

**Research Paper**

# The Complicated Interfaces of Symbolism and Myth in *Dutchman*

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**Approaching *Dutchman* as either a symbolic or a religious allegory, critics have given little attention to the play's revolutionary dimensions and its ethno-political motifs which were integral to LeRoi Jones' evolving black aesthetics in the sixties. This presentation will discuss the religious and symbolic motifs of the play and link them with its sociopolitical background as well as the racial conflict between whites and blacks in America. It will also clarify the revolutionary themes of *Dutchman* which brought about the evolution of Jones' black aesthetics of resistance in the sixties. Moreover, the paper will analyze Jones' anti-white and anti-middle class Negro attitudes as reflected in *Dutchman* in order to locate the play within the black literature of resistance.**

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**Key Words:** Racism; myth; negro; conflict; symbolism; violence; middle-class; integration.

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## CRITICAL REVIEW

In an article called "My Christ in *Dutchman*", George Adams argues that Lula, the white female protagonist of the play, is a modern Eve who offers Clay, a middle class Negro and the new Adam, both concrete "apples" and symbolic fruit "her body and self-knowledge" in an attempt to draw him away from Eden, "America". According to this view, Clay accepts both gifts and reveals knowledge of the forbidden truth which is his real black self. In doing so, Clay oversteps the limits of a racial society through showing his real self (which is threatening to white America), thus, he is dismissed out of Eden. Adams also argues that the black young man who appears in the subway car by the end of the play "will rise as a black messiah, to redeem both the tempter and the tempted"(57). Adams' argument is not solid simply because it contradicts Jones' black aesthetics

of resistance which shaped the author's literary and critical works in the sixties. Adam's view also contradicts the action of the play which emphasizes the impossibility of reconciliation between whites and blacks under the condition of psychotic racism in America.

Therefore, it is not Eden (America) from which Lula seeks to tempt Clay, as Adams assumes, but she rather seeks to tempt him from behind the safe assimilationist facade under which middle class Negroes have sought refuge. This is done intentionally by the dramatist who criticizes middle class Negroes for having no strategy of socio-political protest against white racism. Other critics have interpreted *Dutchman* as a mytho-symbolic allegory which draws its raw material from the Flying Dutchman myth. Furthermore, Lloyd Brown argues that Lula is the Flying Dutchman

compelled by the curse of racism and historical slavery to engage in a series of sadistic actions which reflects "the recurrent guilt, fascination and hatred with which whites view blacks in the society"(144).

Within the symbolic structure of the play, Lula is not only the Flying Dutchman as Brown claims but she is a symbol of white America as well.

In a related context, Le Roi Jones argues: Lula represents something and perhaps that thing is America or at least its spirit. You remember America, don't you, where there are unsolved murders happening before your eyes on television ... how crazy, extreme, neurotic, does that sound? Lula, for all her alleged insanity, just barely reflects the insanity of this hideous place (187-188). The "hideous place" is apparently America with all its racial values, which aim at keeping the black nation inferior.

### Symbolism

In *Dutchman*, the apples, the subway car and the knife are symbolically manipulated to reinforce the racial motifs, which the dramatist seeks to emphasize. In the beginning of the play, Lula offers Clay the first apple claiming that "eating apples together is always the first step"(11). The apples, as traditional symbol of temptation, represent the false promises of equality and integration whites offer to blacks in order to keep them submissive. Moreover, the subway motif is symbolically connected with the white/black conflict. In the subway car, Lula and Clay, white and black, are rushing headlong throughout darkness, literally and symbolically seeing nothing on the way to vague destination. This symbol obviously underlines the danger of maintaining the conditions of racism in America.

Finally, Jones attempts a symbolic sexual union between Clay and Lula through the use of the knife motif and through the emphasis on the verbal ejaculation and exhaustion that occur as a result of Clay's outburst of black rage by the end of the play. Nevertheless, such a union between Clay and Lula can never exist in what Larry Neal calls "the twisted psyche of white America" (34). Neal's point is relevant because in Jones' world a normal relation between whites and blacks is impossible. Ironically, the symbolic, sexual union between Clay and Lula leads to the victimization and murder of Clay.

A great deal of the criticism on *Dutchman* reveals that some critics approach the play from

a Euro-American perspective while ignoring the black revolutionary issues which operate in the play. This kind of criticism is irrelevant because it dissociates the play from its black literary tradition and attempts to link it either with Christianity, the white man's religion, or with white literature and mythology (the myth of the Flying Dutchman).

A close analysis of Jones' literary essays and the text of the play reveals that *Dutchman* fulfils the purposes of the revolutionary black theatre in the sixties in his essay, "The Revolutionary Theater":

Our theater will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are brothers of victims ... and what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they will find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught (Home: 215).

