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Power in the Hands of the Uninvolved

Sarah Vita

Abstract

The Dutchman, written by Amiri Baraka, expresses the racism of the 1960s. While skimming the surface to find the tones of racism and white oppression exhibited by Lula, Baraka craftily sneaks the bystander effect into his stage directions. The bystander effect is easily looked past in this play because the words of Lula and her actions distract from the small details that create the real problem.

Keywords: *Baraka, The Dutchman, Bystander Effect, Lula, Clay, African American*

The Dutchman, written by Amiri Baraka, is a very powerful one-act drama that expresses the racism of the 1960s that people were afraid to address. True to its content, it has been most commonly reviewed as a prime example of racism and deception following its first publication in March of 1964. This play highlights the power a white female possesses over males, especially those who are of African American descent. Lula, a beautiful white woman with blonde hair and appealing physical features, deceives Clay, the well-dressed African American man who she encounters on the subway. Lula easily seduces Clay and while making many racist remarks towards him, is still able to put him into such a deep state of infatuation that he is essentially oblivious to reality. Clay is so blinded by Lula's beauty and empty sexual promises that he is unable to see her true intentions and ends up being stabbed to death by her. The theme of power emphasized by Lula is very prevalent throughout the play; however, the true power lies in the hands of those sitting quietly in the background, turning their heads to ignore the dangerous situation unfolding in front of them.

It is very easy in the play to identify the racism and stereotypes that Clay has to overcome on a daily basis. Lula immediately accuses Clay of staring at her in a provocative way, as if that is the only fathomable explanation for him to be looking in her direction. Further into the play, when an altercation between Clay and Lula becomes obviously violent and aggressive, the people on the subway become aware but choose to ignore it altogether. That is, until Lula stabs Clay, and she commands the other people riding the subway to help her dispose of his body; they obediently comply with her request. However, no one interferes when Lula makes derogatory

insults at Clay such as calling him a “middle class black bastard” or an “escaped nigger” (2004). She also makes many racist remarks about African Americans by referring to plantations, Clay’s wardrobe, and slavery. One of the most prominent lines that stuck out in my mind is when Lula is interrogating Clay about his suit. She says, “What’ve you got that jacket and tie on in all this heat for” and “why’re you wearing a jacket and tie like that? 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” (2004). Lula is attacking Clay for being a successful, intelligent African American because her narrow-minded, white supremacist perspective is clouding her judgement. She is making claims and assumptions that were in the minds of many white people of the time, although slavery and segregation were supposed to be overcome by the mid 1960s. The other subway-riders listen to these comments and ignore them as if nothing is wrong with what she is saying. On page 2012, the stage directions say, “He turns towards the other riders, some of whom are sitting on the edge of their seats. The drunk is on one knee, rubbing his head, and singing softly the same song. He shuts up too when he sees Clay watching him. The others go back to newspapers or stare out the windows.” As soon as Clay looks for reinforcement from the other people on the subway due to Lula’s extremely racist behavior, he finds no comfort or sympathy. He finds himself completely helpless and in grave danger when Lula pulls out a knife and, with aggression, stabs Clay. As soon as he is dead, she orders the other subway passengers to get rid of his body and then continues with her pursuit, acting as if nothing has happened, as another young African American man boards the subway. At the conclusion of the play, the stage directions read, “Turning to the others in the car who have already gotten up from their seats. The others come and drag Clay’s body down the aisle. They throw him off. Lula busies herself straightening her things. Getting everything in order. She takes out a notebook and makes a quick scribbling note. Drops it in her bag. The train apparently stops and all the others get off, leaving her alone in the coach” (2015). These are all clear cut examples that scream that racism and oppression still existed in the 1960s. Baraka creates Lula to voice the words many people were thinking but were too afraid to say, rightfully, as they are untrue and hateful towards African Americans. He succeeds in demonstrating the power white people possessed at the time and how helpless African Americans were in any situation where they were surrounded by solely

whites.

