

# APHRA BEHN

PLAYWRIGHT. POET. NOVELIST



## Who was Aphra Behn?

Aphra Behn (~1640-1689) was an 17th century playwright, poet, and novelist, who was the first Englishwoman to earn a living from writing. Although records of her early life are relatively unclear, it is known she was born in Kent, most likely to Bartholomew Johnson, a barber, and Elizabeth Johnson, a wet-nurse. During her life, she worked as a political spy for King Charles II and wrote several plays, poems, and works of fiction. The most notable of these include 'Oroonoko', a story about an African slave possibly inspired by Behn's own travels, and 'The Rover', a play which was hugely popular with audiences at the time.

## Read the following extracts from Aphra Behn's novel, 'Oroonoko', in which her narrator describes the people and traditions of Surinam, the African colony in which the story is set:

We dealt with 'em with Beads of all Colours, Knives, Axes, Pins and Needles; which they us'd only as Tools to drill Holes with in their Ears, Noses and Lips, where they hang a great many little things; as long Beads, bits of Tin, Brass, or Silver, beat thin; and any shining Trincket...They thread these Beads also on long Cotton-threads, and make Girdles to tie their Aprons to, which come twenty times, or more, about the Waist; and then cross, like a Shoulder-belt, both ways, and round their Necks, Arms and Legs. This Adornment, with their long black Hair, and the Face painted in little Specks or Flowers here and there, makes 'em a wonderful Figure to behold. Some of the Beauties which indeed are so finely shap'd, as almost all are, and who have pretty Features, are very charming and novel; for they have all that is called Beauty, except the Colour...

...in the water, one wou'd think they were Gods of the Rivers, or Fellow-Citizens of the Deep; so rare an Art they have in Swimming, Diving, and almost Living in Water; by which they command the less swift Inhabitants of the Floors. And then for Shooting; what they cannot take, or reach with their Hands, they do with Arrows...So that they being, on all Occasions, very useful to us, we find it absolutely necessary to caress 'em as Friends, and not to treat 'em as Slaves; nor dare we do other, their Numbers so far surpassing ours in that *Continent*.

## Activities

There are still more than 100 isolated, uncontacted tribes in the world today. People from these communities do not interact or know much about the modern lifestyle, as they choose to stay separate from the rest of the world. Imagine you are a person from one of these tribes who arrives in England today, who is shocked to see what life is like in this unfamiliar place. **Write an account of your first impressions of the people and traditions you find here, as if you have never seen them.** *What clothes do people wear? What are their lives like? What strange new things (e.g. technology, food, language) do you notice?*

(Ext.) In the above extract, Aphra Behn's narrator states that the people of Surinam have "all that is called Beauty, except the Colour..." . Although many of the descriptions seem flattering, the narrator also suggests that their skin "Colour" is a negative trait. **Discuss with a partner how this compliment could also be seen as insulting or harmful, and consider how ideas about beauty and other cultures have changed for the better since the 17th century.**

**playwright** - a person who writes plays

**wet-nurse** - a woman who breast feeds and cares for another's child

**trincket** - old-fashioned word for 'trinket' (a small decorative object, or a piece of jewellery which is usually of low value)

**girdle** - a belt or cord worn round the waist

**adornment** - a thing which is used for decoration

**isolated/uncontacted tribes** - groups of people who live without contact with the rest of the world

## What is a colony?

A colony is a group of people from one country who build a settlement in another territory, or land. They claim the new land for the original country, and the original country keeps some control over the colony. The settlement itself is also called a colony. The practice of setting up colonies is called colonialism.

A collection of many colonies is called an empire.