Apparently, Jones' argument indicates that his theatre obviously operates from a purely black perspective. It is a theatre of black resistance which emphasizes the necessity of using violence when blacks have to confront white racism.

### Textual Analysis of *Dutchman*

The action of *Dutchman* also emphasizes that the play was written from a black perspective and that Jones was conscious of the racial conflict in the United States in the sixties. The action of the play is supposed to take place in a New York subway car in summertime. In the beginning of the play, Lula, a seductive white woman enters the train, then she smiles to Clay, a black young man who is sitting there, in an attempt to establish a dialogue with him. Her first statement, however, is rather shocking: "I'd turned around and saw you staring through that window down the vicinity of my ass and legs" (1). Clay replies: "I admit I was looking in your direction. But the rest of that weight is yours"(7).

The word "weight" in Clay's verbal response is significant as it signifies the psychic weight of the white man's obsession with sexual guilt. According to the play's sexual structure, Lula is trying to impose her perverted white-puritan ethic of sexuality on Clay in order to make him feel guilty because he is looking at her. The racial theme is obviously established on the sexual paradigm from the very beginning of the

play in an attempt, on the part of the author, to emphasize the crippling impact of white sexuality on the black psyche which is a part and parcel of the racial superstructure of the play. The action of *Dutchman* affirms that Clay, a representative of the Negro bourgeoisie, is a passive character who is entirely manipulated by Lula, "white America".

Clay's weakness is due to his deliberate attempt to seek integration with white America's mainstream culture which is a cardinal sin in Jones' doctrine because such an attempt is destructive to black humanity as it leads to acts of self-hate on the part of black people. Lula, on the other hand, is not convinced that Clay really seeks integration but she is sure that he seeks personal interests. Consequently, Lula mocks Clay, the way white America mocks black people:

You look like you've been trying to grow a beard.  
That's exactly what you look. You look like you live in New Jersey with your parents and are trying to grow a beard ... you look like you've been reading Chinese poetry and drinking lukewarm sugarless tea (8).

The notion of "drinking lukewarm sugarless tea" is an external symbol which reveals Clay as an imitator of whites. Such an imitation of the oppressor's cultural behavior is forbidden in Jones' world because it is anti-self and anti-black.

The emasculation process of black people in white America is suggested in terms of the main situation in the play, a domineering woman who takes the role of an aggressor in establishing a sexual relation: "Can get you involved ... boy. Get us involved. Um huh. (mock seriously) Would you like to get involved with me. Mister Man"(11). This extended metaphor focuses on the passive posture which blacks have been obliged to adopt by a society which robs them of their manhood. In "Le Roi Jones Talking", Jones states: "To white America, the Negro is a shadowy abstraction reflecting the sterility of its own needs. They can think of Negroes only with abstract non-human concepts"(Home: 186).

Lula, like white America, does not know the Negro except as a type. In *Dutchman*, she said to Clay: "I told you I didn't know anything about you ... you're a well-known type"(12). In this sense, Lula appears as an archetypal figure who represents psycho-sexual and socio-historical attitudes within a racial society. Lula also represents aspects of behavior that result from such racial attitudes. Such a stereotypical dimension is a calculated aspect rather than a mere defect because it arises from the perception and behavior of a character who

has chosen to limit her humanity within the confines of racial and sexual stereotyping that has been molded by social conventions. Lula is obviously acting out of certain pre-determined roles, instead of trying to communicate with Clay as a human being, which is a feature of racial societies.

Furthermore, Clay's aspirations to be assimilated by white society are frustrated by Lula's mocking reminder of his past as a slave. Lula is fully aware that Clay, as middle class Negro is hiding himself under a facade of imitation whiteness:

What've you got that jacket and tie on in all this heat for? And why're you wearing a jacket and tie like that? Did your people ever burn witches or start revolutions over the price of tea? 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-buttoned suit and striped tie? Your grandfather was a slave..... he didn't go to Harvard (18).

Clay's response to these racial insults is rather cold which displays Clay as a modern Uncle Tom who is molded by the white man and inevitably reveals the slave mentality of the Negro bourgeoisie.

The persistence of the slave mentality beyond the years of literal slavery is a hideous attitude which springs from an acceptance of the idea of the superiority of the white man. Clay as a middle class Negro aspires to completely lose himself within the culture and social order of the white man, the ex-master. Jones rejects this attitude completely and argues in "What does Non-violence mean?", that "to enter into the mainstream of American society, the Negro must lose all identity as a Negro, as a carrier of possible dissent, and when the time comes for this white society to die, he will be asked to die with it"(145).

