Dutchman

By

Amiri Baraka

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The story: A sinister, neurotic, lascivious white girl, **Lula**, lures to his doom, a young **black man**, **Clay** - a stranger she picks up in the subway. The man, who, at first, sees no reason to resist the girl's advances, realizes too late that he is being used by her. He then drops his so-called "white" disguise, and launches into a counter-attack against the girl, and at whites in general, leading to its haunting, shocking conclusion.

To say much more would be to spoil it for those who haven't seen it. Interpretations vary, so whatever you see in it, is what you see in it. Although I think Baraka's intentions should be clear. It's been at the center of many a discussion I've been involved in over the years, since I first saw it a decade ago.

Originally a 1964 off-Broadway play which both Freeman Jr. and Knight also starred in, Dutchman (the stage version) initially played to primarily white audiences, until Baraka moved it to a **Harlem** theater that he founded, in order to reach, and to educate his intended black audience. It was the last play produced by Baraka under his birth name, **Everett** **LeRoi Jones**.

At the time, Jones/Baraka was in the process of divorcing his white Jewish wife and embracing **Black Nationalism**. It certainly shows.

Freeman Jr's performance was lauded. The play itself won an **Obie Award**.

Dutchman would later be adapted for the screen, with Freeman Jr. and Knight reprising their roles - a film we've featured on this site on more than one occasion, and will likely feature again in the future.

In Amiri Baraka's play *The Dutchman*, Baraka utilizes metaphor, imagery, and irony to portray society as a machine, the strongest of which is Baraka's emphasis on the subway car as a metaphor for the perpetual forward motion and inescapability of racist, bigoted societal norms. Clay's death proves that a powerlessness to break away from the social machine is fatal. This complex metaphor, among his other compelling, eloquent devices, is an example of Baraka's own standard set forth in his essay, "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature.'" Baraka urges African American writers to rise out of the rut of mediocrity to produce "high art [...] that must reflect the experiences of the human being, the emotional predicament of the man, as he exists, in the defined world of his being" Baraka challenges the black community to produce art that portrays the human condition, and provides *The Dutchman* as a paradigm.

In "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature'", Baraka details the faults of African American literature to date, and describes his vision of what it should look like. ***"It must be produced from the legitimate emotional resources of the soul in the world. It can never be produced by evading these resources"*** (167). This becomes an outline for Baraka's standards and devices in his own work, making use of his struggle and experiences to convey a message to the world. This mission is evident even as early as the title, **The Dutchman, conveying a powerful connotation of the slave ship. The title, recalling slavery in the modern world, fits another of Baraka's standards:** "Africanisms do exist in Negro culture, but they have been so translated and transmuted by the American experience that they have become an integral part of that experience" (169). ***By including The Dutchman in his literary work, both in the sense of the actual play and the cultural memory of the slave ship, Baraka makes his oppression a part of the American experience as a member of the community of high artists.***

Baraka further outlines his goals for black writing, noting that "the most successful fiction of most Negro writing is in its emotional content" (169). Indeed, each device that Baraka uses in *The Dutchman* is emotionally charged. An example of this is the metaphor of the subway car as a social machine. Once Clay has gotten on the subway, he can't get off until he is dead. This is particularly well illustrated by the image of the passengers assisting Lula in discarding Clay's body at the end of the play. "Sorry is the rightest thing you've said. 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. [... *Very soon a young Negro of about twenty comes into the coach, with a couple of books under his arm. He sits a few seats in back of Lula. When he is seated she turns and gives him a long slow look. He looks up from the book and drops the book on his lap"*(37).

There are several themes at work in this scene. First, there is the emotional shock of Clay's murder, which serves to make the reader invest real, personal emotion in the play. This adds to the realism of the play. Second***, the identity of Lula proves Clay's social position and rank. As a woman of thirty, with no sexual virtue who is mentally ill, Lula is the picture of what white society has deemed invaluable and powerless. However, when opposed to Clay, a young man with an education, the traditional would-be image of success and normalcy, ironically Lula becomes all powerful just because of her race.*** Lula's absolute command of the other passengers shows Baraka's stance that race is the ultimate determining factor in society. Third, the closing stage directions convey a sense of hopelessness through the ever-moving sustainability of the subway car. When the next young man enters the car, it is clear to the reader that he is Lula's next victim, and so the social machine forges on, destroying everyone in its wake.

