

Enrichment Exercise 2

Written during the height of European colonization, author Aphra Behn utilizes a unique narrative style to convey the state of relations between white Europeans, African slaves, and the native inhabitants. Based in the American colony, Suriname, the narrator shares her “eye-witness” account of the life and legacy of an African prince named Oronoko. The life of Oronoko portrays the complicated nature of the slave trade during the time, as Prince Oronoko himself is involved in the trading of African people as property for labor. While the story of Oronoko is the story of a “royal slave,” the narrative surrounding slavery tends to be portrayed as white Europeans capturing black Africans and the power dynamic between these two groups- Behn’s narrative highlights class as the true dynamic at play.

As Laura J. Rosenthal stated in her 2006 essay, Oronoko has gained popularity due to arguments about the messaging hidden between the lines. Rosenthal notes the way that Behn highlights slaves being used as a gift throughout the story, rather than the traditionally seen usage of slaves for labor, as well as Oronoko’s position among the other slaves in the colony as they bow to him and he receives less harsh punishment (p.151). Given Behn’s background, the story of Oronoko provides a conflicting opinion on slavery as an institution. Rosenthal mentions the conflicting analyses of the narrative- as some believe the author to be opposed to the practice due to the framing of the slave rebellion, while others find the story to be riddled with condescension and stereotypes that contradict any claims of Behn’s opposition to slavery (p.153). Rosenthal builds upon this idea of Behn’s background influencing the messaging of the story, as she was loyal to the Stuart dynasty throughout her whole life, stating that the story suggests an “idealized version of a traditional monarchial society” (p. 151). Knowing the author’s inclination towards a society with an outlined power structure, the narrative is better understood by examining the importance of class in both the African nation from which Oronoko has his title as well as the colony where he is regarded as the “royal slave.”

Throughout the narrative, the narrator speaks about Oronoko with high regard, claiming he is a “hero” and that she is sharing his story so that his legacy can go on. However, Oronoko can be argued as a contributor in the institution that he planned a rebellion against due to his involvement in the slave trade, and is where he met the English captain who brought him to the colony. Class as a contributor in the power dynamic is seen as Oronoko arrives in the colony and he and his wife are accepted by the white colonists due to their nobility and the two plan to spend some time in the colony before returning home to Africa as they were promised. Oronoko does not feel anything is amiss, and the narrator even notes the working relations between the native inhabitants and the white colonists as a way to illustrate the success of the colony. Despite the use of African slaves, some of which were provided to the colonists by Oronoko, the “royal slave” does not begin to question his freedom until his wife inches closer to labor and he desires passage home. It is only when Oronoko discovers that there was never any plan for him to return home and he was tricked into becoming a slave that he finds the institution of slavery to be wrong and plans a rebellion against his captor.

The story of Oronoko as an “eye-witness” account gives the reader insight into the complicated nature of colonies, slaves, and native inhabitants as Oronoko’s view on how the white colonizers interact with native inhabitants shifts following his discovery of their trick, as well as his sudden opposition to slavery as an institution and the white Europeans who planned to enslave him. This shift only occurs once his class is changed, as he previously had no issue with the use of slaves when he was of a higher class and was in the position to utilize them. When Oronoko arrives in the colony, despite his nobility and initial acceptance by the other Europeans, his title no longer had any real weight, aside from less brutal

treatment, as he was still viewed as a “commodity” (p. 151). The claim by the narrator that Oroonoko was a “hero” can then be contested, as it can be argued that if he were not put in the position, that he put so many others in by trading slaves, he would have never fought against the institution of slavery. Due to Oroonoko’s position in his native land, it is also very likely that he would return home to his homeland and continue on trading slaves had he been granted the freedom he was originally promised.

Given the context of the story, Oroonoko provides the reader a way to understand the relationships between class and slavery rather than the traditionally seen relationship between white European colonists and African people as slaves. Oroonoko’s role in the trade of slaves and his eventual opposition to slavery as an institution provides context on the complexity of slavery in the colonies and the important role that class played.