

Rituals of Resistance: Analyzing Themes of Liberation in Amiri Baraka's 'A Black Mass'

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Abstract

This research paper, titled "Rituals of Resistance: Analyzing Themes of Liberation in Amiri Baraka's *A Black Mass*," indulged into the ritualistic elements and liberation themes within Baraka's provocative play. Amiri Baraka is a central figure in the Black Arts Movement, uses *A Black Mass* to explore the potential of ritual as both a form of resistance and a pathway to liberation for African Americans. The study examines the symbolic and thematic significance of rituals depicted in the play, highlighting how they serve as mechanisms for confronting and dismantling systemic oppression. By analyzing the interplay between the supernatural and the socio-political, the paper uncovers how Baraka employs mythological and spiritual motifs to critique racial injustice and envision a transformative future. The research also situates *A Black Mass* within the broader context of Baraka's outlook and the Black Arts Movement, emphasizing its role in fostering a revolutionary consciousness. Through a close reading of the text and its performance elements, this paper aims to elucidate the enduring relevance of Baraka's work in contemporary discussions on race, resistance, and liberation.

Key Word: African American Theatre

Amiri Baraka, originally named LeRoi Jones, was an influential African American writer, poet, and playwright known for his advocacy of Black Nationalism and his critique of systemic racism. Born in 1934, he gained prominence during the 1960s with works like *Dutchman*¹ which explores racial tensions in America. Baraka's writing evolved from Beat poetry to politically charged plays and essays, reflecting his changing ideological beliefs. He co-founded the Black Arts Movement, which sought to create art that celebrated Black culture and addressed social issues. Baraka's work continues to be studied for its impact on American literature and social justice movements.

A Black Mass, written in 1966, is an allegorical play that explores themes of cultural identity, racial oppression, and the struggle for liberation. The story revolves around Black scientists who conduct a ritual to create a being representing their cultural and spiritual heritage.

The play begins with the scientists, led by Osiris, preparing for a significant ritual. They hope to regain their lost cultural power and reconnect with their roots. However, the experiment goes disastrously wrong. Instead of a benevolent entity, they create the Black Devil, a monstrous figure symbolizing internalized self-hatred and systemic racism. This creature brings chaos and destruction, shocking the scientists and making them realize their grave mistake.

The play then focuses on the scientists' efforts to control and defeat the Black Devil. This struggle represents the Black community's fight against self-destructive behaviors and attitudes imposed by a racist society. The battle is both physical and psychological, reflecting the broader fight against internalized oppression.

The play ends ambiguously, with the scientists still dealing with the consequences of their creation. This unresolved ending suggests that the fight against internalized racism and the quest for cultural and spiritual liberation is ongoing and cyclical, emphasizing the need for continuous effort and vigilance in the pursuit of true freedom.

Amiri Baraka's *A Black Mass*, cultural rituals are portrayed as potent acts of resistance against the forces of cultural erasure and systemic oppression. These rituals serve as a means for the Black community to reclaim their

identity, assert their cultural heritage, and resist the dominant white society's attempts to suppress them. Here's a deeper exploration of this theme:

The play begins with a group of Black scientists, led by Osiris, who are deeply engaged in a ritualistic experiment. This ritual is steeped in cultural and spiritual significance, aiming to create a being that embodies their collective heritage. By performing these rituals, the characters are actively engaging in a process of cultural reclamation, asserting their identity against a backdrop of historical and ongoing oppression.

The ritual conducted by the scientists is not merely a scientific experiment but a symbolic act of resistance. It represents their defiance against a society that has marginalized and dehumanized them. Through the ritual, they attempt to harness their cultural strengths and spiritual beliefs to create a powerful entity that will help them regain their lost power and autonomy.

The deep sense of hope and optimism with which the scientists perform the ritual underscores their desire for cultural renewal. This act is a form of empowerment, seeking to restore their community's strength and resilience. It highlights the importance of cultural rituals in maintaining a sense of continuity and connection to one's roots, even in the face of systemic challenges.

