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A Premeditated Murder of Clay by Lula

— On Amiri Baraka's Play *Dutchman*

Wu Zhaofeng

Abstract: Amiri Baraka's play, *Dutchman*, with an inverted biblical motif, could be viewed as a mix of the Theatre of the Absurd and the Realist Drama. Set in the mythic frame of the creation story in Genesis of the Bible, Clay's counterpart, Lula, could be interpreted as both Eve and Satan in disguise. To be exact, *Dutchman* could be regarded as a premeditated murder of the black man, Clay, by the white devil, Lula. This article endeavors to analyze the premeditatedness of the murder and discuss whether Clay betrays his people and deserves death by dressing in the middle-class way. Such a plot may not necessarily reflect Baraka's essentialist perception of black identity. However, it does vent his desperation and indignation of the existential plight of the black people in the modern white middle-class dominant America, which renders his revolutionary move from the white community and his carrying out the Black Power Movement and the Modern Black Convention Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, this paper discusses the significance of the premeditatedness of the plot in the construction of the black nationality during the Black Power Movement.

Keywords: *Dutchman*, premeditatedness, existential plight, interracial hatred, black nationality

Author Biography: Wu Zhaofeng, Associate Professor, Hubei University of Economics, and

Ph.D. candidate, Central China Normal University. Research Area: English and American Literature and Shakespeare studies. E-mail: wuzhaofeng@hbue.edu.cn.

题目：卢拉对克莱有预谋的杀害——论阿米里·巴拉卡的戏剧《荷兰人号》

摘要：阿米里·巴拉卡的剧作《荷兰人号》以倒置的圣经母题为核心，可被视为荒诞派戏剧与现实主义戏剧的混合。该剧以《圣经·创世记》中创世故事的神话框架为背景，黑人角色克莱的对应者卢拉，可被解读为伪装的夏娃与撒旦。确切而言，《荷兰人》可被视为白人卢拉对黑人克莱的蓄意谋杀。本文旨在分析这起谋杀的预谋性，并探讨克莱是否因以中产阶级方式着装而背叛了自己的族群并死有余辜。这一情节未必反映巴拉卡对黑人身份的本质主义认知，但它确实宣泄了他对白人中产阶级主导的现代美国中黑人生存困境的绝望与愤慨——这促使他做出了脱离白人社区的革命性举动，并在20世纪60至70年代开展“黑人权力运动”与“现代黑人大会运动”。最后，本文探讨了该情节的预谋性在“黑人权力运动”时期对构建黑人美国身份的意义。

关键词：《荷兰人》；预谋性；生存困境；种族之间的仇恨；黑人美国身份

作者简介：吴兆凤，湖北经济学院副教授，华中师范大学博士研究生。研究方向：英美文学教学与研究及莎士比亚研究。电子邮箱：wuzhaofeng@hbue.edu.cn。

Gafio Jerry Watts declares that “*Dutchman* is primarily an absurdist play, with elements of realism. Jones did not create a coherent plot or maintain a realistic stage setting” (2001, p. 71). It is true that there is no coherent plot in the play, but with a demonic female figure, Lula, in it. Whereas, this incoherent plot could be interpreted with a logical line under the biblical frame, for another figure, Clay appears rather rational and genial. Therefore, *Dutchman* could be viewed as a blend of the Theatre of the Absurd and the Realist Drama. Lula is lunatic, hysteric and highly abstract, who represents the demonic power with her omnipotence. She plays the absurd part of the play. Clay is composed and realistic, representing a common modern black man and works the realistic part of the drama. In regard of the conspicuous militant stance of the play, my argument is just opposite to that of Watts: *Dutchman* is primarily a realist play, with elements of absurdity.

As many scholars have agreed, since his name is “Clay”, it reminds readers of the creation story in Genesis of the Bible and of Adam, for the original meaning of “Adam” is “ground, dirt” (2009, p. 53). Although he could represent humankind in general and Watts also deems that what Lula “destroys is not men of a certain race but mankind” (2001, p. 72), my argument is that if Clay is generalized as human race instead of a concrete one, it would soften the militant stance of this great drama. In fact, what the goal of Baraka’s canon is set to attack, is the discriminated, deep ingrained hatred of the black people which the American whites bury at the bottom of their hearts. As to Lula, as Sandra L. Richards regards, her “uncanny knowledge of Clay’s background and his suppressed hatred of the dominant, white society mark her as a mythic figure” (1982, p. 235). Indeed, she could be regarded as Eve, but with a drastic change, not by creating her as the life companion to Adam, but as the life terminator to him, the devil in disguise of Eve. In

certain sense, *Dutchman* could be read as a premeditated murder of the black man, Clay, by the white devil, Lula.

