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Symbolically Speaking

Nearly every syllable of Amiri Baraka's 1964 play, *Dutchman*, oozes with symbolism. *Dutchman* reads as an allegory against the dangers of Black assimilationism in America. Assimilation being the taking on of characteristics of an oppressing group by those who are being oppressed. The title of the work, the setting of the action, and the characters themselves all function as symbolic elements which bring into sharp relief the problematic roles that both White and Black races play while trying to co-exist together.

The title of the play foreshadows the fact that the work will build up to a tragically fateful ending. There exists a relatively well-known myth about a blasphemous Dutch sea captain, the Flying Dutchman, and his ship. This unwise man arrogantly tempted fate, or God, by sailing through an immense storm near the Cape of Good Hope off the coast of Africa and as punishment was destined to sail the seas always to bring nothing but death to those who encounter the vessel. Taking this myth into account the reader is being forewarned that death is on its way and it does, in fact, come and seize the life of Clay who is one of the two protagonists. As well, the Dutch were historically imperialistic and also took part in the slave trade, which resulted in the presence of Black men and women in America so this title works on multiple levels.

The setting of the short, two-scene play also carries significance. The opening lines which frame the story imbue the subway in which the action takes place as a thing "heaped in modern myth" (Baraka 1946). Perhaps the myth that the author is referring to is that of a positive outcome regarding Black assimilation into White society. The subway

itself as a physical thing is a mode of mechanical transportation that is both fast and powerful. However, the physical location of it is underground and thus literally creates a lower station of existence. It functions in the darkness of the earth rather than up in the air and sunlight and is referred to as the “flying underbelly of the city,” which is a seedy and unpleasant image (Baraka 1946). It is fitting that a second-class citizen, such as Clay is as a Black man in this society, should be riding the subway as it too is in a way second-class.

Also with the subway imagery comes a sense of movement and travel as Clay and Lula speed along the tracks making various stops and heading toward their destination. They are moving towards a party; they are moving towards the start of a sexual relationship. There is a momentary sense of future possibility, but it is a seemingly false sense of movement and future, though, because a subway is confined to a track and follows a set pattern of travel in a circular pattern on a daily basis. The subway is going nowhere fast and in actuality so is Clay as long as he participates in a system that demands of him to be lesser than he could be solely due to his skin tone. At one point in the conversation between the two characters Clay reveals he wished to be a “Black Baudelaire” (Baraka 1952) while he was in school. Baudelaire, a White 19th Century French poet, should not be a Black man’s aspiration as he will never be White or be accepted the same way as White artists are. In the realm of this play Clay should strive to be a strong Black artist, not a second-class copycat to a dead White man. Thankfully however, in contemporary society role-models and aspirations have no color boundaries like in the 1960’s world of the *Dutchman*.

It is shown through this setting that one needs true movement to grow and it is not found in this subway or in the setting of the White American society if you are Black. The

cyclical nature of the place is fitting to the plot of the play. Lula will complete her murderous cycle with Clay and then turn to a new young Black man that has entered the train and begin it over again with this new ‘victim’ who may or may not choose assimilation and thus will be tempted by her.

These two main characters in the *Dutchman* are representational of White society and the typical Black man. Clay and Lula are extreme stereotypes. Lula is presented as a thirty year old White woman with red hair in a “skimpy” summer dress. The color red, her hair color, has ties to many negative emotions and objects such as evil, the devil, anger, hatred, and is also the color of blood. Her sexuality is on full display in the story and draws Clay in even as her behavior repels him. Lula is seductive and beautiful as well as antagonizing and repulsive and this makes her the embodiment of White society in the eyes of Black men according to the author’s point of view. Conversely, Clay is meek, able to be made extremely uncomfortable yet still engaged and intrigued by Lula. He sees something worthwhile in her and yet she is his downfall as White America is Black America’s downfall.

The relationship between the two also parallels that of Adam and Eve in certain respects. Elements of the play such as the temptation of forbidden fruit, the fall of Man due to a Woman’s actions, and Clay’s name all have Biblical ties. This harkens back to Genesis 2 and 3:

And Jehovah God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul... And Jehovah God planted a garden eastward, in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed... And Jehovah God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die... And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil.

Clay, a kind of dust or earth, is what Adam was created out of as the first man according to the Bible. The character being named Clay implies that he is a symbol for all Black men. Clay is also an easily moldable substance that any artist with the inclination and skill can shape into whatever he or she wishes. So then it follows that Lula, who enters the play with a never-ending bag of apples, is a symbol of the serpent rather than Eve despite her gender and beauty. She is also an artist looking for buttons to press, while speaking to Clay she is actually trying to dig beneath his well kept façade of a meek white-washed Black man. She devours the apples while trying to repeatedly feed them to Clay while she alternately entices and insults him. So Clay is both symbolic of Adam as well as Eve for Lula, the serpent, is trying to feed him her forbidden fruit which is literally the apple and metaphorically knowledge of White society. His eating of the fruit and going along with the fantasy that she feeds him about their future sexual relationship leads him further into Black assimilation. Clay was not tricked into assimilation; he choose it freely because it was appealing to him just as Lula was appealing to him at first.

It is only moments before Clays' demise after taunts of "nigger" and "Uncle Tom" that his calm mask slips off. He reveals his true feelings about privileged White society which are disgust and contempt as they "know nothing but luxury" (Baraka 1958). He also exclaims that all great Black artists are driven slightly insane by their contempt for White people and could easily murder those that surround them to ease their insanity. He, however, wishes to stay "insane, with his clean, hard thoughts and no murders." (Baraka 1959) This one insight into Clay's true feelings, and the feelings of Black America against White America, are his final words and lead into his death at the hands of Lula for

he can not stand up for himself and his race and escape without consequence.

The last major symbol of *Dutchman* is the witnesses in the train that are present for Act II but not present for Act I. When Clay is undecided about Lula they are alone in the car but once he is immersed in her as Act II begins the rest of the train's inhabitants become visible. He has chosen to be a part of Lula's society and now is physically apart of it. Lula represents both female and White dominance and the passengers are merely sheep that calmly sit through her ravings and then follow her commands to toss Clay's lifeless body from the train car after she has stabbed him.

Amiri Baraka's play is thick with symbolism. His symbols are used to warn Black society of their impending doom if they become or stay assimilated into White American culture. Lula was plotting against Clay the moment she saw him and she knew how the game would end and it would not be in Clays' favor. Baraka tries to show Black America that they must regroup and come together as a United Black society with their own culture to escape the same Clay's fate.

Works Cited

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