
UNDERSTANDING RACIAL TACTICS IN AMIRI BARAKA'S DUTCHMAN

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Abstract:

Amiri Baraka's Dutchman stands as a prominent work in African American theater, compellingly exploring the complexities of racial dynamics and power struggles in mid-20th century America. This paper aims to dissect the racial tactics employed within the play, shedding light on the intricate interactions between the characters, Clay and Lula, and the broader societal implications they represent. Through a detailed analysis of dialogue, symbolism, and character development, the research uncovers how Baraka portrays the manipulation and exploitation of racial tensions. The play's setting in a confined subway car serves as a microcosm of the larger racial battlefield, where psychological and physical confrontations reveal deep-seated prejudices and the pervasive nature of systemic racism. This study also delves into the historical context of the Civil Rights Movement, drawing parallels between the play's narrative and the real-life racial struggles of the era. By understanding these racial tactics, this paper contributes to a greater comprehension of Baraka's critique of societal norms and the enduring relevance of Dutchman in contemporary discussions on race and identity.

Key Word: African American Theatre

Amiri Baraka, born Everett LeRoi Jones on October 7, 1934, in Newark, New Jersey, was a prolific African-American writer, poet, playwright, and political activist. Renowned for his outspoken views on race and politics, Baraka's work often confronted societal injustices and challenged the stereotype. He was a prominent figure in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, a cultural and artistic movement aimed at empowering Black people and promoting Black cultural production.

One of Baraka's most famous plays, *Dutchman*, premiered in 1964 and remains a critical piece of American theater. Set in a New York City subway car, the play revolves around an intense and symbolic encounter between Clay, a young Black man, and Lula, a white woman.

Dutchman is a one-act play by Amiri Baraka, set in a New York City subway car that explores racial tensions in America. The play centers on two characters: Clay, a young Black man, and Lula, a white woman. As the play unfolds, Lula initiates a conversation with Clay, quickly becoming flirtatious and provocatively engaging him in dialogue. Her comments and

actions soon reveal racial issues, as she makes stereotypical and derogatory remarks about Clay's race, background, and identity.

Despite Clay's attempts to remain composed and courteous, Lula's provocations explore, and she continuously mocks and challenges him, highlighting racial prejudices and attempting to undermine his sense of self. The tension between them builds until Clay, unable to contain his anger, confronts Lula about her behavior and the systemic racism he endures as a Black man in America. He enthusiastically criticizes Lula's manipulative tactics and the broader societal oppression.

In a climactic and shocking moment, Lula violently stabs Clay, killing him. The silent passengers in the subway car, who had been passive observers, assist her in disposing of his body by throwing it off the train. The play concludes with Lula preparing to target another Black man who boards the train, suggesting the cyclical and ongoing nature of racial violence and manipulation.

Dutchman is a powerful and intense drama that examines the pervasive and destructive nature of racism in American society. Baraka uses the interactions between Clay and Lula to highlight deep-seated racial tensions and prejudices, showcasing how these issues manifest in everyday encounters. Through Lula's behavior and Clay's response, the play starkly portrays the challenges faced by Black individuals in a racially charged environment and critiques the societal structures that perpetuate these dynamics.

Lula's manipulation of Clay illustrates systemic racism. She uses her racial and gender power to dominate Clay, alternating between flirtation and aggression. This behavior destabilizes Clay, emphasizing the perilous nature of racial interactions for Black individuals and symbolizing broader societal mechanisms that uphold racial inequality. The climactic violence, where Lula stabs Clay, represents historical and ongoing violence against Black people. The silent passengers, who assist in disposing of Clay's body, symbolize society's complicity in systemic violence. Their passive participation reflects how societal structures perpetuate racial violence. Lula's actions and the passengers' reactions highlight that such violence and prejudice are embedded within America's social, cultural, and political systems. The play's confined subway setting underscores these pervasive issues, affecting everyone. Clay's psychological tension and his eventual outburst reveal the mental and emotional toll of living in a racist society, with his murder serving as a grim reminder of the brutal consequences for Black individuals who confront their oppression.

In *Dutchman*, Baraka not only presents a narrative of racial tension and conflict but also critiques the structures that allow such racism to thrive. Through the intense and ultimately tragic interaction between Clay and Lula, the play lays bare the destructive power of racism and challenges the audience to confront the harsh realities of racial prejudice and violence in American society.