1. Lula: the white woman in disguise of Eve and Satan on the Flying Dutchman

The biggest enigma to Clay as well as to the readers is that why Lula knows everything about him. For example, George Piggford mentions that “Lula’s power over Clay is based on what seems to her uncanny knowledge of him” (1997, p. 78), while several researchers have noted her demonic feature. Willene P. Taylor points out that “using demonic inversions of Christian motifs, the playwright gives us in contemporary and ironic terms his views about the black man’s fall from grace in America’s Garden of Eden” (1973, p. 130). Robert George Piggford states that “Lula functions in *Dutchman* as both Clay’s mother and his demonic psychotherapist by bringing Clay’s repressed desires to the surface of his consciousness. Through her verbal taunting she eventually peers into Clay’s ‘black skull’ and finds his murderous unconscious impulses” (1997, p.76). Cardullo also thinks that “By scene 2, Lula accuses Clay of being someone he is not, or disguising imperfection or defect, by dressing and acting ‘white’. It is something Lula herself does by concealing her demonic, racist, murderous intent beneath the guise of a beautiful and seductive woman” (2009, p. 53). All these scholars have perceived the “uncanny” phenomenon about and the “demonic” essence of Lula. If digging deeper, Lula is not shaped simply as a “demonic” figure, but as a devil in disguise. And in this logic, her omniscience and omnipotence could be interpreted. The most tragic point for Clay is that he does not get it even when he is stabbed to death by Lula. The following are the reasons for charging her as a white devil.

The first reason is that she is demonically omniscient about Clay. For instance, at the beginning of their dialogue, Lula mentions New Jersey and his growing of beard. Clay responses with a big surprise, “How’d you know all that? Huh? Really, I mean about Jersey ... and even the beard. I met you before? You know Warren Enright?” (2000, p. 80)^① From their short dialogue, the audience is informed that Clay is a newcomer to New York from New Jersey and probably he only confides it to his good friend, Warren Enright. Therefore, he is of suspicion that Lula knows the latter well. And in the following dialogue, when Lula mentions about the party, Clay is even more certain that Lula knows Warren very well, “You must be a friend of Warren’s to know about the party” (p. 82). And this implies that currently Clay is taking the subway to take part in the party which will be held by Warren. These details provide the personal information of Clay, and more importantly, they show that Lula is not an ordinary woman, for only God and devils own omnipotence.

Still explored from the perspective of the Bible, when Lula is imitating the serpent, as a kind of minstrelsy, crying to Clay, “Let’s do the nasty. Rub bellies. Rub bellies” (p. 94), it reminds the reader of

^① The quotation is taken from *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (2nd Edition) (2000) compiled by Harris, William and Imamu Amiri Baraka which was printed by Thunder’s Mouth Press. The following quotations will only be marked with the page numbers.

Satan, who changes itself into a serpent to seduce Eve. In some sense, Lula is Satan now, because more and more her body imitates the one of the serpent's, more and more insulting her language turns,

Come on, Clay. Let's rub bellies on the train. The nasty. The nasty. Do the gritty grind, like your ol' rag-head mammy. Grind till you lose your mind. Shake it, shake it, shake it, shake it. OOOOweeee! Come on, Clay. Let's do the choo-choo train shuffle, the navel scratcher. (p. 94)

These erotic words bring both Clay and the readers to the nasty history and the ugly minstrelsy show of the black women being raped by the white slave owners. But the rational Clay is only humored by Lula's disgusting words, saying, "Hey, you coming on like the lady who smoked up her grass skirt" (p. 94). He does not savor the deep meaning underlying her insulting expression and frenzy dance. He simply deems her lunatic. However, to the readers, the belly-rubbing first refers to Satan who turns itself to a serpent and seduce Eve by crawling on the ground with its belly rubbing the earth; second, it implies the erotic behavior when sexual intercourse is happening and the two rubbing the bellies together; third, it could refer to the action of rubbing the stomach to facilitate digestion after eating some food.

