

## Le Roi Jones's Dutchman as a Revolutionary Play

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### Abstract

It is about a play by LeRoi Jones, later known as Amiri Baraka, in which he presents an image of American society showing an encounter between a black man and a white woman who meet in a train. When the play begins we are introduced to the two characters who indulge in a discussion that develops into a fight that ends with the death of the man who is killed by the white woman. After that the body of the bourgeois black man is got rid of by the persons in the wagon as they are ordered by the killer.

The aim of the study is to show that the play was intended to be a revolutionary play that aimed at agitating the black people against the injustice practiced by the whitemen in American society at the time.

### LeRoi Jones's Dutchman as a Revolutionary play.

"I see art as a weapon. and a weapon of revolution."  
LeRoi Jones

### I. LeRoi Jones's Revolutionary Theater

LeRoi Jones (1934-), a poet, dramatist, essayist, political activist, and music critic, was the founder of the Black Arts Repertory Theater. He is one of the most influential and controversial American writers of the last two centuries. Jones's writings are usually political in nature dealing with race relations, Black Nationalism, Marxism, and contemporary events. He was

committed to the issues of racial identity and social injustice with the aim of provoking social change. He believes that the theater should be a weapon in the struggle against social injustice and the inhumanity of the whites in their racial treatment of the blacks. Many factors helped establishing Jones's political, social, and racial views including his experience as a black American citizen living in a racial society, the assassination of Malcolm X, the black Muslim leader who had a great influence on Jones and whose death in 1965 led to a drastic change in his life, and the black riots of the mid 1960s. In his plays, Jones tried to embody the black American identity and to encourage the black American people to change in order to be able to face the challenges and difficult conditions in which they lived. "Jones", as Theodore R. Hudson puts it "sees his contemporary social, cultural, and political institutions as destructive of (black) man, so he would have man destroy, change, or control these institutions so that they, in his opinion, serve man rather than have man serve them".<sup>1</sup>

Jones encouraged the black dramatists to write plays that deal with the history and culture of the black American people in order to remind them of their cultural values and to make them feel that they are a distinct nation within the American white dominant nation. He also urged them to write about the black people's suffering and racial oppression at the hands of the whites and to produce their plays in the streets to stimulate revolution and change. According to him the Black Arts Repertory Theater should present "an art that is recognizably Afro-American and revolutionary"<sup>3</sup>.

When he established his Repertory Theater, Jones claimed in the manifesto of the theater: "The Revolutionary Theater must expose! Show up the insides of the humans, look into black skulls. White men will lower before this theater because it hates them because they have been trained to hate. The Revolutionary Theater must hate them for hating." Jones even advocated violence against racial white individuals who were Responsible for the oppression and suffering of the black people, if

Violence is necessary to achieve economic, social, and human justice. Thus, his intention was to utilize this theater as a weapon for black liberation:

" They will all [the whites] die because of this [oppression]. The Revolutionary Theater must teach them their deaths. It must crack their faces open to the mad cries of the poor. The Revolutionary Theater must accuse and attack anything that can be accused and attacked. It must accuse and attack because it is a theater of victims. It looks at the sky with the victims' eyes, and moves the victims to look at the strength in their minds and their bodies. It is a political theater. a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on. We will scream and cry. murder. run through the streets in agony. if it means some soul will be moved to actual life understanding of what the world is. and what it ought to be. This is a theater of assault. The play that will spilt the heaven for us will be called the destruction of Americas<sup>5</sup>."

Thus, Jones's theater is a politically-oriented revolutionary institution aiming at effecting social, economic, and political changes among its black American audience.

## II. LeRoi Jones's Dutchman as a Revolutionary Play

Dutchman was first produced in New York at the Cherry Lane Theater in 1964. It proved an immediate success and won the Obie Award for the best Off-Broadway play. Still, the play was received with controversy from the white American audiences because it was regarded as an anti-white racial play that might provoke racial prejudice against the whites<sup>6</sup>.

