

The use and construction of myth in leroi jones' dutchman



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“ The Flying Dutchman” is a nautical myth about a ghost ship fated to traverse the ocean waves for all eternity. The story is rooted in the legend of Hendrik van der Decken, a 17th-century Dutch Captain who dared to sail beyond the Cape of Good Hope despite treacherous weather conditions. As a result, he and his crew were damned to forever “ beat about in these seas.” The spectre of the vessel, therefore, is said to sometimes be spotted from a distance, usually accompanied by an aura of ghostly light. The mere sight of the haunted ship itself is regarded by seafarers as a harbinger of bad weather, or, more generally, as a “ portent of doom.” In the play Dutchman, LeRoi Jones (alias Amiri Baraka) incorporates particular elements of this myth in order to dramatize the dilemma faced by African Americans adapting to life within the White, middle-class milieu. As represented by the play’s subway setting, the figure of Lula, and the culminating actions (manipulations) both she and the other subway passengers commit at Dutchman’s conclusion, Jones’ revision of “ The Flying Dutchman” myth conveys the fixed, interminable nature of race relations and power structures existing in the United States. By the end of the play, Jones creates his own myth about “ freedom” for the African American caught in this locked power system, and constructs a modern legend that, too, will repeat itself in an eternal cycle of domination and destruction. In Jones’ play, the ship of “ The Flying Dutchman” legend, doomed to an existence of everlasting wandering, is re-imagined as the modern-day, urban subway. Within the context of the drama, the prison of continuous motion and human entrapment embodied by the mythic vessel, signals the perpetuation of established racial relations and power structures. Particularly, Jones uses the image of the subway as a way to frame his critique of the social reform occurring during his time. Written in <https://assignbuster.com/the-use-and-construction-of-myth-in-leroi-jones-dutchman/>

1964, Dutchman coincides with, as is thus informed by, the radical movements and political turbulence characteristic of the decade, including Civil Rights, the Black Arts Movement, and the beginnings of the Vietnam conflict. However, by setting Dutchman in a closed subway, Jones is creating the effect of liminal space. As a “ vessel” always in transition, the subway symbolizes motion without progress, action without change. Careening in the “ flying underbelly of the city” (Dutchman, 3), the subway-as-ship is nevertheless on a static path towards no particular destination or varied resolution. Therefore, by juxtaposing the liminality of the subway against the greater, implied backdrop of his particular historical moment, Jones seems to suggest that, despite the changes anticipated or purported by social “ revolutions,” the course of racial and power relations will remain the same (White will continue to dominate Black). Additionally, as the revamped image of “ The Flying Dutchman” ship, the subway of modernity is plunged from the ocean waters above, into the “ steaming hot” (3) depths of the city below. By setting Dutchman in the urban underground, Jones constructs a subterranean space in which the actions that occur are cast under a light of raw truthfulness (as if, in the underbelly of the metropolis, one views the reality—the “ what’s really going on”—that the artifice of the above-ground world conceals). The underground aspect of the subway also dramatizes the notion of suppression, particularly, the suppression from freedom of expression. Clay’s experience with this kind of suppression is evidenced in Dutchman through his interactions with Lula and the legacy of White control she encapsulates. If Jones is culling from “ The Flying Dutchman” myth in order to assert a belief in the perpetuation of racial and power systems, one might also view his play as using the image of the fated ship as a metaphor