In this play, all the triple meanings could be adopted: Lula tries to seduce Clay with the belly-rubbing dance like a serpent because in essence, she is Satan disguised as Eve. And just like Satan, she goads him to realize the "forbidden truth" (1973, p. 128) that in his mind, exist the murderous unconsciousness of the white. The invitation, "Come on, Clay. Let's rub bellies on the train", serves as a shameless invitation for the erotic copulation on the train, which is also an insulting minstrelsy to Clay, for the black men are often mocked with strong sexual drive. In the end, Clay is murdered by Lula with a phallic knife and thrown off from the subway train, which means he is eaten up and then discharged away like dung from the huge belly of the white-dominated city. Finally, the readers could imagine that Lula would triumphantly "rub her belly" to facilitate her digestion after she "devours down" her victim. The belly-rubbing dance, cast from a retrospective look, foreshadows Clay's ultimate ending under the white hegemony in USA.

This ending also echoes the beginning of the play, "In the flying underbelly of the city. Steaming hot, and summer on top, outside. Underground. The subway heaped in modern myth" (p. 76). If USA is compared to a monster, the subway serves like its underbelly, and its task is to suck the quintessence of the black culture and discharge its creators, the black people, like waste. On the other hand, the subway, not only like the intestine of a serpent but also resembling the serpent itself, forms a special modern "Middle Passage" for the black, hence it sheds a light for the title of the play, "Dutchman", for the namesake *Dutchman* was a ship on the Atlantic transporting black slaves from Africa to America. However, during the journey, many of them died and the ship became a kind of hearse, ferrying many Africans from life to death. Therefore, like the ship *Dutchman*, the subway, which symbolizes USA, also ferries the African Americans from life to death, who do not die from hunger or thirst, but from the modern white supremacy.

What is more, the word "flying", linking the subway to the "Flying Dutchman", a cursed ship, for its captain, Vanderdecken, gambles his salvation on a rash pledge to pass safely the Cape of Good Hope during

a storm and so is condemned to that course for eternity². Thus, the message of this play to the audience is that modern USA is doomed to wander on the sea of destiny with the evil hatred borne by the white supremacists to the black people, and Lula is the devilish white “captain” of the ship, like the Flying Dutchman.

2. Clay: the black man representing innocent but changed Adam

Many researchers, including Amiri Baraka himself, criticize Clay’s middle-class manner of dressing and accuse him that he has been assimilated by the white bourgeoisie and hence betrayed his race. In that case, he must die for his “fall”. As Watts has pointed out, “It is his cultural assimilation that makes him vulnerable to Lula’s evil intentions, for he is preoccupied with the belief that he is just ‘one of the crowd’” (2001, p. 71); “Through his repressed rage, we see the ‘real Clay,’ or what Jones has described elsewhere as ‘a renegade behind the mask. And even the mask, a renegade disguise’” (Ibid, p. 71); C. W. E. Bigsby remarks that “In other words the insecurities that he confronts go beyond simple acts of racial prejudice, just as the real betrayal that he addresses is the betrayal of the self rather than the other. Clay is condemned to death and Lula to her everlasting task because, like the Flying Dutchman, they have in a sense blasphemed against the natural order. They have betrayed themselves” (Quoted from Watts, 2001, p. 74). My argument is that as a modern American man, it is quite natural for Clay to receive the modern American middle-class education and to aspire to be economically well-off. It is unfair to charge Clay that he has betrayed his people for adopting the middle-class way of life. The reason for his being murdered by Lula is neither his fault nor because he is condemned by his so-called “betrayal” but due to Lula’s demonic repressive nature like other white supremacists, who could not bear the positive change and the economic improvement of the black people and want to tread them down forever.

As it is known that in Genesis of the Bible, God creates Adam from clay. Therefore, it is very easy for the readers to link Adam in the Bible with Clay in *Dutchman*. Like Adam, Clay is innocent, composed, and rational. Or, in other scholars’ view, he counts himself as one of the middle-class guys. When Lula repeatedly exasperates him, he only naively responds with a happy mood. When Lula insults him for the first time, “[...] You look like death eating a soda cracker” (p. 79). Clay is embarrassed and wants to retort, but finally he only gives a mild reply, “Really? I look like all that?” (p. 80) It shows Clay’s light humor and kind heart. When gradually Lula seduces Clay with her sexually tantalizing expressions, she suddenly loses her logic line and turns angry,

Everything you say is wrong. [Mock smile] That’s what makes you so attractive. Ha. In that funnybook jacket with all the buttons. [...] 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. A three-button suit. What right do you have to be wearing a three-button suit and striped tie? Your grandfather was a slave, he didn’t go to Harvard. (p. 86)

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Flying-Dutchman>: Jan. 10, 2026.