Themes of racism and deception are easily discovered in *The Dutchman* through a careful analysis of the words of Lula and her actions towards Clay. However, the deeper, possibly more interesting theme lies in the actions of the other people riding the subway. Their hesitation and overall neglect to interject when Lula becomes violent, both verbally and physically towards Clay, is a perfect example of the bystander effect. The bystander effect, or bystander apathy, is a social, psychological phenomenon that refers to situations in which individuals do not offer help to a victim because other people are present (Latané and Darley). It occurs when the presence of other people discourages a single individual from intervening in an emergency situation. The bystander effect has evolved into a famously renowned psychological experiment most universally recognized due to the works of social psychologists Bibb Latané and John Darley. They popularized the concept of the bystander effect following the infamous 1964 Kitty Genovese murder in New York City. The article entitled “The Kitty Genovese Murder and the Social Psychology of Helping,” reviewed by Rachel Manning of the University of the West of England, Bristol and Mark Levine and Alan Collins of Lancaster University, outlines the entire murder and investigates the crime with respect to the bystander effect. Kitty Genovese was sexually assaulted and murdered on the morning of March 13, 1964, in the Kew Gardens district of Queens, New York. According to the article published on March 27, 1964, in the *New York Times* written by journalists, Martin Gansberg and A.M. Rosenthal, thirty-eight people are cited as witnessing the attack in its entirety, but approximately twelve people claimed to have seen the very first attack. Many of them later stated that they “just didn’t want to get involved.” However, not one of these bystanders called the police or intervened to save Genovese. It was not until after she was dead that one woman called the police to report the murder. It is believed that these thirty-eight witnesses, both neighbors and bystanders, watched the attack for over thirty minutes. In this time, Genovese was able to escape her murderer three different times, each time screaming for help, but with unfortunately no response from the silent bystanders. Latané and Darley see this case as a prime example of their theory of the bystander effect. Whether the 38 witnesses saw each other or not, they all had the same thoughts: someone else will call for help; it does not have to be me. This is the perfect example of how dangerous the bystander effect can be to society today. As long as it still exists, it makes it close to impossible to assume that you will be helped in an emergency situation like Genovese’s. Each witness heard the blood-curdling

screams of Genovese and consciously passed responsibility onto someone else.

Latané and Darley took the concept of bystander apathy and conducted their own experiment in which a group of people were tested to see if they would intervene and help a complete stranger in a seemingly emergency situation. Their experiment is mapped out in the article entitled “The bystander effect and social control behavior: the effect of the presence of others on people’s reactions to norm violations,” reviewed by Peggy Chekroun of the University of Clermont-Ferrand, France and Markus Brauer of CNRS and the University of Clermont-Ferrand, France. Latané and Darley studied a group of college students who were under the impression they were participating in a discussion about personal issues. Each participant was in their own room talking to an unknown number of other participants about the life of a college student. There were five different treatment conditions and one of them involved an epileptic student who has a seizure mid-speech. Latané and Darley found that 31% of the participants tried to seek help for the student in need, meaning the majority did nothing. The most significant part of the experiment was during the one-on-one conversation, in which 85% of the subjects looked for help. This means that if an individual believes that they are the only one present in an emergency situation, they are more likely to seek help for the victim. Conversely, if one knows there are a number of other people present, the likelihood that they will seek help is significantly lower. This further proves the theory that in the Kitty Genovese case, the thirty-eight witnesses were demonstrating the strength of the bystander effect but were not cognitively aware of it.

Bibb Latané later teamed up with Steve Nida to further his research. They published an article called, “Ten Years of Research on Group Size and Helping,” investigating the mathematical probability on an individual’s likelihood to intervene in an emergency situation based on the number of people present. Their results demonstrated the hypothetical probability of one to take initiative and help the person in need. These results correlated with those of Latané and Darley’s in that those who were singularly witnessing an emergency situation intervened much more frequently than when they were surrounded by others.