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for this very paradigm of White domination and Black subjugation. In this way, Lula is herself an embodiment or extension of the doomed vessel, representing both the history of race relations in America, and acting as an agent for the preservation of this traditional power ideology. For example, throughout the dialogue of the play, Lula thinks she has Clay “pegged” because she recognizes his “kind.” She assumes facts about Clay’s life – that he lives in New Jersey, is trying to grow a beard, is on his way to visit his best friend, a “skinny black boy with a phony English accent” (10). Surprised at the accuracy of Lula’s assessment, Clay wonders how she could possibly know so much about him. “I told you I didn’t know anything about you....” she responds, “you’re a well-known type...Or at least I know the type very well’ (12). Therefore, Lula not only voices the stereotypes of Blacks held within the White community. She also embodies the stereotyping process itself, and underscores the sense of strength and domination such an exercise in social control engenders. However, in *Dutchman*, Lula’s historical image is carefully, or more particularly, framed as one of seduction, and it is through her powers of temptation that she is able to trap and exert her “White strength” over Clay. Lula’s portrayal as a temptress is another way in which elements of “The Flying Dutchman” myth are reworked in Jones’ play. As such a figure, Lula continues to embody the image of the ghost ship by serving as both portent and agent of doom, bringing misfortune to the ill-fated wayfarer who happens to cross paths with the haunted vessel. Specifically, in *Dutchman*, Lula seduces Clay (the object of her bad-luck bearing “ship”) into her web of manipulation and destruction. Her seductive qualities are clearly established by her introductory characterization.

Described as a “beautiful woman” with “long red hair,” wearing “skimpy
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summer clothes” and “loud red lipstick” (5), Lula conveys the image not simply of sex, but of a dangerous, threatening sexuality. Therefore, she is a temptress because she is predacious, depicted as having distinct designs on Clay. In the opening scene of *Dutchman*, Lula stares at Clay, who “idly”—or by chance—raises his head at this precise moment, meeting her fixed gaze (4). Upon being noticed, Lula smiles “premeditatedly” (4). This simple stage description suggests that Lula had deliberately sought Clay’s accidental recognition in order to enact her preconfigured, master plan (the plan of White domination). Clay returns her gesture but, in comparison, his smile is “without a trace of self-consciousness” (4). This contrast further illustrates the coincidental nature of the encounter from Clay’s perspective, and thus also emphasizes the intentional, preconceived qualities of Lula’s scheme. She forces the adversity of her “bad-weather” influence upon Clay, sitting next to him on the subway, invading a space he has already comfortably occupied. Once caught, Clay cannot escape her manipulations, her intention to destroy him. In fact, it is through these destructive acts that Lula, as well as the other subway passengers, function as tools for the perpetuation of race relations in America. A final way in which the ghost ship of “*The Flying Dutchman*” myth is reworked in Jones’ contemporary drama, is through the ultimate destruction of Clay as rendered by both Lula and the additional riders on the subway. Because Lula’s manipulations are the products of her seductive powers, as well as of her adherence to the ideology of White racial dominance, she comes to represent the historic image of the White woman who incites the Black man to endanger himself. She achieves this representation within the play, and finally destroys Clay, by claiming full knowledge of his “authentic blackness” (having already identified his “

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type”), and then demanding that he satisfy her socially-constructed definition of his black “ self.” For example, she chastises him for adopting the bourgeois, middle-class intellectual image suggested by his clothing, his “ funnybook jacket with all the buttons” (18). Lula says: Boy, those narrow-shouldered 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.