Imagery is an important means of conveyance for Baraka. Lula is an Eve character throughout the play, constantly eating apples and tempting Clay with her overtly sexual advances. In the beginning of the play, Clay didn't try to make any advances toward Lula; in fact, he found his attraction to her inappropriate: "*The man looks idly up, until he sees a woman's face staring at him through the window; when it realizes that the man has noticed the face, it begins very premeditatedly to smile. The man smiles too, for a moment, without a trace of self-consciousness. Almost an instinctive though undesirable response"* (4***). Very quickly, the reader sees that social convention plays a large part in Clay's life, inhibiting him and informing his instincts. Lula is white, the "forbidden fruit", and she will tempt him with it.***

"You want this? [...] Eating apples together is always the first step. Or walking up uninhabited Seventh Avenue in the twenties on the weekends. [*Bites and giggles, glancing at Clay and speaking in loose sing-song]* [...] Would you like to get involved with me, Mister Man?" (11). Lula tempts him with her sexuality, but also with inhibition. Baraka includes the "Seventh Avenue" line as a metaphor to convey what each might gain from this experience. Lula would feel young again by being with Clay, using him to feel like she is in her "twenties" again. Clay would gain the freedom of inhibition, as is exemplified by Baraka's use of the word, "uninhabited" as a play on words with "uninhibited". Baraka foreshadows Clay's downfall with the apple. "[*Trying to be as flippant as Lula, whacking happily at the apple]* Sure. Why not? A beautiful woman like you. Huh, I'd be a fool not to" (11). Clay is not yet aware of Lula's toxic nature because he is blinded by her beauty.

The image of the conductor is also significant. He is the image of how white Americans traditionally view black Americans. "There is Uncle Tom. [...] Let the white man hump his ol' mama, and he jes' shuffle off in the woods and hide his gentle gray head" (32). The conductor embodies this image. "[*Then an old Negro conductor comes into the car, doing a sort of restrained soft shoe, and half mumbling the words of some song.* [...] *Lula turns to stare at him and follows his movements down the aisle. The conductor tips his hat when he reaches her seat, and continues out the car]*" (38).

Baraka also uses irony to show the absurdity of stereotypes. Throughout the play, Lula claims that she knows Clay, knows his type, even though they have just met. "'You look like you live in New Jersey with your parents and are trying to grow a beard. That's what.' [...] 'How'd you know all that? Huh? Really, I mean about Jersey... and even the beard. I met you before?'" (8-9). Indeed, Lula does know things about Clay, and this is because up until the end of the play, Clay is the mediocre middle class depiction of black America that Baraka so disdains. Clay is passive for the entire play, letting Lula call him names without protest, and insult him without any consequence. "'In college I thought I was Baudelaire. But I've slowed down since.' '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]*" (19).

Clay is, at this point, everything Baraka stands against. He accepts his assigned place in the world, and does nothing to combat it. However, when Clay stands up for himself in his monologue at the end of the play, he becomes Baraka's paradigm. "Thus, the Negro writer if he wanted to tap his legitimate cultural tradition should have done it by utilizing the entire spectrum of the American experience from the point of view of the emotional history of the black man in this country: as its victim and its chronicler" (169). Clay has been the victim throughout the play, taking Lula's bashes in stride. Now, he has become the chronicler. "You don't know anything except what's there for you to see. An act. Lies. Device. Not the pure heart, the pumping black heart. You don't ever know that. [...] And I'm the great would-be poet. Yes. That's right! Poet. Some kind of bastard literature... All it needs is a simple knife thrust. Just let me bleed you, you loud whore, and one poem vanished" (34-35).

***Here, Lula's stereotype of Clay is finally proven wrong, both to her and to the reader. "If I'm a middle class fake white man, let me be. And let me be in the way that I want. [...] I'd rather be a fool. Insane. Safe with my words, and no deaths, and clean, hard thoughts, urging me to new conquests" (34-35). Baraka shows that even when Clay was sucked in by the Lula's sexuality, he never fooled himself by thinking she, or white society, would accept him.*** "He is an American, capable of identifying with the fantastic cultural ingredients of his society, but he is also, forever, outside that culture, an invisible strength within it, an observer" (171). This is Clay, personified. But his actions could never go without consequence, and rendered Clay "just another dead American" (171).

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