Dutchman can be described as a political allegory dealing with racial relations during Jones's times. It depicts a racial

encounter between a sadistic seductive white woman, Lula, and a middle class young blackman, Clay, who meet on a train in New York. At the beginning of their journey, Lula tries to seduce Clay, and the two characters engage in a flirtatious conversation. Then Lula insults Clay reminding him of his origin as a black man and a slave. and his attempt to be part of the white society (or what is known in America as assimilation or racial integration)'. Clay, who at first accepts these racial insults passively, violently reacts against Lula when he forces her on her seat, slaps her, and threatens to kill her. As he bends over to take his books and tries to leave, Lula aggressively stabs him while the other passengers watch the violent scene silently. She orders them to get rid of Clay's dead body and to get off the train at the next stop. The play ends as it begins as Lula approaches another young black man who is obviously her next target of seduction and humiliation.

Dutchman was derived from the playwright's experience as a student at Rutgers University and then the African American Howard University.

This taught him a lot about racial discrimination and the black people's attempt to imitate the white people in order to escape feeling as a minor race in their racial community. Historically speaking the play is important because it echoes the racist struggle of the 1960s America when it was written and produced. The black people were either to accept integration in this white-dominated society and endure inhuman and unjust treatment or to revolt and face violence and inevitable deaths<sup>8</sup>.

The play is also significant because of its portrayal of a challenging image of black American identity. The American audience were accustomed to see the black people as primitive African savages<sup>9</sup>, or as characters employed to entertain the whites by singing and dancing or by other menial means of entertainment. In *Blues People* Jones discusses the image of the Negro as a "wild savage" and a comic figure for white American people. He also

comments on the development of this image in American literature saying:

**"As the image of the Negro in America was given more basic human qualities, e.g., the ability to feel pain, perhaps the only consistent way of justifying what had been done to him- now that he had reached what can be called a post-bestial stage-was to demonstrate the ridiculousness of his inability to act as a "normal" human being. American Negroes were much funnier than Africans<sup>10</sup>."**

What is new in the play is Clay's presentation as an educated man, though naive and harmless at the beginning of the play, while the white woman is portrayed as being racially violent and oppressive in this brief encounter.

She seems more savage than the pacifist Clay.

The title of the play, Dutchman, is chosen to emphasize the major theme in the play- racial discrimination. Many critics<sup>11</sup> agree that the title bears mythical and allegorical implications. The Dutch were the first to bring slaves in vessels to America. The famous legend of the Flying Dutchman tells of a ship cursed to sail the seas eternally and absurdly without being able to find a final destination or a safe harbor. In the play, the train represents the cursed ship moving in an endless voyage. Lula stands for the cursed crew of the ship and, in the play, she represents the white Americans who because of their inhuman treatment of the blacks were doomed to face a fate similar to that of the Dutch who were responsible for the blacks' suffering and their servitude. Jones himself says that "Lula is America, or at least its spirit"<sup>12</sup>. The passengers, in the train, represent the passive individuals in the society who accept racial prejudice and violence and even participate in social injustice and dehumanization. This is obvious in Lula's commands to them after killing Clay and their passive

obedience: "Get this man off me! Hurry, now! }The others come and drag Clay's body down the aisle]. Open the door and throw his body out. [They throw him off]. And all of you get off at the next stop"<sup>13</sup>. This shows that racial discrimination is the dominant factor in the society, and Lula is very powerful only because of her white race.

Throughout the play, Lula is critical of Clay's assimilative nature and even says that he is dying because of his assimilation: "What right do you have to be wearing a three-button suit and striped tie?" she asks. "Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harvard"( Dutchman, p.2306) .She says that she knows many things about him because he is the "well-known type" of the racially and socially ambitious black lot. She is able to recognize his common type through his bourgeois suit, style of speech, and pretentious manners. She rebukes him saying that his white-fashioned suit and adoption of white people's manners and life style is a mask that will not conceal his black identity. She even tries to reawake him from his self-denial sarcastically:

" LULA. [Mocking him. in wild dance] Be cool. Be cool. That's all you know . . . shaking that wild root cream-oil on your knotty head. Jackets buttoning up to your chin, so full of white man's words. Christ. God. Get up and scream at these people. Like scream meaningless shit in these hopeless faces. Clay. Clay, you go! I0 break out. Don'! xii there dying the way they want you to die. Get up (Dutchman. p.231 1, Italics mine). "

She also tells him that those whom he tries to imitate are his racial offenders: "Boy, those narrow-shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed by"(Dutchman. p.2306). At the beginning, Clay seems so willing to humiliate himself and bear Lula's insulting racial remarks just to fulfill his own physical desires and the dream of becoming a member of the white community through his assimilation and imitation of the whites'

ways of life. This is clear in Lula's speeches and Clays passive reactions: "I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger. ¶Mock seriousness, then she howls with laughter. Clay is stunned but after initial reaction, he quickly tries to appreciate the humor. Lula almost shrieks] (Dutchman, *ibid.*). Henry C. Lacey indicates that assimilation is a major idea that the play tackles, and it is the hero's tragic flaw: Dutchman is "concerned with..... the black man's desire to meld into the oppressive structure of America. Clay, in opposition to his deepest desires, chooses a life of self-denial and is killed"<sup>14</sup>. Although Clay's death at the end is symbolic of the oppressed blacks silenced by their persecutors, this death is only on the physical level for Clay is already a dead man spiritually when the play opens because he kills the black identity inside him by confirming to white values. Through her racial discourse, Lula clearly remarks that Clay is a murderer because he kills his black identity through his attempt to imitate the whites:

LULA. You're a murderer. Clay. and you know it. [Her voice darkening with significance] You know goddamn well what I mean.

CLAY. I do? (Dutchman, p.2307)

Clay believes that through his racial assimilation his color and identity will be worthless. He struggles with his own identity. Still, his ultimate violent reaction is a justified rage in the face of Lula's racist oppression. In his long climatic speech defending his black identity, Clay reveals "that violence will come in time for the black people are trying to rationalize their struggle and through their education and intellectual maturity they will be able to understand the "great intellectual legacy of the white man" (Dutchman, p.2313), and consequently, destroy the white dominant oppressive nation. Therefore, through their subsequent intellectual manipulation of the whites, the black can understand the way they think and rationalize murder as the whites have done. This will

make them able to turn the table downwards by having the superiority over the whites after centuries of oppression and suffering.

Despite his position as a victim in the play, Clay is the most important of the two main characters. Lula, though dominant and triumphant at the end, is presented as a flat one-dimensional character, while Clay is the most developed character because he is able to react against the racial and social injustice and to make a decision about himself refusing to remain the common middle class black American man and expressing himself as a true black rebellious individual. When the other young black passenger appears at the end of the play, the spectators might not expect him to face a tragic end similar to Clay's. Clay is not a stereotypical figure, but he is an exception. Jones knew through his experience as a black American man that most of the black young men during that time preferred assimilation and would accept Lula's seductive invitation and endure her impudence and humiliating speeches passively. Hence, through Clay Jones wants to give a lesson. Even if tempted at the beginning, Clay is disillusioned and is certain at the end that he cannot be a member of a society that will never accept him as an equal. Therefore, he chooses to be a black revolutionary man than being a member of this society: "If I'm a middle class fake white man, let me be. And let me be in the way that I want Safe with my words, and no deaths, and clean. hard thoughts, urging me to new conquests" (Dutchman, *ibid.*). Clay's reaction at the end is a verbal revolt against Lula's inhumanity and racism. In this final speech one can sense Jones's nationalist and revolutionary tendency. By making Clay revolt, Jones intends to encourage his audience to react actively and break the racial yoke put around their necks by the white masters. J Shankeswari notes that when Clay speaks at the end, it is "as though the whole generation of black suffering has occurred in him" <sup>15</sup>.