There is no surprise then that *Dutchman* emphasizes the necessity of black separatism as a way of maintaining the authentic black culture because integration with the hostile white culture -though impossible- will lead to the death of black history and values. In *Dutchman*, Jones demonstrates the hazards of being non-violent while living in a white, racial society. To Jones, non-violence as a theory of social and political demeanor concerning American Negroes means simply a continuation of the status quo. Thus, he introduces the character of Clay as a typical middle class Negro who isolates himself from blacks by showing no tendency to resist the white racial oppression. Lula, herself, is fully aware of such a fact.

She addresses Clay saying: "I bet you never once thought you were a black Nigger" and he replies: "that's right". College, I thought I was Baudelaire"(19). According to Jones, the Negro middle class intellectual is living in the illusion that he/she is the most intelligent person among black literati. Despite claiming intellectual superiority, Clay is completely unconscious of Lula's cynical comments and he swallows her bait and carries on with his stupid talk about himself. He tells her that he writes poetry and that his mother was a "Republican."

In addition to that, Clay, in hopes of being assimilated, displays his devotion to white America which is a lie. Lula, the shrewd white woman, knows that Clay is not saying the truth. She told him: "You'll say to me, very close to my face, many, many times, you'll say, even whisper, that you love me ... and you'll be lying"(20). Clay claims that he cannot lie about "something like that" but Lula insists on her opinion: "Huh, it's the only kind of thing you will lie about"(21).

Finally, Lula utters one of the most important statements in the entire play: "You're a murder, Clay, and you know it". This statement implies that Clay, through consciously assimilating himself into white culture has murdered his true black self which makes it easy for Lula to kill him at the end of the play.

Afterwards, Clay and Lula start talking about going together to a certain party after which Lula is supposed to give herself to Clay. Lula completely manipulates Clay by playing on his sexual fantasies:

We'll pretend the people cannot see you. That is, the citizens and 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 (21)

Ironically Clay can never free himself from his history, the heritage of slavery, and Lula cannot be free from her history, the history of oppression. However, Clay is blind to all these facts and he only dreams of the coming party after which he is supposed to sleep with the seductive Lula.

Within the symbolic fabric of the play, the party stands for the white man's hollow promises of integration which are offered to blacks to keep them quiet and consequently maintain white superiority. Even the party itself will keep the psychic slavery of the black man: "And everyone will pretend they don't know your name, and then .... (Lula pauses) later, when they have to, they'll claim a friendship that denies your sterling character"(23).

Afterwards, the drama suggests that the black man will be responsible for his death if he gives himself up to whites without being aware of the killing

instinct engraved on the white man's psyche. According to Julian Rice, the black man will be victimized if "he continues to nurture the white man's master complex"(52), a prediction which will be fulfilled through Clay's murder.

Clay has obviously paved the way to his death by keeping his tormentor alive and by ignoring the compulsive, relentless urge of the murderer attitude in the white mind which makes him (Clay) comparable with "all those Jewish poets from Yonkers, who are too serious to be psychoanalyzed"(28). The references to the Jews signify the possible fate in store for black people if they remain as passive as Clay. Near the climax of the play (Clay's violent reaction to Lula's insulting comments), Lula accuses Clay of being "an escaped Nigger." Then she breaks into a hysterical obscene dance insisting "that is how the blues was born".

When Clay refuses to join Lula in the dirty dance, she becomes angry and insults him:

Clay, Clay, you middle class black bastard. Forget your social working mother for a few seconds and let's knock stomachs. Clay, you liver-lipped white man. You would-be Christian. You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man (31).

It is obvious that the white indifference to the humanity of blacks and to the essence of their culture is epitomized by Lula's superficial interpretation of the blues as mere belly-rub music.

She also assumes that black history and black music evolved out of big plantations in the slave-holding South. Surprisingly, Clay opposes Lula for the first time telling her that her concept of black history is wrong and prejudiced. Lula becomes angry because Clay manifests himself for a moment as a rebel. The rebellion of Clay is menacing to Lula as it may destroy her racial stereotypical myths which are essential to her racial superiority. Clay, in other words, is dramatically lured into a relation which makes him expose his real self which in turn brings about his murder.

After hearing the racial insults from Lula, Clay becomes angry but Lula increases his rage by telling him that he is afraid of white people and that his father "was Uncle Tom Big Lip" (33). Clay bursts into a long monologue in which he insults Lula and all white people. The violence of Clay's speech comes to a peak when he tells Lula that:

You don't have any sense, Lula, nor

feelings either. I could murder you now. Such a tiny ugly throat. I could squeeze it flat, and watch you turn blue, on a humble. For dull kicks. And all these weak-faced ofays squatting around here, staring over their papers at me. Murder them too. Even if they expected it. That man there ... I could rip that Times right out of his hand, as skinny and middle-classed as I am, I could rip that paper out of his hand and just as easily rip out his throat. It takes great effort. For what? To kill you soft idiots? you don't understand anything but luxury (33).