The emergence of the Black Devil during the ritual symbolizes the internal conflicts and self-destructive tendencies that can arise from internalized racism. This figure represents the negative aspects of their own culture that have been shaped by oppressive external forces. The scientists' confrontation with the Black Devil becomes a metaphor for the internal struggle to overcome these destructive elements and reclaim a positive, empowering cultural identity.

The ambiguous ending of the play, with the scientists still grappling with the consequences of their creation, suggests that the struggle for cultural and spiritual liberation is ongoing. It emphasizes the cyclical nature of resistance, where each act of cultural assertion is met with new challenges but also new opportunities for empowerment and growth. This ongoing process highlights the resilience and persistence required to maintain cultural identity in the face of oppression.

Baraka's use of rituals as a central element in *A Black Mass* serves as a broader commentary on the need for cultural and spiritual resistance as a foundation for social and political liberation. The rituals symbolize the broader efforts of the Black community to resist cultural assimilation and maintain their unique identity amidst a society that often seeks to homogenize and suppress it. Shannon, Sandra G. states:

Within the mythical context of an African setting are the African-American magicians. For the African-American viewer who is more than likely saturated with Western interpretations of Africa, magicians in a supposed African context inevitably conjure up expectations of a masked and painted voodoo witch doctor performing convulsive, ritual dances while summoning supernatural assistance via charms and unintelligible incantations. Quite unlike the un-sophisticated practices of the witchdoctor, however, Jacoub conducts his experiments with all the trappings of a modern scientist, complete with laboratory and its familiar equipment.²

Cultural rituals in Amiri Baraka's *A Black Mass* are profound acts of resistance that embody the Black community's struggle to reclaim and assert their cultural identity. These rituals highlight the importance of cultural heritage in the fight against systemic oppression and serve as powerful symbols of resilience, continuity, and empowerment.

The Black Devil is a central symbol representing a complex array of themes, including internalized racism, the destructive impact of systemic oppression, and the challenges of reclaiming cultural identity. Here's a critical analysis of the symbolism of the Black Devil:

The Black Devil emerges as a monstrous figure resulting from the scientists' ritualistic experiment. Instead of the powerful, benevolent entity they hoped to create, they bring forth a being that embodies their deepest fears and internalized self-hatred. This transformation reflects the destructive consequences of internalized racism, where the oppressed group's negative perceptions of themselves, influenced by systemic racism, manifest in self-destructive behaviors and attitudes. The Black Devil symbolizes the internal conflict within the Black community, struggling with the harmful self-perceptions imposed by a racist society.

The creation of the Black Devil highlights the broader theme of systemic oppression and its pervasive, corrupting influence. The scientists' failure to create a positive force instead produces a creature of chaos and destruction, symbolizing how systemic racism distorts and corrupts the potential for positive cultural and spiritual regeneration. This outcome underscores the idea that the pervasive and insidious nature of systemic racism can undermine even the most well-intentioned efforts to reclaim and restore cultural identity.

The Black Devil also represents the alienation from cultural and spiritual roots experienced by the Black community. The scientists' experiment is an attempt to reconnect with and reclaim their lost heritage, but the creation

of the Black Devil instead of a benevolent being suggests a profound disconnect from their cultural and spiritual essence. This alienation is a result of centuries of oppression and cultural erasure, leaving the community struggling to rediscover and reassert their true identity amidst a legacy of trauma and displacement.

Despite its initially negative connotations, the Black Devil also serves as a symbol of the ongoing struggle for liberation and resistance against oppression. The scientists' battle with the Black Devil, both physical and psychological, mirrors the broader fight against the internal and external forces of racism. The intense confrontation represents the community's resilience and determination to overcome the self-destructive influences imposed by a racist society. The Black Devil's presence forces the characters to confront their internalized oppression and galvanizes their efforts to reclaim their identity and power.

