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The Construction and Destruction of Clay's "Ideal Self" in *Dutchman*

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Abstract: Amiri Baraka's play *Dutchman* tells the tragic story of Clay, a black man who is seduced, insulted and killed by a white woman Lula on the subway. In order to fit into mainstream American society, Clay always constructs his "ideal self" and plays the role of a fake white man. Lacan's mirror stage theory can explain the cause of the construction and destruction of Clay's ideal-self.

Keywords: *Dutchman*; Clay; Ideal self; Mirror stage

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Dutchman, Amiri Baraka's one-act play, delivers a stunning effect through special scene: subway and simple characters. The play tells a story that a white woman Lula, seduces Clay, a young black man on the subway and insults him openly. When Clay is angered by Lula's aggressive behavior, he loudly scolds her, and finally Lula kills him with a knife. Clay and Lula are the two real characters in the play and the others are in the background. Clay is an archetypal middle class black man, the representative of millions of black people. Influenced by the mainstream society, he is assimilated by the white education system and way of life. In order to survive, many black people have to give up their values and try to integrate into the white society. Clay always disguises himself with white norms in order to enter the white mainstream society, but the presence of Lula uncovers his mask, revealing his black nature relentlessly. We can see from Clay's behavior that he is a two-faced man with double-consciousness. On the one hand he maintains the gentlemanly demeanor of a middle-class man, behaving as if he is an educated white man. On the other hand, in order to escape from reality, he chooses to hide his black nature and original values. As a result, Clay has "double-self": one white, one black, and the white side is just a fantasy, an ideal-self alive in his brain. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan once proposed the concept of the "Mirror Stage." Lacan found that by the sixth month, when the visual organs were sufficiently developed, infants began to notice their own images in the mirror and became unusually interested in them. "The unity, wholeness, fixity and perfect form of the image in the mirror predict the future of the baby. By equating themselves with this ideal image, the baby overcomes the bad feelings and experiences of 'the fragmented body' and acquires self-consciousness that is ahead of time. Thus, the baby's first confirmation of self is also a misidentification [1]." In other words, "the subject regards itself as something that is not really itself [2]." In fact, the image in the mirror is only an "ideal self." In the play, Clay has been carefully constructing his "ideal self". The story is set on a hot summer's day, but the hero, Clay, is wearing a tightly buttoned, narrow-shoulder jacket. This kind of inappropriate dress may give people a sense of seriousness or nobility. The opening scene is Clay sitting in a subway seat, "holding a magazine but looking vacantly just above its wilting pages [3]." It

seems that he was just deliberately creating an image of a well-educated man. Lacan argues that “the Mirror Stage is a form of identity ^[4].” Living in a society surrounded by white culture, Clay’s self-identity is also more inclined to the white image. He has long regarded the ideal white image as his own image in the mirror and used the ideal image as an example in his words and deeds. But this image is not real, but comes from imagination. Lacan explains, ‘I’ am ‘the other’ ^[5].” In Clay’s imagination, as long as he does and says the same things as the white man, he can fit into the environment without being excluded.