In relation to *The Dutchman*, the bystander effect becomes a very important aspect of the climax and unfortunate conclusion of the play. Had the others riding the subway intervened and stopped Lula, Clay might have survived. Based off of Latané, Darley, and Nida’s research it is safe to assume that the presence of others on the subway decreased each person’s willingness to intervene. Clay is speechless when he finds himself completely helpless in a situation where he is

obviously the victim. The most obvious example of this is in the stage directions on page 2012 that say, "...He shuts up too when he sees Clay watching him. The others go back to newspapers or stare out the windows." Clay has finally calmed Lula down and looks for any reassuring looks or words from the other passengers, only to find the backs of their heads or the *New York Times* held in front of their faces. Although the one drunk passenger does intervene, it is in defense of Lula (2012). This makes me wonder if that can even be considered as evidence for the bystander effect, because Baraka makes it perfectly clear that he is intoxicated. Every time this man is brought up in the stage directions he is referred to as "the drunk." The experiments conducted by Latané, Darley, and Nida were done with sober patients, therefore, the effects of alcohol on one's impulse could cause very different results. Regardless of this small, drunken, physical intervention, the bystander effect is extremely present on the subway and can be potentially credited with Clay's death. If someone had intervened Lula may have realized that her actions were wrong and oppressive. However, seeing that the other passengers are white and in a large quantity, the chance of intervention becomes smaller and smaller as the play progresses. This subtle concept of intervening in an emergency, makes a significant impact on the sequence of events that eventually results in untimely deaths such as that of Clay and Kitty Genovese.

In this play, the evidence of the bystander effect lies mostly in the stage directions because they describe the actions and emotions that the reader cannot see. In the form of a play, the evidence is not in what the audience hears, but what they see. The subtle hints that the characters display signifies their disinterest with getting themselves involved. On page 2011, the stage directions describe the scene where Lula is dancing on the train, humiliating and yelling at Clay, while the other passengers sit back, laugh, and one even joins in. Baraka writes, "...Begins to dance a kind of jog, mocking Clay with loud forced humor. Some of the other riders are laughing now. A drunk gets up and joins Lula in her dance, singing, as best he can her 'song'. Clay gets up out of his seat and visibly scans the faces of the other riders" (2011). Clay finds himself completely isolated from the only people who are witnessing this hideous display of humiliation. As the scene progresses, Lula takes her gestures too far, and Clay attempts to restrain her and ends up slapping her as his last resort to stop her. On page 2012, Clay feels ostracized from the entire subway car when he looks around after slapping Lula. The stage directions describe this scene saying, "He turns towards the other riders, some of whom are sitting on the edge of their seats. The drunk is on one knee, rubbing his head, and singing softly

the same song. He shuts up too when he sees Clay watching him. The others go back to newspapers or stare out the windows” (2012). Clay finally succeeds in restraining Lula and looks to the other passengers for reassuring expressions of sympathy only to find their eyes looking elsewhere. The situation becomes dangerous when Clay hits Lula and at that moment, everyone on the train goes silent and immediately removes themselves from the situation, as if it makes them invisible as witnesses. They revoke their involvement as soon as there is a threat of violence exhibited, especially because it is initiated by Clay as opposed to Lula. Racism clearly enters the picture when the bystanders immediately take action to dispose of Clay’s body upon Lula’s command. Similar to the Kitty Genovese case when the only report of the attacks came after Genovese had been murdered, the only sign of intervention comes when Clay is already dead. Rather than looking at the racism jumping off the page at the reader, we can use the theory of the bystander effect and the results of the experiments to delve deeper into the silence behind the words. The ears that Lula’s racist comments fall on go deaf and, as proven by social scientists, is because of bystander apathy and its substantial effect on an individual in need.

While skimming the surface to find the tones of racism and white oppression exhibited by Lula, Baraka craftily sneaks the bystander effect into his stage directions. The bystander effect is easily looked past in this play because the words of Lula and her actions distract from the small details that create the real problem. It takes a much closer reading to identify the hints of this bystander effect such as the turning of heads and the silence of the train while Lula rips Clay apart with horrendously racial insults. It is what is seen, not heard that composes the play and the sequence of events that leads to Clay’s unfortunate end. Once the bystander effect is identified, it’s underlying prevalence and Baraka’s intentions for including the detailed stage directions and minute details becomes inherently apparent. After identifying this, it is very hard to read the play and ignore the plethora of small hints at the power these bystanders possess over Clay and his fate. The others on the subway possess the most power and are not even aware of it. Baraka places the most power in the hands of the uninvolved bystanders on the subway who unconsciously pass responsibility off to one another until Clay’s unnecessary death concludes the play.

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