The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African relates Equiano’s autobiographical life story and was one of the first slave narratives published. In it, he describes his experience being captured, sold into slavery, and eventually buying his own freedom. Equiano poses these questions to his readers: “O, ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice?” (3039). Equiano poses some valid questions about the nature of Christianity and how its tenets apply to the African slaves. These questions are meant to awaken the Christian sensibilities of the readers of the time and open their eyes to the evils of slavery. Equiano uses several examples to awaken these sensibilities, but his descriptions of the occult and savage nature of the Europeans who captured and sold him into slavery are especially vivid. Equiano uses references to spirits, magic, and savagery to awaken the minds of his readers and illustrate how the practice of slavery is evil and against Christian values.

Equiano establishes the foreignness of the European culture to him by describing everything he does not understand in terms of magic or spirits. Equiano relates, “There were cloths put upon the masts by the help of the ropes I saw, and then the vessel went on; and the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water when they liked in order to stop the

Commented [EG1]: Love this thesis. The opposition between paganism and Christianity is a great tension to isolate in Equiano’s work, as well as the opposition between savagery and decency.

Commented [EG2]: Excellent evidence.
vessel. I was exceedingly amazed at this account, and really thought they were spirits” (3036). Equiano has never before seen the sails on ships. Since he has no point of reference with which to understand this phenomenon, he attributes it to magic. This not only makes the European ships exotic, powerful, and unpredictable, but thus the European men who control these ships are also exotic, powerful, and unpredictable. Equiano further confirms this, saying, “I was now more persuaded than ever that I was in another world, and that every thing [sic] about me was magic” (3038). This causes Equiano to view anything they do or say with suspicion because anything that is magic or of the world of spirits is inherently unpredictable. Even the simplest things, such as the sails on the ships Equiano and his countrymen are on become magical and mysterious. Being in another world immediately puts someone at a disadvantage, and this is what happens to Equiano. It is impossible for him to assimilate or defend himself when he does not have anything with which to relate or understand.

Further, Equiano is not alone in his view that the ship and its crew are magical. He relates, “At last she came to an anchor in my sight, and when the anchor was let go, I and my countrymen who saw it were lost in astonishment to observe the vessel stop; and were now convinced it was done by magic” (3036). Equiano mentions that his countrymen also are convinced that the entire ship is magical. This establishes that most, if not all, of the captured Africans are not only physically confined, but mentally in submission to the European men. If they believe that the vessel is magical, as well as the men that control it, they are further enslaved by their own ignorance. The European men do not do anything to dispel the false assumptions that the slaves are making. Because most of these Europeans should be Christian, even if they are not fully practicing, those who associate with these slavers should have problems with convincing or letting others believe in magic and witchcraft. Besides the fact that Christians

Commented [EG3]: Yes; good.

Commented [EG4]: An interesting suggestion here about imprisonment via ignorance. In particular, I like how you note that the Europeans “do not do anything to dispel the false assumptions”; this is very key to your conclusions.
should not enslave their brethren, true Christians would want to enlighten their fellow beings, especially since witchcraft and magic are not acceptable to their doctrine. The slavers use the Africans’ own ignorance to subject the minds of the Africans that they have captured and are selling into slavery.

Equiano and his countrymen are convinced that the Europeans and their vessel are magical, but the actions of the European men are what convinces them that they are savage and hostile. Equiano relates, “Still I feared I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shewn [sic] towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves” (3036). The white European men are not just cruel, but savage. This is completely opposite of the love and brotherhood that Christianity should espouse. Equiano describes the inhumane way they treat the black Africans and also one another. Equiano specifically describes their treatment to highlight how very wrong these actions are. Equiano flips the tables and describes the Europeans as uncivilized and savage instead of the Africans, which were typically described as savages by the white Europeans. Thus, these specific word choices are purposeful on Equiano’s part in order to make a point with his white Christian readers.

Equiano goes a step further in flipping the stereotypes, and describes himself having the same fears that his Christian readers would have when being introduced to African culture. Equiano exclaims, “I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair” (3035). A very strong stereotype at the time was that black Africans were cannibals and inhumane savages. Equiano deliberately describes this very same fear when encountering the new and hostile white Europeans. The idea of cannibalism is just as horrific to him as it would be to any European. This makes him sympathetic to his readers, but
also gives them common ground. It shows that Equiano and the other Africans have the same basic fears that the Europeans have when encountering the unknown. This illustrates that the black Africans are just as human as the white Europeans that have captured them, and unlike popular belief, not unintelligent or animals. Since they are human beings, then they are worthy of Christian kindness and assistance, rather than imprisonment and slavery.

Finally, Equiano decides that not only are the white Europeans magical, but because of their savageness, they are evil spirits. Equiano shares, “I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me” (3035). Based on the environment in which he is in, where everything foreign seems magical and the strange white men are brutal savages, Equiano makes the logical assumption, that these people are “bad spirits.” This is important because it establishes that instead of being a holy and pious people, the Europeans, by their actions, have become evil. They are the ones that need a God and to be taught righteousness. They are the very evil that they proclaim to be against.

Olaudah Equiano uses references to magic, spirits, and savagery to illustrate the evils of slavery and appeal to the Christian cause. Equiano has moved beyond the ignorance and superstition that plagued him and his countrymen when he first was captured by slavers; however, he uses his knowledge of Christian feelings about magic and inherent fears about savagery and barbarism to purposefully show the evils of slavery in a way that would appeal and resonate with his readers. Equiano is extremely successful in his rhetoric, and this also demonstrates his intelligence and knowledge. Despite the prejudices and stereotypes of the time, Equiano’s *Interesting Narratives* shows how one man can assimilate into a culture well enough to use their own fears and prejudices to illustrate the dangers and evils of a practice that brings them economic gain. To truly persuade an audience, an individual needs to truly be able to
understand and think like them, which is what Equiano has masterfully done in his *Interesting Narrative*. While it would still take a lot more effort to abolish the slave trade, Equiano’s knowledge and rhetorical skill showcase the wrongs of slavery and give a glimpse into one man’s journey from slavery to freedom.

Commented [EG9]: Yes, I think this is a nice way of putting it. If you wanted to continue researching this kind of argument, you should look into conversion narratives that were pretty popular in the 18th century. Not only does Olaudah write in the English language, but he seems to follow the suit of many conversion narratives about Christians coming to a knowledge of God and Christ’s Atonement. In light of your argument, I think this would be further evidence in your assertions that Equiano is going out of his way to think and act like white Europeans in order to reverse roles with them and accuse them of savagery. Very cool.
Works Cited