### Dramatic Metamorphosis

Clay's speech, obviously, reveals Jones' own consciousness because almost all the literary works of the author in the mid-sixties encouraged the adoption of violence as self-defense which was the only way of black survival in the United States whereas any other alternative would have led to black genocide.

In his violent speech, Clay accuses Lula of being an ignorant bohemian who knows everything in the way Euro-American civilization knows: "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"(34). Clay adds that he is setting in the subway car in his buttoned-up suit as a way of controlling his violence: " I set here, in this buttoned-up suit, to keep myself from cutting all your throats"(34).

Afterwards, Clay confirms to Lula that "murder, just murder, would make us (blacks) all sane" (35) because the only thing that could cure the neurosis of blacks is the murder of white racism. He even threatens Lula that black people will kill her:

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 so the flesh can fall away from your bones, in sanitary isolation (36).

After showing his verbal violence, Clay is suddenly metamorphosed in the sense that he comes back to his real nature as a passive, middle-class Negro. He tells Lula: "Ahhh. Shit. But who needs it? (he means violence) I'd rather be a fool. Insane. Safe with my words and no deaths" (36).

The real folly of Clay comes not from speaking violently but from telling white America (Lula)

that he will be non-violent. By telling Lula that he cannot resist her racism, Clay makes himself like the Jews referred to earlier in the play, a passive, non-violent sacrifice to white psychosis. Jones puts Clay in a highly critical situation by giving him two alternatives: either to conceal his blackness and continue the insanity of living half-hidden in a white world or to redeem his insanity by asserting his blackness through violence and murder which are inevitable in Jones' theater once whites and blacks confront each other.

Clay chooses the first possibility and he is consequently victimized. After finishing his talk with Lula, Clay attempts to collect his things and leave the subway car, but Lula stabs him twice with a knife and she orders the rest of the white passengers to throw his body out of the train.

The act of murder is significant because Lula kills Clay though she is sure that he will not do any harm to her or to whites in general. This signifies that even if blacks remain peaceful, the murderous impulse inside the white man's subconscious will make him victimize blacks in order to maintain white superiority.

After the murder of Clay, a young black man enters the subway car. He was carrying books, an indication of his intellectual tendencies. Lula looks at him the way she did with Clay in an attempt to repeat the same calculated routine.

### CONCLUSION

Critics have misinterpreted the final episode jumping to conclusions which are contradictory with Jones' dramatic and aesthetic intentions. For example, Donald Costello argues that "the young black man will have to live in accordance with the perverted values of Lula" (436). Costello's view is irrelevant because the black young man is completely different from Clay that is why the black conductor in the subway car comes to greet him. The conductor, on the other hand, does not come to meet Clay, neither does he appear in the subway car during Clay's presence. In terms of the play's historical significance, the young black man represents the black intellectuals of the sixties who revolted against white racism and resisted all forms of racial oppression.

Consequently, *Dutchman* becomes a literary expression of Jones' evolving aesthetics of black resistance in the sixties. The resistance motif and the racial issues which characterize

the play could be considered the starting point of Jones' career as an activist, black writer, a shift which comes in response to the racial violence of the sixties in the United States. *Dutchman* not only reveals Jones' growing racial awareness but also highlights the author's separatist aesthetics and calls attention to the ethno-political nature of his theater.

The significance of *Dutchman*, according to Yugendernath, "emerges not from the play's ability to stand out as a representative black play but as a significant human drama exploring the cultural psyche of the blacks as well as of the whites and evolving the elemental patterns of human instincts and reason"(199). *Dutchman* is equally a significant play because it appeared in the mid-sixties, a critical period in Jones' personal, ideological and literary career since it witnessed the author's divorce from his white wife, his abandonment of the white Beat Movement in Greenwich Village and his subsequent move to Harlem City where he gave up his slave name (Le Roi Jones) and became Imamu Amiri Baraka.

There is some evidence then that Jones wrote *Dutchman* from a purely black perspective showing his awareness of the black aesthetics of resistance which became the major characteristic of his works in the mid and late sixties.

Moreover, the complex interweaving of ethno-political themes with the mytho-symbolic and

religious motifs gives more depth to the dramatist's vision and affirms beyond all doubts that *Dutchman* is a revolutionary work of the highest caliber, and its creator is a writer of superior talents who possesses the ability to suggest a multiplicity of meanings in a simple and direct way.

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