Although carefully playing the role of the ideal self in the “mirror,” Clay is afraid of white people to some extent. He dares not get their attention or be the center of attention. Clay has mixed feelings when Lula, a beautiful white woman, approaches him deliberately and tries to seduce him. On the one hand he is aware of the impassable gulf between their different colors, and on the other hand he is flattered by the interest of a white woman. Thus, when Lula talks positively to him, he is embarrassed but tries to give some comeback. For Clay, Lula is a symbol, an embodiment of the character of white society. He is always careful not to offend Lula, and actively cooperates with her requests. And he is used to regarding white people as his own mirror image. By this time, Clay also takes Lula as his “ideal self” and intimates her unconsciously. Lula is a somewhat flirtatious white woman. She has been eating apple since she gets on the subway and speaks and acts as if she is at home. When she asks Clay if he would like to have an apple with her, Clay, a very reserved man in public, readily agrees, “trying to be as flippant as Lula, whacking happily at the apple ^[3].” Obviously, this kind of behavior does not fit the ideal image that Clay has always constructed, because most cultured white people may not act so. But soon, he takes Lula as prototype and constructs another “ideal self”. Clay does not have a real self, so to speak, for Lula, he is just “a well-known type ^[3].” and his name is just “one of those hopeless colored names creeping out of New Jersey ^[3].” From Lula’s words, we can see that although the whole society has gradually realized the inequality imposes on the black race, it still takes a contemptuous and ignoring attitude towards these people. No matter how hard Clay tries to construct the “ideal self”, Lula’s inherent cognitive remains a barrier to their interracial communication. When Lula refers to “Uncle Tom” it is a reflection of the fact that in the early 1960s the whole white society’s understanding of black people remains in a state of ignorance. Therefore in the play Lula is confident that she can tell a lot about Clay’s family history and so on by the way he dresses and behaves. In Lula’s eyes, the young black man she is talking to is not an individual worthy of respect. He is just a black man disguised as a white man, and she seems to have a clear understanding of Clay’s psychology in constructing the ideal image. In the conversation that follows, Lula tries to destroy Clay’s “mirror image” with this question: “And who did you think you were? Who do you think you are now? ^[3].” The question of “who are you” seems to be a force trying to rouse Clay from his fantasies. And with that comes more naked humiliation, “I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger ^[3].” Based on Lacan’s concept of “Mirror Stage”, the defects, confusion, inadequacy and emptiness in life give birth to a full and perfect self, a unified and idealized subject. In order to achieve his full self, Clay always escapes from reality. He is unwilling to face his true self, even though Lula tells him so directly that “you are a black nigger,” he still “quickly tries to appreciate the humor ^[3].” In fact, Clay is just a victim of the white society. On one hand, the mainstream society of The United States encourages the middle class black people represented by Clay to imitate the way of the white people, which makes the black people have an illusion and makes them voluntarily contribute more to the white society. In addition, by inculcating the thoughts and culture of the white people, the black people are further and further separated from their native cultural tradition, which makes them unable to show their national consciousness. On the other hand, white people try their best to magnify the stereotype of black people, so that let them have a sense of inferiority. Lula mercilessly shatters Clay’s “white dream” by repeatedly stressing the skin differences between them. She also reminds Clay that the buttoned-up suit does not conceal his black nature. It is in effect a clear message to Clay that he would never be free from the influence of slavery, nor would he ever be able to change his

black ancestry and become white.

The increasingly defiant humiliation from Lula gradually destroys the ideal image Clay has long constructed. Lula knows exactly how to strip him of his disguise, how to show his weakness and let his anger erupt. She keeps humiliating Clay with almost abusive language and the provocation turns from a conversation between the two to a public humiliation. Not only does she try to disprove Clay's disguise ironically by saying that "You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man ^[3]," but she also dances and arouses other's attention in the subway. Lula is not the only one who has broken Clay's "ideal self." There are also "conspirators" who seem obscure but fuel dramatic contradictions -- other passengers in the subway. This arrangement is, in effect, an indictment of society. Until the end, the two protagonists never looked like they do when they first appear; Clay could no longer hide the "black" he has tried to hide, abandoning the white role he has tried to play. After a variety of contempt, Clay's "ideal self" finally collapses, the white image in the "mirror" is broken, and the real Clay finally appears. Unable to bear Lula's humiliation any longer, Clay changes from a passive, silent victim to an angry counterattack. By this time his "ideal self" has been torn to pieces, he no longer has any decent image to maintain, no longer cares about the white woman in front of him. His true self has been completely released, the words that have been repressed pour out. He admits that he has been living under a "white mask," defending that "If I'm a middle-class fake white man ... let me be. And let me be in the way I want ^[3]." The ensuing torrent of abuse and humiliation at Lula leads to his death, and it is only during this period of counterattack that Clay lives as his true self. But a "true" black man could not survive in a white society, so his death is doomed. In the end Lula mercilessly kills Clay, the victim of white society. The end of the play fully shows that the tyranny of the mainstream society at that time, and the lack of sympathy for the oppressed are the root causes of social oppression. Thus, when Lula kills Clay and asks the others to throw his body out and get off at the next stop, they comply silently without hesitation. It also symbolizes the white society's blindness to the suffering of black people. Finally, another young black man gets on the subway, and the message conveyed by the author is that this is not the first time Lula has murdered like this, but that the cycle of murder will continue. Black people like Clay who has "dual identity" and an "ideal self" will eventually die out. "For Lacan, 'Mirror Stage' is not only a 'phase', but also a 'proscenium' (semantic pun on 'stage'), on which a tragedy is staged, demonstrating the fate of subject alienation ^[2]." On this illusory stage, Clay is the hero of tragedy. His tragic fate is preordained, and as his death implies, once black people wake up from colonial culture and rise up against white oppression, they are bound to be killed by white people. The author takes the play as a weapon to encourage black compatriots to be liberated from their imprisonment of thought, and suggests that if black people want to get their subjectivities and get rid of the marginalized status, they have to recover from the illusion of "ideal self," break the stereotype of black constructed by white people and use violence to resist the bullying and oppression of white colonists.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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