Clay: "You great liberated whore! You fuck some black man, and right away you're an expert on black people. What a lotta shit that is. The only thing you know is that you come if he bangs you hard enough. And that's all." (*Dutchman*, P-09)

Lula: "Ten little niggers sitting on a limb, but none of them ever looked like him. [Points to CLAY, returns toward the seat, with her hands extended for him to rise and dance with her] And that's how blues was born. Yes. Come on, Clay. Let's do the nasty. Rub bellies. Rub bellies." (Dutchman, PP-11)

Clay: "You don't ever know that. And I sit here in this buttoned-up suit to keep myself from cutting all your throats. I mean wantonly." (Dutchman, PP-13)¹

Lula's interactions with Clay are laced with aggression and condescension, reflecting the systemic oppression African Americans face. Her flirtation quickly turns into psychological and emotional abuse, mirroring the daily micro aggressions and larger systemic violence black individuals endure. This violence is both physical and symbolic, with Lula's verbal assaults and racial slurs exemplifying societal dehumanization.

The climax of the play, where Lula stabs Clay, is a brutal culmination of her psychological torment. This act represents the extreme measures of control and dominance exerted by white society over black individuals, symbolizing the brutal consequences of systemic racism. The silent passengers on the subway, who observe the conflict and help dispose of Clay's body, symbolize society's complicity in this violence, reflecting how societal structures enable and supports racial violence.

Lula's manipulation of Clay is a form of psychological violence. She taunts and provokes him, forcing him to confront his repressed anger and frustration. This reflects the psychological oppression African Americans experience, as they navigate a society that constantly undermines their identity and worth. Clay's initial attempts to maintain composure and civility in the face of Lula's provocations reflect the internalized oppression experienced by many African Americans. His eruption of suppressed rage, followed by his violent silencing, underscores the psychological toll of living in a racist society.

The play's ending, with the arrival of another black man, suggests a cyclical pattern of violence and oppression, implying that systemic violence is ongoing and inescapable. The subway setting symbolizes the inescapable nature of these structures, trapping individuals in a confined space where power dynamics play out starkly and brutally.

Through the violent interactions between Lula and Clay, Baraka critiques the broader societal structures that perpetuate racial violence and oppression. The play calls for societal change to address the root causes of racial violence and oppression, highlighting the dehumanizing effects of racism on Clay's identity and dignity. Written during the 1960s, a period of intense racial tensions and civil rights struggles, Dutchman reflects the real-life experiences of African Americans and serves as a powerful commentary on the racial injustices of the era.

Baraka's portrayal of violence and oppression in Dutchman is a call for awareness and action. By exposing the brutal realities of racial violence, Baraka urges audiences to confront systemic racism and work towards meaningful change, reminding them of the ongoing struggle for racial justice and the need to address deep-rooted issues of violence and oppression.

The power of *Dutchman* stemmed from its message and the shocking but intelligent manner in which it was conveyed. Ironically, the play's dramatic power became for some critics, particularly some perverse white critics, a sign of its dishonesty. After all, a Negro playwright who could write in such a power full-fashioned and have his play produced could not really harbor such rage against whites and white racism. If white Americans had been as racist as Jones's play described them, how could we explain the existence of Jones, the writer? And how do we explain his marriage to a white woman?² In Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*, the theme of identity is central, revealing the struggles faced by African Americans in a racially oppressive society. The protagonist, Clay grapples with his identity, attempting to assimilate into white society by adopting behaviors and appearances that conform to its expectations. This is reflected in his dress, speech, and attempts to engage with Lula, a white woman. However, Clay's efforts are met with Lula's condescension and provocation, exposing the futility and pain of assimilation.

Lula represents the oppressive force of white society, manipulating and controlling Black identity. She mocks Clay's attempts to fit in, highlighting his race and undermining his efforts. Her seduction and subsequent violence symbolize the constant threat and control exerted by white society over Black individuals, suggesting a cyclical nature of racial oppression.

The confined subway setting symbolizes the inescapable struggle with racial identity. Lula's offering of an apple, and Clay's rejection of it, symbolizes rejecting false identities imposed by white society. In his monologue, Clay expresses his frustration with the oppressive expectations, asserting his true identity and rejecting the imposed one. However, his murder underscores the perilous nature of asserting one's true identity in a racist society, highlighting the systemic oppression that violently suppresses Black identity.