The ambiguous nature of the Black Devil's symbolism adds depth to its representation. The creature is not merely a one-dimensional symbol of evil but embodies the complexity of the Black community's experiences under systemic oppression. It encapsulates both the destructive impact of internalized racism and the potential for transformation and empowerment through confronting and overcoming these internalized forces. This duality reflects the nuanced reality of the struggle for liberation, where resistance involves grappling with both external and internal challenges.

It should come as no surprise that the concept of the Beast in *Black Mass* initially evolves as a result of Baraka's close alignment with many of Elijah Muhammad's ideas about Western white male domination over the African- American male. In his Autobiography of Malcolm X, Malcolm frequently claims that "the white man is the devil" and that "the black man had great fine, sensitive civilizations before the white man was out of the caves."¹¹ Evident from the context of Baraka's Beast is the Islamic view that whites - like the way Satan and his army were depicted in heaven - were initially rabble-rousers among members of Islamic heaven. According to world history as Elijah Muhammad interprets it, once these whites were discovered.³

The Black Devil in Amiri Baraka's *A Black Mass* is a multifaceted symbol that captures the intricate dynamics of internalized racism, systemic oppression, and the struggle for cultural and spiritual reclamation. Its creation and the subsequent battle with the scientists serve as a powerful allegory for the Black community's ongoing fight against the destructive legacies of racism. By critically examining the symbolism of the Black Devil, Baraka underscores the profound psychological and cultural impacts of oppression and the resilient spirit of resistance and liberation that persists within the community.

A Black Mass, the struggle for liberation is intricately tied to the themes of cultural identity, resistance, and the confrontation of internalized oppression. The narrative centers around Black scientists who attempt to reclaim their cultural heritage through a ritualistic experiment intended to create a powerful, benevolent being. However, the experiment results in the creation of the Black Devil, a monstrous entity that symbolizes the internalized self-hatred and the destructive impact of systemic racism.

The scientists' ritual represents an attempt to reclaim their lost cultural power and identity, which have been eroded by centuries of oppression. This ritual is a metaphor for the broader struggle within the Black community to reconnect with their roots and regain their cultural and spiritual strength. The experiment reflects a deep-seated desire to liberate themselves from the cultural alienation imposed by a racist society.

The emergence of the Black Devil, instead of the desired benevolent figure, symbolizes the internalized racism and self-hatred that have taken root within the Black community as a result of systemic oppression. The scientists' struggle to control and subdue the Black Devil represents the broader fight to overcome these destructive internal forces. This struggle is both physical and psychological, highlighting the pervasive and insidious nature of internalized racism.

But interestingly, five different categories of Afro-Americans come under attack. First, the poem targets "niggers in jocks"- presumably, those blacks with nothing on their minds except sports. They need, apparently, to be mobilized for THE CAUSE. The "gird lemma mulatto bitches'-half-white women who aspire to be all-white- are reviled in even more violent language, perhaps because they represent an outright rejection of blackness. Even worse are the politicians who sell out the interests of black folks: the "slick half white politicians" and "negro leaders." The most loathe some of these is the "negro leader" whose idea of negotiating for black people is to fellate the enemy, whom Baraka calls the sheriff. Baraka attacks all of these figures because they stand in the way of true black liberation.⁴

The scientists' battle with the Black Devil is a metaphor for the resistance against both external and internalized oppression. It reflects the ongoing efforts within the Black community to liberate themselves from the

dehumanizing effects of racism. The intense confrontation symbolizes the broader fight for liberation, where the community must confront not only the external forces of racism but also the internalized attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate their subjugation.

