

Subjugated to manipulation: the freedom of will in büchner's woyzeck



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Karl Georg Büchner (17 October 1813 – 19 February 1837) was a German playwright, natural scientist, poet, and writer, who was a member of the literary group Young Germany. To this end, he was also considered a revolutionary, as the liberal movement was against the reactionary politics of the Restoration. In 1831, Büchner was introduced to politics and furthered his understanding of political history through French literature. His studies also took him to Gießen and Zurich, and proved so successful that medical dissertation, *Mémoire sur le Système Nerveux du Barbeau* (*Cyprinus barbus* L.), was published and distributed in several cities and universities. With this publication came the award of his M. D. and Büchner's final months were spent writing and lecturing at the university in Zurich before he succumbed to typhoid fever at the young age of 23 (Hellock).

The play *Woyzeck* was written by Georg Büchner shortly before his death and is considered an important reflection of Naturalism. This disjointed theater piece involves a poor soldier, Woyzeck, and his common-law wife, Marie, with whom he has a child and whom he kills at the end of the story, due to her affair with the Drum Major. Of the many themes in this play, it is mental instability, freedom of will, and repressed emotions to be the most reflective of Woyzeck's plight. Even in the beginning of the play, Woyzeck is having apocalyptic hallucinations of fire, darkness, and the Freemasons returning. As the story evolves, the reader notices that his madness is brought on by the Doctor, who inhumanely subjects him to tests (such as eating only peas, being the least cruel of his experiments), and the Captain, who is unreasonably obsessed with Woyzeck's rushed activity and attempts to control him and his pace of life. Although the Captain employs Woyzeck

with various mundane activities such as shaving him, he barely pays Woyzeck enough wages for a healthy living standard.

These two characters, the Doctor and the Captain, make for interesting case studies, as they both have peculiarities about their manipulative natures and display cognitive dissonance. For instance, when the Doctor catches Woyzeck urinating on the side of the building, he goes on a rant and paces – only to contradict himself by telling Woyzeck how calm the Doctor feels and his rationale for why he finds anger to be unscientific. Similarly, as previously mentioned that the Captain despises rushing, he berates both the Doctor and Woyzeck for their haste and yet is described as being out of breath in multiple passages, such as the ninth scene. This scene is prime for epitomizing the personalities of the Doctor and the Captain, both who hold themselves in very high regard.

As they interact, it becomes clear that the Doctor has a burning desire to experiment and be world-renowned in his practice. He eagerly attempts to persuade the Captain to become his patient and urges, “ I could do some experiments that would put your name in the annals of medical history.” Uninterested with being the subject of study, the Captain not only prefers being the manipulator rather than the manipulated, but also he plays into the role of the virtuous victim. A few quotes which support this theory include the Captain’s line, “ A good man with a clear conscience doesn’t rush about like that. Grant me the privilege of saving a human life.” The Captain also exposes his fears of failure and being forgotten, as he cries out, “ Doctor, please stop – I get so depressed...I see my coat hanging on the wall with nobody in it and I burst into tears” (Büchner 29). Of these two <https://assignbuster.com/subjugated-to-manipulation-the-freedom-of-will-in-bchners-woyzeck/>

characters, however, it is the Captain who is the most insidious, as he is the one to disclose Marie's affair to Woyzeck. Still feigning virtue, the Captain tells Woyzeck that divulging this secret is him "only trying to help" (Büchner 31).

Given that Büchner died before finishing this drama, it is up to interpretation of how the author might have rearranged the scenes and established an ending - if any - to this piece. The disjointed scenes and murky ending, however, has made way for many adaptations of this book by various authors, playwrights, and directors. The classic work of literature has been read as a book, performed as a play and an opera, and even brought to life on screen as a film, with the most notable adaptation by the acclaimed German film director Werner Herzog. Woyzeck has also been utilized in studies of philosophy; play's structural relationship to time and space as well as themes of freedom and causality reflect allusions to the philosopher Schopenhauer's question of determinism and freedom of will (Weber). Rivaling the pessimism in previous German literature, Georg Büchner illuminates ethical issues while leaving the reader feeling as helpless and ignorant as Woyzeck himself.

Works Cited

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