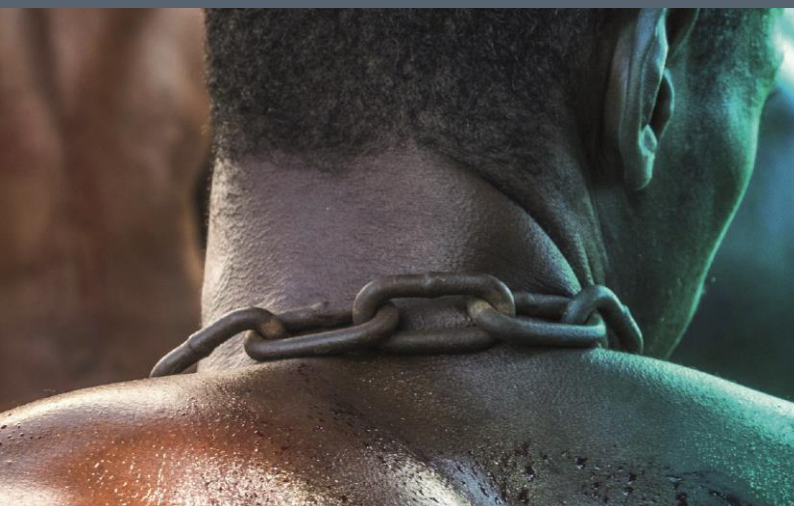




Book club 34: Migration & globalisation

Oroonoko
by Aphra Behn

Rules

In this book club you will discuss *Oroonoko* by Aphra Behn in a group of 4-6 readers. The book club opens with a brief introduction that one of you reads out loud. The book club then continues in four rounds:

- 1 Round 1 consists of 5 questions about the plot. One of the group members acts as the quiz master who reads each question out loud, after which everyone (including the quiz master) writes down their answer. The correct answers will appear on the screen after you have turned over the final question card. You may then check your answers and calculate your scores.
- 2 Round 2 consists of asking and answering questions each of you have about the book/story: in turn, the players say what they did not understand about the book and try to find an answer together. When the biggest confusions are solved, round 3 starts.
- 3 Round 3 consists of discussion questions. The person with the most correct answers to the quiz questions from round 1 gets to be the first to turn over a card and respond to the question. The other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas. Take turns until all cards are flipped.
- 4 Round 4 is when you get to review the text. How many stars would you give the text and why? Discuss this together until you have reached a shared verdict. Use the text box to explain your choice.

This book club was developed by the editors of LitLab, a digital laboratory for high school literature research. For more teaching materials, visit www.litlab.nl. A teacher's guide and a didactic justification of this teaching method are available at www.litlab.nl/docenten.



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Oroonoko

Introduction

'No, I would not kill myself, even after a whipping, but will be content to live with that infamy, and be pointed at by every grinning slave till I have completed my revenge; and then you shall see that Oroonoko scorns to live with the indignity that was put on Ceasar.' (p. 69)

A large part of the events of *Oroonoko* is set in the English colony of Surinam, before it was taken over by the Dutch in 1667. A female narrator who has spent time there tells the story of Oroonoko, a noble prince from the African kingdom of Coramantien. In his own country, he comes into conflict with his grandfather, the King, after falling in love with Imoinda, who is as beautiful and virtuous as Oroonoko is noble and heroic. As a result, Oroonoko loses his beloved, before being deceived, enslaved and taken to the colony of Surinam.

The author, Aphra Behn, was a playwright, poet and prose writer who was one of the first women in England to earn her living with writing, at a time when very few women had such opportunities. She was also a monarchist, and supported King Charles II. The alternative title of the book, 'the Royal Slave', can be linked to the important role nobility and honour have in the story. Although in some ways a critique of a colonial society, the book does not criticise the practice of slavery itself. This makes it, and the larger-than-life figure of Oroonoko, a complicated and sometimes uneasy testament to the values and attitudes of its time.

Round 1: Quiz

Turn over the 5 cards with quiz questions one by one. Write down the answer on a piece of paper.

Round 2: Initial questions

What questions popped into your head while reading *Oroonoko*? Were there any parts that left you confused or wondering? Take turns sharing your questions about the story and try to come up with answers together. Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.

Round 3: Discussion

The player with the most correct answers to the quiz questions gets to turn over a card first from one of the two piles of discussion questions. Once they have answered the question, the other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas.

Round 4: Review

Review *Oroonoko* by rating the novel on a scale of one to five stars, and then provide an explanation for your choice. Discuss what aspects you enjoyed and what aspects you didn't, and provide reasons for your opinions. Reflect on whether the discussion influenced your individual perspective, and if so, how. Incorporate examples and arguments from your responses to the discussion questions to support your review.



