tears tricked down his cheeks, hers were smiling with joy that she should die by so noble a a hand and be sent into her own country (for that is their notion of the next world) by him she so tenderly loved, and so truly adored in this.
-- The Narrator (Section 6)

Importance: Here the narrator described the moment in which Oroonoko / Caesar and Imoinda / Clemene agreed to follow through on his plan that he should kill her in order that she might evade the inevitable suffering that she would face when he killed Byam in revenge for being first trapped, then tortured.

Thus died this great man, worthy of a better fate, and a more sublime with than mine to write his praise. Yet, I hope, the reputation of my pen is considerable enough to make his glorious name to survive to all ages, with that of the brave, the beautiful, and the constant Imoinda.
-- The Narrator (Section 6)

Importance: These are the final lines of the story, and sum up the attitude of the narrator towards the central character, his wife, and their deeds.