(18) Firstly, Lula is here claiming to know Clay’s personal history by virtue of her generalization of his type. However, her knowledge is clearly mistaken, for Clay matter-of-factly counters her final line by responding, “ My grandfather was a night watchman” (18) (I also do not believe that, as a twenty-year old man in 1964, Clay could have a grandfather who was alive before Emancipation a century earlier). Thus, so brazen is Lula in her faultiness that her ignorance seems almost laughable, and thus her assertions or demands over Clay easily dismissible. However, the veracity of her statements is irrelevant. Rather, Lula’s strength, the force of her manipulations, are derived from this very legacy of White ignorance. It is this veil of ignorance that distorts truth, allowing White society to believe in the legitimacy of its own inaccurate assumptions, and then maintain a defense for its acts of oppression. Lula’s erroneous knowledge, therefore, inspires or buttresses her (delusional) contention that she possesses an “ understanding” of Clay’s “ authentic” blackness. She evokes this claim in the quite above, for instance, when she insists that Clay’s jacket represents “ a tradition [he] ought to feel oppressed by.” She continues to needle Clay in this way, charging him for somehow not being fully “ black.” Lula deems him as nothing more than a “ liver-lipped white man,” “ a would-be Christian”
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who “ ain’t no nigger,” but simply a “ dirty white man” (31). As she launches her attack, she becomes increasingly vulgar and outrageous in her behavior. She begins to sing a song that “ becomes quickly hysterical,” throws the contents of her bag about the subway car, and dances in provocative, lewd and intentionally embarrassing manner. She urges Clay to “ get up and scream at these people. Like scream meaningless shit in these hopeless faces” (31). However, Lula’s “ crazy” antics are not arbitrary, and her insistence that Clay stand up to his oppressors is not motivated by an altruistic, “ equal rights” mentality. Lula is, after all, both a member and embodiment of this system of oppression. Therefore, her actions are specifically crafted to rouse Clay into speech, with the particular goal of prompting him to both enact and confess a “ fundamental” violent nature that has long been the fear of Whites about Blacks. Inevitably, once caught in Lula (White society’s) trap, Clay fulfills her ultimate design by speaking out and articulating this very notion of “ Black violence.” However, he distinguishes “ violence” as not the essence of his Black nature, as Lula’s constructed perspective on Black “ authenticity” would suggest. Rather, he declares that White society/politics/history has left him, has left African Americans, with little choice: either they go “ insane,” becoming “ fools” (35) by assimilating to the White-man’s world, or they express their deep-seated protest, their anger, by way of “ murder” (35). Clay declares, “ I sit here, in this buttoned-up suit, to keep myself from cutting all your throats” (34). He would actually prefer to take the route of this bare honesty, of “ no metaphors,” declaring that murder would in fact be the “ simple(r) act...just murder! Would make us all sane” (35). Ultimately, however, he asserts that he would “ rather be a fool,” be “ insane” within White bourgeois society—a <https://assignbuster.com/the-use-and-construction-of-myth-in-leroi-jones-dutchman/>

poet “ safe with [his] words, and no deaths” (35). Nevertheless, despite his rejection of the path of violence, the damage has been done. Clay has spoken, and Lula (as both the history and current face of race relations in White America) has achieved her manipulative goal, her premeditated intention. She can now indict and condemn Clay, thus fulfilling her role as the White woman leading the Black man down the path of his own endangerment or demise (within the American historic narrative, this was the woman who would launch false accusations of rape against an African-American male). The very evocation of this iconic image fosters a sense of history, a sense of the fulfillment of a specific historic cycle. Therefore, this particular use of “ The Flying Dutchman” legend within Jones’ play—as a way by which to characterize Lula’s destructive actions—continues to convey the fixed, determined nature of race/power structures existing in America. At the end of Dutchman, Lula fatally stabs Clay. She abandons her outrageous behavior and declares, “ I’ve heard enough” (38). She thus forcefully acts when all Clay could do was speak, her prompt execution trumping his eloquent, impassioned words. Lula involves the other passengers in his killing by demanding that they dispose of Clay’s dead form: “ Hurry, now!” she commands, “ open the door and throw his body out. And all of you get off at the next stop” (37). The others comply with Lula’s final manipulation, indicating that the destruction of the Black man is a matter not exclusive to Lula and the White social context she embodies. Rather, because the other subway passengers are comprised of both White and Black individuals, their assistance at the conclusion of Dutchman indicates that all spheres of American society are complicit in the race game. Like the doomed, mythic sea vessel, the other riders on the subway are fated to repeat a particular

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course. Specifically, they are fated to either promote and/or resign themselves to the legacy of White racial domination. In conclusion, LeRoi Jones revises element of “ The Flying Dutchman” myth, particularly through the extended metaphor of the revamped or modernized “ doomed ship,” in order to illustrate the perpetuation of racial and power dynamics rooted in colonial imperialism (the play’s title, Dutchman, after all, harkens to the 17th-century imperialistic context from which the myth originated). Despite important developments in the course of US history, such as the abolition of slavery and the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, once “ caught” in the fixed sociopolitical conditions of White dominance (as embodied by Lula), African Americans can never truly be free. In this way, Jones indeed creates a “ modern myth” (3) with Dutchman. As alluded to by the fact that Lula sets her sights on another nameless, twenty-year old male at the conclusion of the play, the myth of Dutchman will also persist, cycling through the turbulent seas of American life for all time.