The play concludes with the scientists still grappling with the consequences of their creation, suggesting that the struggle for liberation is ongoing and cyclical. The unresolved ending implies that the fight against internalized racism and the quest for cultural and spiritual liberation are not easily won. It highlights the need for continuous effort and vigilance in the struggle for true freedom. *“Though deemed too violent and offensive by some and considered anti-white and/or anti-American by others, Amiri Baraka’s early plays challenged black audiences to take a more active role in their liberation from various forms of oppression.”*⁵

In *A Black Mass*, Amiri Baraka portrays the struggle for liberation as a complex and multifaceted battle against both external oppression and internalized racism. The play serves as an allegory for the broader challenges faced by the Black community in their efforts to reclaim their cultural identity and liberate themselves from the dehumanizing effects of systemic racism. The struggle is depicted as ongoing and cyclical, requiring constant resistance and introspection to overcome the deeply ingrained forces of oppression.

A Black Mass, the reflection of societal change is evident through its exploration of cultural identity, resistance, and the consequences of internalized racism. The play, set in the context of the 1960s, a period marked by intense racial tensions and the Civil Rights Movement, uses allegory and symbolism to comment on the transformative and often painful processes of societal change.

The ritual performed by the Black scientists symbolizes a collective effort to reclaim cultural identity and power that has been eroded by systemic racism. This act represents a desire for societal transformation—a return to a time of cultural pride and strength. The scientists’ efforts reflect the broader movement within the Black community during the 1960s to assert their identity and demand equality.

And finally, what is the relationship between black people and America? Are African Americans an ethnic group along the same lines as Irish Americans, Jewish Americans, and German Americans, destined to be assimilated into American society? Or do they constitute an oppressed nationality locked out of White America, fundamentally in conflict with the established social, economic, and political order of the United States? With an eye toward these questions, this study examines Amiri Baraka’s cultural approach to Black Power, the rise and fall of the Modern Black Convention Movement, and the phenomenal spread of blacknationalism in the urban centers of late twentieth-century America.⁶

The creation of the Black Devil instead of a benevolent figure highlights the potential pitfalls and unintended consequences of societal change. The Black Devil represents the internalized self-hatred and destructive behaviors that can arise from long-standing oppression. This suggests that while societal change is necessary, it is also fraught with risks and challenges, particularly when dealing with deeply rooted issues like racism.

The scientists’ struggle to control the Black Devil mirrors the ongoing societal struggle against racism and oppression. The chaos and destruction brought by the Black Devil symbolize the tumultuous nature of societal change, where resistance against oppression is met with significant challenges. The play suggests that societal change is not a linear process but involves continuous resistance and the confrontation of both external and internal obstacles.

The unresolved ending of the play, with the scientists still grappling with the consequences of their creation, reflects the cyclical nature of societal change. It implies that the fight against oppression and the quest for liberation are ongoing processes, with each generation facing its own challenges and responsibilities. This cyclical struggle is a reflection of the broader societal shifts that occur over time, where progress is made, but the underlying issues may persist or re-emerge in different forms.

A Black Mass by Amiri Baraka serves as a powerful reflection on societal change, illustrating the complexities and challenges involved in the fight for liberation and cultural identity. The play highlights the need for continued resistance and vigilance in the face of systemic oppression, acknowledging that societal change is a continuous, often cyclical process that requires collective effort and introspection. Through its allegory, Baraka emphasizes that the road to societal transformation is not without its dangers and setbacks, but it is a necessary journey toward true freedom and equality.

In conclusion, Amiri Baraka’s *A Black Mass* serves as a profound exploration of the themes of liberation through the lens of cultural rituals and resistance. The play’s symbolic narrative, centered on the creation of the Black

Devil, highlights the complexities and internal conflicts faced by the Black community in their struggle against systemic oppression. Through the rituals performed by the Black scientists, Baraka illustrates how cultural practices can be acts of resistance, aimed at reclaiming identity and power in the face of ongoing racial subjugation. However, the creation of the Black Devil also underscores the dangers of internalized racism and the unintended consequences of such resistance, reflecting the nuanced challenges inherent in the fight for liberation. Ultimately, *A Black Mass* calls for continued vigilance and resilience in the pursuit of true freedom, reminding us that the path to liberation is fraught with challenges, but is essential for achieving social and cultural justice.

References and Notes:

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