In face of such white-supremacist speech, on hearing Lula's so-called white American tradition of colonization, religious prosecution and revolution, and on her naked negation of his right to wear a three-button suit and a tie (which means to negate his middle-class social status), Clay must feel very uncomfortable, but this innocent man simply refutes, 'My grandfather was a night watchman.' He does sense the insult and feel hurt, instead, being in the public space, he tries to control his temper and retain his rationality.

However, the most acute problem is that Clay wants to remain decent and rational, but that Lula does not. What drives Lula mad? Many researchers have ignored this madness under the impression of the Theatre of the Absurd. Probably, the main factor which drives Lula crazy is that with the development of the society, the living condition of the black people has gradually changed and much improved. That needles Lula, the representative of racism, the white devil. First, she sneers at the Reconstruction in the South, "And you went to a colored college where everybody thought they were Averell Harrima^③" (p. 86). Here, "you" refers not to Clay at the present, but to the liberated black people after the American Civil War in the past, Clay's ancestors. The sarcastic sentence serves as a vile blow to strike down Clay's as well as other black people's confidence fostered during and after the Reconstruction.

Second, she openly condemns "change":

All stories are whole stories. All of 'em. Our whole story ... nothing but change. How could things go on like that forever? Huh? [...] Except I do go on as I do. Apples and long walks with deathless intelligent lovers. But you mix it up. Look out the window, all the time. Turning pages. Change change change. Till shit, I don't know you. Wouldn't, for that matter. You're too serious. [...] (p. 92)

"Our whole story ... nothing but change" means the whole story of USA is a story of change: from a colony to a country, from a slave-trading country to a slave-free country. But Lula, the white racist, does not change because she claims, "Except I do go on as I do. Apples and long walks with deathless intelligent lovers", which means from the beginning to the end, she plays the old tricks of seducing the black men with apples and long walks. Here, 'intelligent' may just imply the opposite, the stupid, because the black men are too innocent and naïve to see through the tricks of Lula and are easily fooled by her.

"But you mix it up. Look out the window, all the time. Turning pages. Change change change", means Clay are different from all of his predecessors, for he is intellectual, turning pages of the book. It forms a deadly blow to Lula, because she could not bear the positive improvement of the black people. Three "change change change" pours out her bitter fury over the improved situation of the black people and

^③ W. Averell Harriman (born November 15, 1891, New York City, New York, U.S.—died July 26, 1986, Yorktown Heights) was a statesman who was a leading U.S. diplomat in relations with the Soviet Union during World War II and the subsequent Cold War. He also served as the governor of New York (1954–58). The son of the railroad magnate Edward Henry Harriman, he began his employment with the Union Pacific Railroad Company in 1915; he served as chairman of the board in 1932–46. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/W-Averell-Harriman> (last accessed on January 18, 2026)

reflects the white racists' vicious desire to keep the black low in the social rank forever. In face of a new generation of the intellectual black youth, what will the racists like Lula do?

3. "Dutchman": a premeditated murder of a black man by the white devil

Nita N. Kumar has paid attention to the premediated element of the play:

Lula's apparent randomness takes on a sinister, premeditated aspect as she orders the other subway riders to throw Clay's body out, starts straightening her things and getting everything in order. It is as if she has timed and controlled the entry of the next young Negro who walks into the coach, completely oblivious of the preceding action. The suggestion of premeditatedness of Lula's plan is therein the play at the beginning, when the direction reads that she "begins very premeditatedly to smile," as well as at the play's end, and thus frames the main action of the play. Within the play, however, even her premeditatedness remains an element of her unpredictability. (2003, p. 275)

Kumar has noticed the premeditatedness of the plot at the beginning as well as the end of the play, however, she does not explore further to the issue, such as how the murder is carried out premeditatedly. Instead, she simply equals Lula's premeditatedness with her unpredictability. My argument is that as to Lula, since she is so bitter at the black people, especially, the appearance of the middle-class black man like Clay, her aim must have been set beforehand: send every black man to hell with a phallic knife. There is a lot of further evidence which indicates the murder of Clay is premeditated.