Through Clay and Lula, Baraka explores the destructive impact of assimilation, the manipulation of identity, and the struggle to maintain an authentic self in a hostile environment. *Dutchman* masterfully portrays the internal and external conflicts arising from living in a racially oppressive society. The dialogues between Lula and Clay Clarify the same:

LULA: I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger. [Mock serious then she howls with laughter. CLAY is stunned but after initial reaction, he quickly tries to appreciate the humor.

LULA: almost shrieks] A black Baudelaire.

CLAY: That's right.

LULA: Boy, are you corny. I take back what I said before. Everything you say is not wrong. It's perfect. You should be on television.

CLAY: You act like you're on television already.

LULA: That's because I'm an actress. (*Dutchman*-PP-5) ³

In Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*, cultural alienation is a profound theme, illustrating the disconnection African Americans experience from their cultural roots and the dominant white society. Clay, the African American protagonist, is caught between these worlds. His attempts to assimilate into white society—by adopting its norms and behaviors—come at the cost of his authentic self, highlighting his cultural alienation. Clay distances himself from stereotypical Black identity markers to survive in a predominantly white society, leading to a loss of cultural connection and pride. Lula, representing white society, mocks Clay's assimilation efforts and forces him to confront his cultural alienation, ultimately leading to his violent suppression. This cyclical struggle of cultural alienation is central to the narrative, portraying the painful realities of living in a society that demands assimilation while rejecting those who try to conform. As Jerry Gafio Watts states:

All the code words are here. Nyerere's romanticization of indigenous African socialism persuaded Baraka to gradually add a progressive economic agenda to his cultural nationalism. Using Nyerere's ideas, Baraka could confront issues of class and economic inequality without having to resort to the "white ideas" of men such as Marx, Lenin, or Trotsky. According to Nyerere, to be truly African was to be socialist. Increasingly, however, Baraka recognized that Nyerere's claims about the "natural" socialism of traditional African societies did not explain the lack of socialism in contemporary Africa. Although he never expressed his doubts openly, Baraka realized that Nyerere's celebration of traditional African society was insufficient for understanding the dynamics of the African Diasporas and particularly the economic issues facing Blacks ⁴

Seduction and manipulation are key themes that drive the plot and highlight the power dynamics between Lula and Clay. Lula uses seduction to engage with Clay, employing provocative and flirtatious behavior to create intimacy and vulnerability. This tactic is not merely for sexual attraction but serves a deeper purpose of manipulation. Lula controls the conversation, steers topics, and uses psychological tactics, alternating between flattery and insult to destabilize Clay. Her actions are deeply tied to racial provocation, making Clay confront the racial tensions he faces. The climax occurs when Lula stabs Clay, symbolizing the violent suppression of Black voices and the systemic power imbalance. As Jerry Gafio Watts states:

Dutchman is set in a subway train where the two main characters, Lula and Clay, meet. During their talk Lula seduces and then mocks Clay for accepting the standards of the white society and

suppressing his black identity. Clay brushes her off declaring that he does not need her approval. Infuriated, Lula stabs Clay to death, then orders the subway passengers – who were passively watching – to throw the body off the train and they comply. Another black man boards the train at the next stop and Lula repeats the same pattern of seduction. The play is an extended metaphor of the flirtatious temptation and the subsequent murder of Clay, a twenty-year-old black American, by Lula, a thirty-year-old white woman. The words of Lula – as a representative of white Americans – symbolically act out the different patterns of history; her lines are contrasted with Clay's innocent and naïve responses that reflect his slave mentality. The metaphorical subway journey taken by Lula, Clay and the silent passengers mirrors a racist society speeding toward genocide (symbolized by the murder of Clay). The play, thus, denotes the genocidal nature of white races and urges black men to stand against any form of abuse, symbolized by Lula's masochistic act. ⁵

Amiri Baraka's "Dutchman" is a powerful critique of racial dynamics in American society, highlighting systemic oppression faced by Black individuals. Through the intense interaction between Clay and Lula, Baraka reveals the manipulative nature of racism. Lula's behavior, shifting between charm and hostility, reflects societal tactics to control Black people. The play's violent climax, with Lula murdering Clay, symbolizes widespread racial violence. This act represents not just an isolated incident but systemic aggression against Black bodies. "Dutchman" challenges audiences to recognize and dismantle these oppressive structures, urging a reflection on racism's persistent issues and the need for systemic change for true social justice.

References and Notes:

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