Ian Watt's Definition of the Novel: Why Aphra Behn Deserves Inclusion

By Lillian R. Parrotta

Ian Watt, in the first chapter of his *The Rise of the Novel*, connects the history of the novel with the philosophy of realism to help define the novel. He makes this connection because the novel's pursuit of the individual has roots in the realism movement: "Modern realism, of course, begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses" (Watt 12). Watt credits Descartes's work as the basis for "the modern assumption whereby the pursuit of truth is conceived of as a wholly individual matter" (Watt 13). But, this emphasis on the individual meant an abandonment of the (past) emphasis on the collective. This change happened in the literary world as well. The start of the novel is a direct reflection of the philosophical movement of realism because the novel's "primary criterion was truth to individual experience" (Watt 13). In comparison, past literary tradition used "conformity to traditional practice" as the "major rest of truth" instead (Watt 13). As Watt succinctly writes: the novel "has set an unprecedented value on originality," and marks a larger cultural shift towards realism and the individual (13). The work of Locke and Descartes greatly influenced our modern culture because their writings bled into other disciplines. Watt sees individualism as one of the markers of a novel, a characteristic Defoe was the first to apply to his writings (Watt 14-15 at the end of section (a)). Naming Defoe the first writer to include individualism means that, according to Watt, Aprha Behn did not. While I agree Behn's *Oroonoko* contains more allegorical elements than *Moll Flanders* for example, I am discontented that Watt leaves an in-depth analysis of her contribution to the history of the novel out of his work. I don't believe there could have been a Moll or a Pamela without her contribution. Through the glorification of Oroonoko and the

detailing of his suffering, Behn's *Oroonoko* criticizes the royal system, which was necessary to pave the way for "the novel's" individualism.

Since individualism sees "the pursuit of truth" "as a wholly individual matter," one of its foils is the royal system (Watt 13). As seen in *Oroonoko*, the royal system values the King's truth, and it expects a collective worship of one family in order to have a functioning state. This collective ideology shows up when Imoinda has no choice but to obey the royal veil shortly after meeting Oroonoko: "'tis death to disobey" its invitation, and "pleading worse than treason, trembling and almost fainting, she was obliged to suffer herself to be covered and led away" (Behn 15). Imoinda has no choice but to accept the royal veil and become one of the King's mistresses, even though she has fallen in love with Oroonoko. She cannot safely and authentically follow her individual desires. Imoinda forsakes her individuality because the King requires her to do so. Oroonoko suffers from this situation as well: upon learning of the veil, "this raised him to a storm and, in his madness, they had ado to save him from laying violent hands on himself" (Behn 17). I don't believe Behn is only highlighting an unfortunate circumstance because of the care she took to make a hero out of Oroonoko.

The narrator's descriptions of Oroonoko glorify him, which makes him integral to the story. In first introducing him to us readers, she writes: "the most illustrious courts could not have produced a braver man, both for greatness of courage and mind;" "the whole proportion and air of his face was so noble and exactly formed" (Behn 11, 12). The narrator takes time during this introduction to repeat the transcendence of Oroonoko's greatness. Her abundant and extreme praise turns Oroonoko into more of a god-like figure than a human one. By the narrator saying the courts, a very high human position, could not have created a better man shows that Oroonoko is beyond the physical and more akin to the metaphysical. She also writes: "the most famous

statuary could not form the figure of a man more admirably turned from head to foot" (Behn 12). Again, Oroonoko is surpassing human capabilities–he is so perfect that the best statuary couldn't create a better one. Another example of his transcendence is through his more European and less African qualities: "his face was not of that brown, rusty black which most of the nation are" and "His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat" (Behn 12). Oroonoko is so astonishing that "the white men, especially to those of Christendom," "would have confessed that Oroonoko was as capable even of reigning well" (Behn 12). Though Oroonoko is African, he transcends the (let me be clear, completely false and racist) "imperfections" the narrator, who is speaking for Europeans, sees his ethnicity associated with. The narrator is saying Oroonoko is so perfect that he surpasses the "limitations" of his race, and that even white people, the thought-of "superior" race, can't deny his greatness. Oroonoko's grandeur is constant throughout his story and does not stop once he leaves Coramantien.

Oroonoko's grandeur persists as he reaches Surinam. Shortly after being enslaved on the ship, the people that were kidnapped with him refuse to eat. But, "it was concluded that nothing but Oroonoko's liberty would encourage any of the rest to eat" (Behn 36). Traveling up the river on the same ship, people still noticed Oroonoko's greatness in spite of his enslavement: "numbers of people would flock to behold this man" and "they venerated and esteemed him; his eyes insensibly commanded respect" (Behn 39). Even though he is dressed as a slave, his greatness shines through. In the colony, Oroonoko lives separately from the other slaves, he kills the unkillable tiger, and he catches an eel, though with less grandeur than usual. Just like in Coramantien, Oroonoko is beyond the people he is around in Surinam. Throughout the story, whether through that narrator's praises or Behn's plot, Oroonoko is constantly ethereal. Because Behn has created this hero in Oroonoko, his suffering is integral to the story, if not *the* story.

Back in Coramantien, when he cannot honorably marry Imoinda, this tragedy has a large impact on the story because it is Oroonoko that is hurting. Behn builds up the character of Oroonoko with great care, which means anything that happens to him is not to be overlooked. As a result, his suffering in Coramantien because of Imoinda receiving the royal veil is much more than a plot point. I believe Behn is criticizing the royal system because our hero suffers from it.

With more time, I would discuss every instance of her criticism of the royal system. The second half of the novel, Oroonoko's enslavement in Surinam, is a gruesome account. Our hero is severely whipped, betrayed, and suffers in more extreme ways than in Coramantien. Even though it seems like slavery is the opposite of royalty, the system of slavery is still an extension of royalty. It is another King that rules Surinam, though he is across the sea in England. In Coramantien, Oroonoko is a Prince himself and cannot escape the limits of royalty, but then lives on the other end of the spectrum, completely powerless, and of course, suffers other limits of royalty. Behn shows that any part of the royal system is limited and has great potential for harm. Royalty is a system that emphasizes the abandonment of individualism, which is the foil to the Descartes philosophies Watt mentions in his scholarship. Behn does not write about individualism, but her denouncement of the royal system cleared the way for Defoe to write his heroes. She set him up perfectly. I wish Watt had included this in his book because Defoe could not have written novels that expressed individualism without Behn's work.

Works Cited

Behn, Aphra, and Paul Salzman. *Oroonoko and Other Writings*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Watt, Ian. "Realism and the Novel Form." *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, University of California Press, Los Angeles , CA, 1957, pp. 9–34.