For example, just as many researchers have noted, at the beginning of the play, when the train slowly stops at one station, Clay "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" (p. 76-77). Here, two words are worthy of being highlighted. One is "it" and the other is "premeditatedly". The second "it" refers to the woman, Lula's face, the first one refers to her soul, which implies that she is the incarnation of devil, and 'it' is a very apt pronoun to represent it. The latter, "premeditatedly", signifies the core action line for Lula, the white devil. She has noticed Clay first, got the plan to kill him, and sent him a prepared seductive smile. Everything has been arranged before she gets aboard the train and sits down beside him.

Another example, at the end of Scene One, when Lula asks Clay's middle name, Lula cries out suddenly,

A union of love and sacrifice that we destined to flower at the birth of noble Clay Clay Williams. Yea! And most of all yea yea for you, Clay Clay. The Black Baudelaire. Yes! [And with knifelike cynicism] My Christ. My Christ. (p. 87)

When she refers Clay as Christ, her intention to murder him is unwittingly revealed. The first part of the above quoted lines seems a kind of complement on Clay, but the second part forecasts a kind of tragic color to his final ending and indicates that Clay would become a Christ-like figure. The 'knifelike' cynicism signals that Lula despises Clay, the representative of the middle-class black people, heartily, and would use a knife to end his life. Willene P. Taylor praises Baraka for the word "knifelike": "In a stroke of genius, Baraka here suggests a sexual union between Lula and Clay through his use of the knife motif and through

his emphasis upon the verbal ejaculation and exhaustion that occur as a result of Clay's outburst of black rage" (1973, p. 129). It is true that the virtual sexual union hotly discussed by the two parties through the use of the bloody realistic knife serves as a bleak irony to smack the literal racial relationship between the black and the white.

The third example, In Scene Two, when Lula continues her conversation of sexually tantalizing imagination with Clay, she says, "And you'll call my rooms black as a grave. You'll say, "This place is like Juliet's tomb." And the innocent Clay laughs, "I might" (p. 91). When Clay listens very attentively and interestedly in Lula's erotic imagination, Lula is in fact depicting what will happen to him next: he would be killed by her because she is the devil, and the tomb is her living place.

From the above proof, it is quite clear that Lula has premeditated to murder Clay. But how? As it could be inferred, since it is a premeditated murder, her strategy must have also been worked out when she catches the sight of Clay outside of the subway train: she would seduce him first, then vex him second, and stab him to death promptly in the end. The most conspicuous point is that she employs sex as a tool to achieve her purposes of seduction and vexation.

To vex Clay, Lula first invites him to do the nasty minstrelsy sexual dance "belly-rubbing" with her in the train and then insults the black women by crying out, "Do the gritty grind, like your ol' mammy. Grind till you lose your mind [...]" (p. 94). When Clay feels very awkward and tries to interrupt her crazy dancing and yelping, Lula, twisting out of Clay's reach, doubles her insult and moves her striking target to Uncle Tom with further minstrelsy show,

Screw yourself, Uncle Tom. Thomas Woolly-head. [Begin to dance a kind of jig, mocking Clay with loud forced humor] There's Uncle Tom ... I mean, Uncle Thomas Woolly-head. With old white matted mane. He hobbles on his wooden crane. Old Tom. Old Tom. Let the white man hump his ol' mama, and he jes' shuffle off in the woods and hide his gentle fray head. Ol' Thomas Woolly-head. (p. 95)

"With old white matted mane" is compared Uncle Tom to an old shabby horse, which is a savage ridicule of his obedience to the white masters, just like a dumb and timid beast. On the surface, it seems that what Lula mocks is Uncle Tom, saying that Uncle Tom escaped from confronting the white man who was raping his old mother. However, deep within her insult, is her charge against Clay, because in face of her overt racial discrimination and humiliation, he remains silent and escapes like a meek beast, just like Uncle Tom. Lula adopts the black people's painful history of being insulted sexually by the white men and of their sons' efforts to evade confrontation and conflicts as a weapon to vex and strike Clay.

And this strategy works. Clay becomes furious, and "he gets up out of his seat" and when some passengers are laughing, he "visibly scans the faces of the other riders", he swears at Lula, "Lula ... you dumb bitch. Why don't you stop it?", he "rushes half stumbling from his seat, and grabs one of her flailing arms", he drags her towards her seat, he clubs the drunk to the floor without releasing Lula, he gets her to the seat and throws her into it and grabs her shoulders, ordering her, "Just shut up." When Lula still laughs at him, "You're afraid of white people. And your father was. Uncle Tom Big Lip!" Clay "slaps her as hard

as he can, across the mouth”, twice, and then he says, “Now shut up and let me talk” (p. 95-96). He clearly declares,

