

The Dilemma of the Black Man in LeRoi Jones' Play *Dutchman*

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LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka), was born in 1934 in New Jersey to a middle class family. He attended Rutgers University then he transferred to receive his degree from Howard University in 1954. He had an M.A. in Philosophy at Columbia and an M.A. in German literature at the New School for social Research.

Jones is one of the most influential African-American writers of the 20th century. He is a prolific writer who has worked across a range of genres: drama, poetry, novel, jazz operas and nonfiction.

He published his book of poetry *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961) and the *Dead Lecturer* (1964). Jones co-edited poetry journals *Yugen* and *Floating Bear*. His book *Blues People* (1963) traced the social and political development of African American music. He opened the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/ School in 1965. That institution became a model for the development of Black Cultural Centers in the sixties. Jones won several awards: Whitney Fellowships, 1962, Lonview Award, and Guggenheim Fellowship (1965-66).

The assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 marked a radical shift in his values. It led to his final break with the white culture. Jones was the founder of the National Black Political Assembly.

Jones has taught at Yale, Columbia and the State University of New York. He is widely celebrated as the father of the Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The movement is

...a cultural nationalist movement that has waged an anti-colonial struggle in the United States and the Caribbean since 1965¹.

Jones was a social activist who revolted against racism, national oppression, colonialism and neocolonialism. He believed that

The theatre must be an institution for bringing change.... Black theatre must be a school for teaching high morality, for inspiring black people to move, for Self- Determination, Self-Respect and Self – Defense²

Jones' play *Dutchman* (1964), won the Obie Award (off Broadway) for (1963-64). The action takes place when subway train stops at an underground station. Clay is a young black poet on his way to a friend's party. He is wearing a buttoned-down collar and suit. He surrenders his black identity. He adopts the dress, speech and manners of the white bourgeois society. His aspirations enslave him.

Lula, an attractive white woman boards the train and introduces herself. Clay responds to her deliberate smile with a nervous grin. He is relieved when she leaves. Yet Lula comes back eating an apple and she sits beside him.

Clay is astonished as she seems to know a great deal about him. He says "Hey, you still haven't told me how you know so much about me."³ She says that he is merely a well-known type, the black man who repudiates his racial identity to adopt a white culture. Clay assumes

the appearance and manners of the whites. Lula asks him to invite her to the party he is going to.

...we'll pretend...that you are free of your own history. And I am free of my history. We'll pretend that we are both anonymous beauties smashing along through the city's entrails.⁴

Lula tries to seduce Clay. He rejects her advances politely. She insults, embarrasses and humiliates him. She becomes aggressive towards Clay. She blames him for repudiating his identity.

Boy, those narrow-shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed by....What right do you have to be wearing a three-button suit and a stupid tie? Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harvard.⁵

Clay is provoked. His reaction is violent. He slaps her to shut her up.

Clay: Now you shut the hell up. Just shut up. You don't know what you are talking about. You don't know anything. So just keep your stupid mouth closed.

Lula: You're afraid of white people. And your father was Uncle Tom Big Lip.⁶

In rage of anger, Clay reveals to Lula his hatred for her and all the whites. He tells her that his white man's three-button suit is a disguise to keep him from cutting the white man's throat:

And I sit here, In this buttoned-up suit, to keep myself from cutting all your throats.⁷

Western rationalism that was preached to black people must be suppressed. Still he retaliates saying that he knows blacks who achieve sanity by murdering whites-including Lula:

They'll murder you, and have very rational explanations. Very much like your own. They'll cut your throats, and drag you out to the edge of your cities.⁸

Clay prefers to be:

...a fool. Insane. Safe with my words and no deaths, and clean hard thoughts, urging me to new conquest. My people. They don't need me to claim them.⁹

Jones partly believes that the blacks are responsible for their victimization.

Clay who deserts his disguise and language as a would-be white man becomes a dangerous, powerful rebel. Lula stabs him to death with a small knife. She orders the other passengers who are her allies representing a racist society, to get rid of his body: "Open the door and throw his body out."¹⁰ Lula escapes punishment and she seeks out another prey. She makes an entry in her notebook. The victimization will go on as she will confront another black man who carries books and boards the train.

Lula carries paper books which symbolize the written culture of the white man. Her sunglasses cover her eyes and she pushes them on her forehead. They represent her disguise of friendship which will disappear entirely at the end of the play. Donald P. Costello says that Lula

Is, of course, America, especially, white liberal America who interferes with the black man, who professes friendship as it murders.¹¹

A message is conveyed to show the agonized tense life of a black man in a white man's world and to warn the blacks against the genocidal attitudes of the whites. There is cultural-racial injustice. The play stresses the conflict between two hostile visions. The white culture is guilty of oppressing and exploiting the black minority. This challenges the possibility of whites and blacks to be equal.

Both Clay and Lula are restless. Clay doesn't find security in the white man's world. Instead, he loses his identity. Lula is cursed and condemned to a symbolic role as an executioner who has to chase her black victims and kill them successively.

The play detects the dilemma of black men beneath the surface of conventional, social, and racial relations to reveal the hidden reality.