Lula (or white America) is victorious, at the end of the play, only because the black people cannot unite and revolt to face the challenge and danger in which they have been trapped for centuries. Describing Lula's role in the play and her struggle with Clay, Nita N. Kumar states:

" Lula is aggressive and menacing and emerges as the face of an orchestrated. destructive white power. Lula's authority is supreme and unchallenged. Clay's act of assertion is an offense. a sin for which the only retribution is death. Lula. and all that she represents. becomes the reason as well as the agent of the destruction of Clay and his world<sup>16</sup>. "

Clay does not survive because he does not realize the danger surrounding him only too late. He is an individual who violates the rules of race in his society, disregarding many of the consequences that such a decision can bring on him. Through this unbalanced situation, Jones wants to warn the black American people and to encourage them to act before it is too late to change anything. So, in Clay. Jones intends to give his black audience a model. By seeing Clay's tragic fate. they can learn from his mistakes and revolt against oppression. Jones even sets himself as an example when he divorced his white Jewish wife and underwent an intellectual ,national. and religious change<sup>17</sup>. Jiton Sharmayne Davidson relates Clay's murder to Jones's life when she says that Clay's murder is symbolic of Jones's need to get rid of his assimilative life: "When Lula kills Clay, it is almost as if Baraka kills that part of himself which he can no longer live with"<sup>18</sup>. In fact, The play reflects some autobiographical elements represented by the life of the playwright in his early Bohemian stage of artistic development before undergoing a change in his views when he divorced his white wife and became a Muslim changing his name from LeRoi Jones to Imamu (a title meaning spiritual leader that he soon dropped) Amiri Baraka as a mark of his new black American identity. It portrays the conflict that lurks inside the dramatist before divorcing his wife which he expresses in this racial encounter

between Clay and Lula<sup>19</sup>. Jones regretted marrying a white woman and later remorsefully confessed: "I was guilty for having lived down- town for so long with a white wife"<sup>20</sup>. Therefore. the play is autobiographical. and it marks a turning point and a transitional revolution in the life of the playwright. Of the play's autobiographical nature J Shankeswari writes:

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" To a certain extent, Clay resembles LeRoi Jones himself. Both are middle-class poets who in varying degrees articulate disillusionment with their assimilationist lifestyles. The play can be read as a trial of Baraka's assimilated period. in which he condemns himself through Lula's words and actions. The playwright symbolically kills off his passive "white" self through the fictional account and is reborn in real life <sup>21</sup>. "

The play ends as it begins. At the end one may think that the train will continue to move endlessly, and Lula will continue to seduce and. perhaps, kill black men until the black realize their problems and react properly to be able to survive and live freely. By making Lula triumphant and Clay a victim. It is concluded that Jones aims at raising his black audience's sympathy with the black characters represented by Clay and anger against this oppressive white woman, who represents the racist white characters represented by the women character Lula Americans, and consequently, urging his audience into revolution and action. He is aware that real change can only be achieved by revolution and not by passive resistance. and finds in this the sole solution to the problems of living in a racial community.

## Notes

1. Theodore R. Hudson, From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka

(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1973), pp.179-80.

2. Komozi Woodard, "A Nation Wit/tin a Notion." Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

3. Jones as quoted by Williams J. Harris, The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), p.xxi.

4. LeRoi Jones. "The Revolutionary Theater", in Home: Social Essays (New York: William Morrison & Co., 1966), pp.210-215 .

5. Ibid.

6. C. W. E. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, Vol.3, Beyond Broadway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.375.

7. J. Shankeswari clarifies the meaning of assimilation saying: The modern myth of black assimilation has been practiced by many of the a black middle class in America. It consists of adopting the values and norms of the oppressing society through white education. The black people continually strive to accomplish what can never be achieved- to be completely accepted into the white society They are conscious of their positions and also the contradictions inherent in it. On the one hand. they try to accept America on white terms and on the other hand to accept their own identity.

J Shankeswari, "Assimilation V/S Identity: A Study on Amiri Baraka's (LeRoi Jones) Dutchman", Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies, Volume II Issue 4, (Winter, 2010), P. 1 65.