[...] all it needs is a simple knife thrust. Just let me bleed you, you loud whore, and one poem vanished. A whole people of neurotics, struggling to keep from being sane. And the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murder. Simple as that. I mean if I murdered you, then other white people would begin to understand me. [...] Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane. [...] (p. 97)

What Clay says is very militant. He has realized that only when he fights with the white with a simple knife, it will change the white's idea about the black and hence make the white sane, because the black's sanity, such as meekness and obedience, only encourages the white's insanity and render their atrocity to the blacks. If sanity just bring insult and maltreatment, insanity, such as fighting and murder, can bring respect to the black people and solve the problem. That is the lesson, or the “forbidden truth”, which Clay learns from Lula's frantic minstrelsies and insulting speeches.

The tragic point is that although Clay has realized the necessity of fighting with the white and of murdering Lula with a simple knife, he has not prepared to put it into practice. He wants to avoid all this madness and is going to get off the train, but unfortunately, Lula stabs at him of a sudden, and orders the people on the train to throw his body off. Several problems may arise, which are: what if Clay tries to kill Lula first? Would the other people on the train protect Lula and kill Clay? Or would the other people on the train turn to Clay and support him, and hence change the train into one which is free from racism and terminate the white supremacy? That remains uncertain. But one thing is for sure, *Dutchman* is a premeditated murder of the black man by a white supremacist.

Dutchman was first staged in 1964, and in the same year, the Black Power Movement^④ was carried out revolutionarily. Amiri Baraka had come to see that although the living condition of the black people had been improved much and some of them began to enjoy their new social status as the middle-class guys, such as Clay, dreamed to be a black Baudelaire, while the white supremacists, like Lula, smashed their dream into pieces, continuously dragging them back to the painful history of the black people by insulting, mocking and condemning them with the most hysterical and frantic means. In another word, the essence of the white supremacy had not changed: it is as evil as devil itself; and its goal of the racists had not been changed: it is to destroy every black man, including the awakened militant black one, and send them to the hell.

4. The significance of the premeditatedness of the murder in *Dutchman*

Although Amiri Baraka won the Obie Award for this play, he also received a lot of harsh criticism.

^④ Black Power Movement began as revolutionary movement in the 1960s and 1970s. It emphasized racial pride, economic empowerment, and the creation of political and cultural institutions. During this era, there was a rise in the demand for Black history courses, a greater embrace of African culture, and a spread of raw artistic expression displaying the realities of African Americans. <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/black-power> (last accessed on January 18, 2026)

For instance, Willene P. Taylor points out, “No doubt his many detractors, who have maligned his motives, will continue to label him as a racist demagogue who merely mouths propaganda and fomented hatred between the races” (1973, p. 130); Jerry Gafio Watts states that “His willingness to express black disgust with whites was interpreted by many whites as hateful” (2001, p. 73); Jessica E. Teague admits that “His outspoken, often violent, critiques of white bourgeois culture and the treatment of black Americans led many to accuse him of race baiting, but his simultaneous insistence on the beauty and spirituality of black culture would galvanize a generation of black poets and artists” (2015, p. 22); Sandra L. Richards thinks, “To the mainstream literary critics and intellectuals, Jones was an enfant terrible, gifted as a craftsman but excessively unfair in his views of whites” (1982, p. 233) and she specifically indicates that “Yet all such evaluations, whether made by whites or blacks, men or women, tend to disregard the fact that his dramaturgy is almost overwhelmingly male-dominated and woman hating” (Ibid, p. 233); Matthew Rebborn criticizes that “Baraka’s black masculinity defines itself through the abjectification, or ‘othering’, of queer men and women. This maneuver, however, constantly reveals its own shaky foundations, and thus in serious ways undermines and problematizes Baraka’s militant black masculinity” (2003, p. 800), etc.

All the above criticism bears some truth in it and it does give the audience and readers an impression that Baraka hates the white indiscriminately, exalts the militant black masculinity while keeping the black women down and even hates women. As *Dutchman* is concerned, a question may be raised up: if Baraka is not the person who does not hate the white as well as women, why does he set it as a premeditated murder of a black man by a white woman? Or why does Baraka have to write it in that way, as if he wanted to condemn all the white in USA for all the eternity?