Allan Lewis believes that

The play is an apostrophe to hate, reviling those who pretend friendship only to serve as executioner, and castigating the white for dragging the Negro down to the animal level.¹²

Dutchman reflects a significant aspect of American thought in the nineteen-sixties and the nineteen-seventies. It is understood in light of social, political symbolic and mythical complications. Jones suggests multiple meanings. The play deals with motives from Edenic myth. Jones uses religious allusion successfully as he gives a new idea to the universal theme of the fall of man. There is a Biblical reference to Adam and Eve. "Clay" is the material out of which Adam was made. The protagonist's name is Clay. Lula is the Twentieth century Eve who enters the subway train eating an apple. She offers one to Clay tempting him to another fall from Grace. Lula and Clay become forbidden fruit for each other. He is the forbidden black man and she is the forbidden white woman. The apple symbolizes the promises offered by the white society to the black man. It is the forbidden fruit of truth of self-knowledge, of good and evil bringing death in the Biblical parallel. Lula "offers the apple of knowledge which in this case is the brutal exposure of Clay's latent will to rebel".¹³

Adam sinned as he accepted the forbidden fruit offered to him by Eve. The consequence was dismissal from Heaven. Clay is an innocent Adam figure tempted to the world of sin and corruption by Eve. He accepts the fruit and he manifests his knowledge of the forbidden truth. Thus he is dismissed from the subway, the perverted garden of Eden. It is the chaotic New York subway due to racism in American society.

Jones' interest in the *Flying Dutchman* curse syndrome is detected in the play. Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* (1843)¹⁴ is about a curse imposed by an angry Deity on a ship to sail the seas for ever. The captain will be redeemed only through the love of a faithful woman. He is granted few days every seven years to search for such a woman. Finally he finds Senta who leaps into her death from a cliff to prove her loyalty. The curse is lifted when the ship sinks as Senta and the Dutchman fly up from the sea.

In the play the subway is a doomed ship under the curse, the doors open and shut mechanically. The silent passengers resemble the ghosts that walked the *Flying Dutchman's* decks. Like the captain, Clay suffers as he lives under a curse of a white society. The curse will be lifted if Clay sacrifices his identity and adopts the materialistic ideas of the Whites. He ignores his black identity as he assimilates himself into white culture. He is robbed of his manhood by a perverted society. Jones says that " *Dutchman* is about the difficulty of becoming a man in America".¹⁵

Clay wants to have an awareness of his position in society that judges him by the color of his skin. In Wagner's version, the Dutchman is released and he is united with his lover. Lula could release Clay if her love for him is true. Yet it is difficult to have a normal love relationship between a white woman and a black man. Jones believes that such redeeming love is a failure. Instead, there is a slave-master relationship, hostility and racial hatred.

Lula cannot be free from her heritage of oppression. She represents the colonizer whose reactions

... are mere emblems of the materialistic technological inducements which a Western capitalist and patriarchal society holds out to men of color in its drive to subjugate them.¹⁶

Clay whose self is repressed in that stifling society goes underground to preserve its integrity. Jones exposes the guilt ridden American white society and the anger of the American black society. He says that "... an acceptance of the idea of the superiority of the white man ... is another aspect of the slave mentality".¹⁷ The black man is responsible for his death if he nurtures the white man's master complex. Black nationalism leads to black survival. Clay tries to recover his lost African culture with the growing sense of black power and anger. Being provoked, he challenges Lula expressing his authentic self.

It is the black man's responsibility to preserve himself and to prevent white society from converting its racism into overt criminality.¹⁸

Clay is a victim and Lula is the white oppressor, the voice of white America who passes judgment on him. She acts a composite role as a witness, judge and jury. Clay is found guilty and is executed.

Jones asserts black pride. He is worried about the position of the black writer in a white society. William W. Demastes believes that Jones ... broke onto the American theatre scene with *Dutchman*... displaying the revolutionary fervor of an African American who possessed the growing racial self-esteem that would be a touchstone of the 1960s.¹⁹

Notes

- 1 David Krasner, ed. *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*. (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2006), p:263
- 2 Andrzej Ceynowa, "The Dramatic Structure of *Dutchman*," *Black Theatre Issue*, No.1 (Spring, 1983): p.15
- 3 LeRoi Jones, *Dutchman* in Syvon Barnet, Morton Berman and William Burto, eds., *Types of Drama: Plays and Essays*. (Illinois Scott, Foresome and Compny), 1989, p:622.
- 4 Ibid., p.623.
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Ibid.p625
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Ibid 627
- 9 Ibid
- 10 Ibid
- 11 Herman J. Weiland, ed., *Insight IV Analyses of Modern British and American Drama*, (Frankfurt am Main: Hirschgraben- Verlag, 1979), p.213
- 12 Allan Lewis, *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre*. New York: Crown Publishers INC., 1966, p.254.
- 13 Sandra L. Richards, "Negative Forces and Positive Non-Entities: Images of Women in the Dramas of Amiri Baraka," *Insurgency in American Theatre*, (May, 1982), p. 235.

- 14 Encyclopaedia International, 1964, ed., s.v. "The Flying Dutchman".
- 15 Willene P. Taylor, " The Fall of Man Theme in Imamu Amiri Baraka's (LeRoi Jones') *Dutchman*." *Negro American Literature Forum*, Vol. 7 No.4, (Winter, 1973): 128.
- 16 Sandra L. Richards, " Negative Forces and Positive Non-Entities: Images of Women in the Dramas of Amiri Baraka," *Insurgency in American Theatre*, (May, 1982), p. 235
- 17 Julian C Rice. "LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman*: A Reading." *Contemporary Literature*, Vol.12, No.1 (Winter, 1971): 49.
- 18 Ibid., p. 59.
- 19 William W. Demastes, ed., *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition*. (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1996), p.218.

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