8. Gerald M. Berkowitz, American Drama of the Twentieth Century (London: Longman, 1992), p.146.

9. **Devon Boan, Author and Audience in African American Literature**(New York: Peter Lang Publishing Company. 2002). p.34.
10. **LeRoi Jones as quoted in Julian C. Rice, "Leroi Jones's "Dutchman": A Reading", Contemporary Literature, Vol.12, No.1 (Winter, 1971), pp.46-47.**
11. **See for example Hugh Nelson, "LeRoi Jones's Dutchman: A Brief -Ride on a Doomed Ship", Educational Theatre Journal. Vol.20, No.1 )March, 1968), pp.53-58. See also William W. Demastes, ed., Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition (Tuscaloosa. AL: University of Alabama Press, 1996), p.226. And Joann Cerrito and Laurie DiMauro, eds.. Modern American Literature. Vol.1 (Detroit: St. James Press, 1999), p.424.**
12. **Cites in Tyrone Williams, ed., Masterplots II: African American Literature (Carlifonia: Salem Press Inc., 2009), p.536.**
13. **LeRoi Jones, Dutchman, in The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol. E, American Literature Since 1945, ed., Nina Baym (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), p.2313. All subsequent references to the play is from this edition and will be parenthetically documented within the text.**
14. **Henry C. Lacey, To Raise, Destroy. and Create." The Poetry, Drama. and Fiction of Imamu Amiri Baraka /Le Roi Jones), (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1981), p.72.**
15. **J Shankeswari, P.170.**
16. **Nita N. Kumar, "The Logic of Retribution: Amiri Baraka's Dutchman", African American Review, Vol. 37, No. 2/3, Amiri Baraka Issue (Summer - Autumn, 2003), pp.277-278.**
17. **This radical development in the playwrights life is accompanied by a similar artistic and thematic maturity in his plays. Catherine Daniels Hurst argues that Jones passed three stages of development throughout his career as a dramatist:**

Baraka's career as a playwright falls into three categories: his concern with aesthetic and universal themes of personal identity, self-actualization. And appearance versus reality; his involvement with national identity and self-determination: and his move toward communism and its emphasis on' economic equality.

Catherine Daniels Hurst, Dictionary of Literary Biography, Part 1, Vol.7, Twentieth Century American Dramatists (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1981). p.52. Dutchman was written at the end of his early stage of development as a writer. but it reflects the spirit of the second stage, and it combines both the qualities of the first and second stage of his literary maturity.□

18. Jiton Sharmayne Davidson, "Sometimes Funny, but Most Times Deadly Serious: Amiri Baraka as a Political Artist", African American Review, Vol.37, No.2/3, Amiri Baraka Issue (Summer- Autumn, 2003), p.402.

19. See Bigsby, p.397.

A. Quoted in Huda B. Al-Mutrafi, "The Call for Black Consciousness: A Study of Four of Baraka's Plays" (An Unpublished M. Thesis, Umm Al Qura University , Makkah, 2005), p.8.

20. J Shankeswari, P.172.

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### المخلص

تدور الدرسة حول مسرحيه للكاتب لس روس جونز الّذي عرف فيما بعد باسم اميرى بركه ، والتي يقدم فيها صوره للمجتمع الامريكى . ففى هذّ المسرحيه يعرض مواجهه بين رجل اسود وامراه بيچا و يلتقيان فى قكار. فى بدايه المسرحيه تظهر الشخصيتان وهما فى حاله نقاش يتكور الى نزاع جسدى ينتهى بموت الرجل الاسود على يد المراه البيچا و . بعد ذلك يتم التخلص من جسد الرجل الاسود البورجوازي من قبل الاشخاص الموجودين فى عربه القكار وذلك بناوا على امر من السيده القاتله . تهدف هذّ الدرسة الى ايبات أن الفرع من المسرحيه هو ان تكون مسرحيه پوريه تهدف الى اباره الامريكان السود جد القلم الّذي كان يمارسه الامريكان البيچ فى ذلك الوقت .

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