Ironically, in some critics’ eyes, such as Harold Clurman, deems that “*Dutchman* is less of an indictment of white America than an indictment of American civilization” (Quoted from Watts, 2001, p. 72) and in his opinion, this play has no racial specificity. And even Baraka himself denies that Lula represents all of white America by saying: “the play is about one white girl and one Negro boy, just them, singularly, in what I hope was a revelation of private and shared anguish” and he also declares that “*Dutchman* is about the difficulty of becoming a man in America. It is very difficult to be sure, if you are black, but I think it is now much harder to become one if you’re white” (Ibid, p. 73). Jerry Gafio Watts thinks such kind of expression softens the play’s racial image.

My argument is that racial problem is still very acute at the time when Baraka wrote this play and the interracial hatred exists as a matter of fact. For example, the hatred that a black person bears against the white is depicted in another play of his, *The Toilet* (1964). A gang of black boys drive a white boy into a corner and bully him in a high school toilet. It really proves that under the haunting of racial hatred, not only the black people suffer the existential plight, but also the white. It not only destroys the love between the two races, but also any form of racial affection. Therefore, the first significance for the premeditated plot of *Dutchman* lies in the point that it accurately and precisely portrays the interracial hatred between the black and the white, which forces Baraka to the realization that only the separation of the black from the white and

the formation of a unique national identity could establish the black's dignity and win respect for them from the white.

On the other hand, between 1965 and 1970, more than 500 urban uprisings broke out and the massive scale of the ghetto revolts sufficiently prove that the living condition for the black on the general was rather bad. Although there were some of them, like Clay, had squeezed in the middle class, the majority of them still lived in the awful ghettos. What is more, according to Komozi Woodard,

The massive tumult of the ghetto revolts set the stage for the fusion between the nationalism of small circles of radical artists and intellectuals and the grassroots nationalism of the broad urban masses; out of that explosive mix came a new generation of militant Black Power organizations, demanding self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense. In the midst of the uprisings the politics of black cultural nationalism and the Modern Black Convention Movement took form, unleashing the dynamics of nationality formation. During those turbulent years, Amiri Baraka's poetry raised the slogan, "It's Nation Time!" (1999, Preface: p. xiii-xiv)

Therefore, the second significance is that it propels Baraka to take a radical action to break away from the white community in the Greenwich Village in New York and to form the elite nationalism of the radical artists with the Black Arts Movement^⑤. And this movement, when jointed with the grassroots nationalism of the urban black people, pushed the human rights movement of the black into a new height: the Modern Black Convention Movement, with the philosophy of "Kawaida"^⑥, to create a nation within a nation, and won a significant victory.

Without this separation from the white in a definitely militant stance, and without the Black Arts Movement, the human rights movement of the black people in USA would never reach such a range and

^⑤ The Black Arts Movement (1965-1975) was a Black nationalism movement that focused on music, literature, drama, and the visual arts made up of Black artists and intellectuals. This was the cultural section of the Black Power movement, in that its participants shared many of the ideologies of Black self-determination, political beliefs, and African American culture. It started in 1965 when poet Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones] established the Black Arts Repertory Theater (BART/S) in Harlem, New York, as a place for artistic expression. Artists associated with this movement include Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, James Baldwin, Gil Scott-Heron, and Thelonious Monk. <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/black-power/arts> (last accessed on January 18, 2026).

^⑥ The philosophy of the cultural nationalist theory and movement called kawaida (a Swahili word meaning "tradition" or "reason," pronounced ka-wa-EE-da) is a synthesis of nationalist, pan-Africanist, and socialist ideologies. It was created and defined by Maulana Karenga during the height of black pride and self-awareness that characterized the Black Power movement in 1966. Karenga believed that black people needed a change of consciousness before they could mount a political struggle to empower themselves. He argued that the reclamation of an African value system based on the *nguzo saba* (seven principles) of *umoja* (unity), *kujichagulia* (self-determination), *ujima* (collective work and responsibility), *ujamaa* (cooperative economics), *nia* (purpose), *kuumba* (creativity), and *imani* (faith) would serve as a catalyst to motivate, intensify, and sustain the black struggle against racism. This value system, which served as the basis of kawaida, would provide the foundation for a new African-American culture defined in terms of mythology (religion); history; social, economic, and political organization; creative production; and ethos. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/kawaida> (last accessed on January 19, 2026).

such a scale. In another word, to deploy the plot in *Dutchman* in this way is quite necessary. As Nita N. Kumar has pointed out,

