
Who's to Say: Insanity in Dutchman

An apple pressed precariously to her blushed lips, Lula from Leroi Jones' existential drama *Dutchman* is the epitome of temptation. She snakes around the train car, spying Clay and eventually driving him to his outburst late in the second scene. Clay's speech is spontaneously provoked, but is nonetheless revealing about his character. In Jones' play, Lula pushes the boundaries of social decency with her form of neurotic and offensive insanity, eventually forcing Clay to engage in his own animalistic tantrum, illustrating that the two characters, although different in motivation and actions, both harbor some form of insanity.

Lula attacks Clay on all fronts, specifically addressing his clothing and how it is an inaccurate reflection of his identity. She says to him, "Boy, whose 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? Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harvard" (18). Lula accuses Clay repeatedly of being pretentious, of trying to be something he should not or cannot be, even saying, "You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man" (31). The three button suit, for example, would be something traditionally worn by a wealthy, white man—not a young, black man riding a train. Lula, however, takes her questioning to an indecent level, asking Clay about his "right" to wear the suit and accusing him of wearing something that should make him feel ashamed. Lula accuses Clay of embracing his own oppression by wearing such clothing and then pushes her reading of the suit even farther, insinuating that slavery is the position of blacks and Harvard is the domain of whites. Her neurotic behavior is unprovoked and uncalled for, highlighting the careless and vicious nature of her insanity.

In his outburst, though, Clay—as well as the audience—realizes that his feelings about his position in society and the way he dresses are not that different from Lula's perceptions. As Lula is pressed against her seat, Clay addresses the entire train, "And I sit here, in this buttoned-up suit to keep myself from cutting all your throats" (34). Clay's retort is obviously a response to Lula's former mention of his clothing, but its ferocity is unexpected, even unreasonable. The sheer animalistic anger in his murderous words is shocking, yet he does not just address Lula—he addresses the whole train which, at this point, has filled with white passengers. He admits that the suit is a sort of forced civility, realizing that, deep down, he is full of savage hatred for the white race and that he has conformed to white society's vision of refinement. Lula's antagonism coupled with this self-discovery pushes Clay over the edge into a state of his own breed of insanity, where he claims that it is only his clothing that keeps him from murdering a train full of people.

Furthermore, Lula attacks Clay's schooling, ambition, and perception of himself. Lula asks

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Clay, “And who do you think you were? Who do you think you are now?” Clay answers, “Well, in college I thought I was Baudelaire. But I’ve slowed down since.” In a biting response, Lula again accuses Clay of not being black, of not exemplifying his race in his ambitions and perceptions of himself, saying “I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger” (19). Lula’s line of questioning and response insinuates that Clay’s former perception of himself as Baudelaire is incompatible with his identity as a black man, accusing him once again of not seeing himself clearly, of imagining himself more refined and learned than he deserves.

In his outburst, Clay addresses this instance, saying to Lula:

And I’m the greatest would-be poet. Yes. That’s right. Poet. Some kind of bastard literature...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. (35)

Clay yet again embraces Lula’s interpretation of his identity, agreeing that he is a poet, yet he takes the argument in a different direction. He blames Lula for the neuroses of black men, claiming that killing her, letting her bleed, would be cathartic for the black race, ridding them of temptation and conflict. His outburst is, again, animalistic in nature and unexpectedly violent—one could easily imagine his mouth spitting, his eyes large. He even references his own insanity, claiming that part of his own neurosis is not embracing his black culture and race, struggling against it in order to keep sane. For, to give into the humanity of being a black in a white world would mean only destruction of the white race, so Clay restrains himself, hiding behind neat clothing and cerebral poetry.

Dutchman would be a far less complicated and disturbing play if Lula was purely insane and Clay was purely reasonable. The layers of reason and insanity overlap, however, providing many grey areas. While it would be inaccurate to say that Lula and Clay are similar in terms of their insanity, it is not a stretch, after closely examining the text, to propose that both Lula and Clay lose their sanity at certain points. The differences between Lula and Clay, however, are their motivations and actions. Lula’s neuroticism seems fueled by her desire to destroy others while Clay’s outburst is fueled by his anger and is a response to certain pressures. Furthermore, Clay merely talks of murder, while Lula actually kills Clay. Lula’s insanity is active and, consequently, destructive while Clay’s form of insanity stems from a defensive stance. The two characters do share common ground, however, which makes Dutchman a play that asks countless questions and does not offer many answers.

Works Cited

Jones, Leroi. Dutchman. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1964.

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