Question 1

What role does Aboan play in Oroonoko's plan to see Imoinda?

Question 2

How has Oroonoko learned about European language and culture?

Question 3

How is Oroonoko tricked into captivity?

Question 4

What event involving Imoinda increases the urgency Oroonoko feels to escape slavery?

Question 5

What is the name of the man who buys Oroonoko after he is sold into slavery?

Answers

- 1 Aboan helps Oroonoko see Imoinda by agreeing to distract Onahal
- 2 Through a Frenchman who serves as his tutor and by spending time with foreign traders.
- 3 An English captain invites Oroonoko and his noble attendants on board.
- 4 Imoinda's pregnancy
- 5 A Cornish man called Trefry.



Question

3

Question

2

Question

1

Answers

Question

5

Question

4



Personal connections? 1

Oroonoko has been adapted for the stage a number of times. Views on slavery at the time it was written are very different to those in the present day. If you were to make a film or stage adaptation now, what would be needed to make the story relevant and understandable for a modern-day audience?

Personal connections? 2

When Imoinda receives a message requesting her to 'take the veil' and become a mistress of the King, she hurries because she knows refusing or even taking too long could have terrible consequences. How do you consider the position of women in the royal court?

Personal connections? 3

How easy or hard do you find it to identify with the characters in Oroonoko? What are the reasons for this, do you think? You could think of characterisation here, or of the way the story is told and framed.

Personal connections? 4

The narrator tells us about some of the things she does in the company of Oroonoko. One of these activities is tiger hunting, and she describes one instance in which Oroonoko captures a cub and kills its mother. What are Oroonoko's and the narrator's attitudes to this? Are these different from your own feelings in response to this scene?

Personal connections? 5

When Oroonoko and Imoinda are enslaved and arrive in Surinam they are renamed by their owners. What could be a reason that this was done by people enslaving and exploiting people?

Personal connections? 6

The cruel deputy governor Byam and his 'Parhamites', are contrasted with Trefry, the narrator and other people Oroonoko's associates with, who care for him after he has been whipped and tortured following the rebellion. Do you think this second group can be described as Oroonoko's friends? Why or why not?

Personal connections? 7

After the rebellion Oroonoko leads is crushed, he denounces the other enslaved people for surrendering. He says that, by giving up, they have shown that they deserve to be enslaved. From a modern point of view this seems harsh and unjust. Is it possible to understand Oroonoko's reaction in light of his views on honour?

Personal connections? 8

Why does Oroonoko decide to kill Imoinda and their unborn child? And how does Imoinda respond when he tells her of his plan? What do you think about Oroonoko's motivation?



Personal connections?

3

Personal connections?

2

Personal connections?

1

Personal connections?

6

Personal connections?

5

Personal connections?

4

Personal connections?

8

Personal connections?

7



Food for thought? 1

'His face was not of that brown, rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony or polished jet. [...] His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat.' (p. 15) In what way does the narrator's description of Oroonoko emphasise his nobility and difference from the common people of his country?

Food for thought? 2

The narrator describes the nature of Surinam as a kind of garden of Eden, and the native people as innocents. Do you think this reflects reality? And how do these descriptions contrast with the way the Europeans are presented?

Food for thought? 3

After Oroonoko visits Imoinda in the King's palace, the King punishes her by selling her as a slave. This is presented as a dishonour compared to the nobler punishment of being executed. How is this idea of death being more desirable than enslavement reflected in the rest of the book?

Food for thought? 4

Oroonoko is very emotional in the way he responds to events. Can you think of an example of Oroonoko's larger than life emotional reactions? What is the function of such emotions?

Food for thought? 5

'And why, said he, my dear friends and fellow-sufferers, should we be slaves to an unknown people? Have they vanquished us nobly in fight? Have they won us in honourable battle? And are we by the chance of war become their slaves?' (p. 62) What, according to this view, is the difference between acceptable and unacceptable enslavement?

Food for thought? 6

The narrator tries to get Oroonoko and Imoinda to convert to Christianity, but Oroonoko is adamant he will never do so. How is his negative attitude to Christianity strengthened by events in the book?

Food for thought? 7

The author, Aphra Behn, was a Royalist, which means she believed the power of the King should overrule that of parliament and the common people. How is this reflected in *Oroonoko*?

Food for thought? 8

Does Imoinda have the same choices as Oroonoko when it comes to reacting to the things that happen to her? Why or why not? What does that say about how characters are influenced by characteristics such as their gender, status and race?



Food for thought?

3

Food for thought?

2

Food for thought?

1

Food for thought?

6

Food for thought?

5

Food for thought?

4

Food for thought?

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Food for thought?

7