Clay's message of rage cannot be equated with Baraka's valorizing of an activist and committed art. When Baraka proclaims in his poem "Black Art" that "We want 'poems that kill' / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot/ guns," he is not displacing art by rage, but is rather struggling to invest art with more power (219). Nor can't he play be seen as advocating an essentialist perception of black identity encapsulated in Clay's "pumping black heart" image. On the contrary, Baraka is here combating the forms of representation / perception that become forms of persecution by denying blackness any possibility of viable existence. The source of this persecution, the play suggests, lies in a severing of modes of representation and discourse from any authentic context. Thus, in the dialectical, penetrative understanding embodied in the play, the retributive logic remains, but not merely in the form of physical violence. White violence is seen to be operating at the level of the construction of black. it is at this level that the play seeks to contend with the oppressive structures of the binary, racial logic. (2003, p. 279)

It is true that Baraka's intention is not merely venting out his rage at the repressing institutions of the white domination with the ingrained hatred and violence, but also endeavors to break the institutions by exposing them and to replace them legally with the ones advocating black nationality through cultural uniqueness. The Modern Black Convention Movement was an essential component of the Black Power Movement. During the great movement, many cultural, political, and economic programs were proposed and developed by various organizations, such as the Black Arts Renaissance, the Black Panther Party, the US Organization, the Republic of New Africa, the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Nation of Islam, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. When the basic government and commercial services in the postindustrial ghettos collapsed, the African American radicals like Amiri Baraka developed "parallel black institutions in the void left by the urban crisis, emphasizing the failure of the American government and mainstream economy in providing basic services and offering black nationalism and cooperative economics as alternatives" (1999, Preface: p. xiv).

In the summit of the movement, by June 1970, the black and Puerto Rican convention candidates won the municipal election in Newark and "broke an historic, executive political color bar by installing the first black mayor in a major northeastern city" (Ibid, Introduction: p. 2). While during the 1960s and the 1970s, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) "rose to national leadership in the Black Revolt at the head of the Modern Black Convention Movement" (Ibid, Introduction: p.1), it is quite salient that without his literary, especially dramatic, and political exploration of the interracial relationship between the black and the white, such movements of great significance could not be carried out. In a certain sense, he has put his literary assertion in "Black Art" into practice:

The critic for the New York Times, leaving a performance of "Slaveship," says, "This play makes me uncomfortable. This play says something that I do not want to hear." What else should it do? That is its function, to aid in the destruction of a society which is opposed to human life and

development. Its function is to transform reality, not to exist in fantasy. Not to exist as idle entertainment for the colonizers and the slave masters to giggle at. But to transform reality. (1987, p. 29)

The Black Arts Movement, the Black Convention Movement, and the Black Power Movement were the means to “transform reality”. And all these movements were carried out after Amiri Baraka wrote and staged his *Dutchman* in 1964. Although in his *The Slave*, which was written in the same year, he expressed his hesitation at his separation from the white community, the road which was taken by him served well in the building of the black nationality. From this perspective, the greatest significance of *Dutchman* lies in that it works as a kind of declaration to construct the black nationality, which speaks powerfully for Amiri Baraka’s acute political insight and correct political decision.

5. Conclusion

This article analyzes the premeditatedness of the murder in *Dutchman* and deems that Clay does not betray his people, nor does he deserve death by dressing in the middle-class way. Just as Wang Yuli, a renowned literary critic in China, states that we should “keep close to the ontology of the play and offer appropriate critique”^⑦ (Quoted from Yang Youan, 2025, p. 152), it is partial when many critics launch a lot of harsh criticism on this play, and it lacks full consideration to state that Baraka holds some essentialist perception of the black identity. As a matter of fact, it merely expresses his keen and painful awareness of the existential plight of the black people in the modern white middle-class dominant America. The significant point is that it propels his revolutionary move from the white community and his successful carrying out of the Black Power Movement and the Modern Black Convention Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. All these activities contribute greatly to the construction of the independent American nationality of the African Americans in USA.

From a retrospective angle, the premeditated murder in *Dutchman* serves not only as a declaration of constructing independent black identity but also as a sparkle to kindle Baraka’s colorful and powerful activities to improve the living conditions of the black people and to transform the reality. In this sense, *Dutchman* owns an undeniable important literary status in Baraka’s literary works as well as in the African American literary canon.

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^⑦ The original quotation is written in Chinese: “探讨 ‘如何贴近戏剧本体、恰到好处地评论’ (汪余礼 2024, p.209) ” and the English version is translated by the author of this article.

ORCID

Wu Zhaofeng ^{ID} <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9939-371X>

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