



# **A Black Sisyphus? Existentialism in Ed Bullins' play "In the Wine Time"**

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Technical University (Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik), course: Hauptseminar

Literaturwissenschaften, 20 entries in the bibliography, language: English, abstract: Say, maybe you'll go to France... to Nice or Marseilles [sic] ... the Riviera. Lie out in the hot sun... you won't need a suntan but you can lie out there anyway so those tourists and Frenchmen can see you and envy you. And you'll see all those sexy French broads in their handkerchief bathin' suits. Yeah, I can see you now, Ray, out there in your bright red trunks with sunglasses on peekin' at those girls. Or maybe you'll go to Italy and git you some of that dago stuff. Ha ha ha... best damn poon tang in the world, boy.

It seems highly unlikely that playwright Ed Bullins thought of French existentialism when he wrote these lines for his protagonist Cliff Dawson in the 1968 play *In the Wine Time*. Despite his mentioning France, the metaphysical aspect of Cliff's statement seems rather small, his main objective being to talk his step nephew Ray into the Navy, where voluptuous women will help him forget his girlfriend. Nonetheless, by giving his step nephew advice on which choices to take, Cliff Dawson reveals to us that he has a vision. He wants Ray to evade Derby Street in the black ghetto of some "large northern American industrial city in the early 1950's" to fulfil his dreams of not being "an animal to be used for the plows of the world."

Although the circumstances might not seem to be existentialist, the way Cliff Dawson revolts against his living conditions are very much reminiscent of Albert Camus' existentialism. Both Camus' character Bernard Rieux from the novel *The Plague* and Ed Bullins' Cliff Dawson revolt against their environment and find their humanity through an act of solidarity; Doctor Rieux unswervingly fighting against the plague saves the Algerian city Oran and Cliff Dawson prevents his nephew from being imprisoned by assuming the guilt for the murder of Red, a bully from the neighborhood in the final act of the play. Camus formed his protagonist Bernard Rieux according to his notion of existentialism, the foundations of which he had laid in his 1942 philosophic essay *the Myth of Sisyphus* (*le mythe de sisyphé*).

The objective of this paper is two-fold. It is both a contrastive analysis of Bullins' *In the Wine Time* with regard to Camus' existentialism and a classification of the play in terms of literary and dramatic traditions. After taking an in depth look at Camus' existentialism portrayed in *the Myth of Sisyphus* and describing the characteristic features of the absurd hero on the basis of Bernard Rieux, the protagonist of the novel *The Plague*, I will draw parallels to Ed Bullins' character Cliff Dawson and try to answer the question whether he could be called "the black Sisyphus" in analogy to Rieux, being Camus' literary incarnation of Sisyphus. Beyond that, I will analyze existentialist and absurd characteristics of the play *In the Wine Time* and put them into context with other dramatic traditions used in the play, in order to find out to which extent Bullins aimed at weaving in absurd and existentialist features. The second aim of this paper will thus be to find out which dramatic tradition we can assign the play *In the Wine Time* to.

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