

Spiritual Murder in Buchner's Woyzeck

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Spiritual Murder in Georg Buchner's Woyzeck

Throughout dramatic history, tragedies have depicted a hero's humanity being stripped from him. Usually, as in Shakespeare's classic paradigms, we see the hero, whether King Lear or Othello, reduced from his original noble stature to nothingness and death. Yet [Georg](#) Buchner's fragmentary play *Woyzeck* shows us a protagonist already stripped of humanity, transformed into and treated as an animal. Indeed, *Woyzeck*, far from being a simple tale of a village murder, shows us the systematic debasement, even intellectual and spiritual "murder," of the protagonist and all his class.

Like August Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*, *Woyzeck* identifies most of its characters only by [professions](#) or descriptions, not by names. Franz Woyzeck and Marie are surrounded by a whirl of anonymous figures: the Captain, Doctor, Drum Major, Barker, Grandmother. Perhaps this shows the world as it appears from Woyzeck's point of view. For Woyzeck sees the world as filled with anonymous forces. In scene I, Woyzeck talks of "the Freemasons!" as responsible for the rolling heads and underground passages he hallucinates into being. In scene VIII, Woyzeck speaks of "the toadstools, Doctor. There -- that's where it is. Have you seen how they grow in patterns? If only someone could read

that." Woyzeck's world is filled with and controlled by great forces only occasionally glimpsed, and perhaps he attributes to the Doctor and Captain some of the same mysteriousness and respect he gives his [hallucinations](#).

Animal imagery appears throughout Woyzeck -- appropriate, since the rough society Woyzeck exists in has been lowered to the animalistic level. Marie is a sensuous, animal woman, ...

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... or not. The Captain's and the Doctor's relentless scorn and disparagement have killed his intellectual, rational part. Marie has murdered Woyzeck's emotional side almost from the moment he saw her with the Drum Major's earrings -- the red necklace of blood which signals Marie's death is only justice, in Woyzeck's eyes. Viewed as "the lowest level of the human race", no better than a dressed monkey, Woyzeck is systematically stripped of his humanity and oppressed. To the Captain, to the Doctor, he is no better than a spider or a Proteus bacterium. Perhaps he would empathize with Gloucester, in Shakespeare's King Lear, another tale of humanity supremely stripped away:

"As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods:

They kill us for their sport."

(King Lear, IV.i.36-7)

Work Cited

Woyzeck, by George Buchner. Ed. Henry J. Schmidt Avon Books (New York) 1969

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