

# An analysis of naturalism in henry schmidt's

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Henry Schmidt's translation of Georg Buchner's "Woyzeck", the original work that was written partially in the late 1830s, carries the author's intent of exposing the effects of the events of the time—in a style pronounced with significant wit, sarcasm, and absurdity. This manner lends itself well in the discussion of matters that question the weaknesses of humanity, in reference to the circumstances with which it is forced to co-exist.

The play is largely based on the true story of one Johann Christian Woyzeck, a small-town German soldier who was beheaded in 1821 for the murder of his mistress. With that premise, Buchner created a play that would showcase the literary movement of Naturalism, which had been active in the late nineteenth century (Knapp, 2003). Compared to the Realist thrust of presenting the balance of good and evil forces in life, proponents of Naturalism aimed to focus on the negative aspect of humanity and existence—producing some of the most pessimistic and bleak insights in literature. The Naturalist worldview places man as a veritable specimen, helpless and vulnerable, and completely consumed by his environment. This often results in despair, devastation, and tragedy—coinciding with the Naturalist belief in the predetermined fate of humanity as an effect of science (Campbell, 1997-2008). Buchner's subscription to these parameters is evident in "Woyzeck", which enumerates the ills of society and environment and narrates the effects these elements have on a human being—transforming him from man to animal, ultimately allowing instinct to rule over reason.

II. The Role of Economics  
It was common for a country to experience a period of poverty after engaging in war, and Buchner's depiction of a small German town included this reality. The author further expounds on its

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significance through economics, specifically by the extensive use of professions as a substitute for actual names—in fact, among the major characters, only Woyzeck and Marie are named, while the others are defined by their professional capacities. The Captain and Doctor are clearly shown to be the most powerful personalities in the community, and have a great amount of influence on Woyzeck; the Captain is portrayed logically as Woyzeck's master, due to the latter being a soldier. The Doctor, on the other hand, apparently has much control over Woyzeck, going as far as treating him as a virtual lab specimen for his medical experiments.

Another character, the Drum Major, is perceived to be of higher economic and social status compared to Woyzeck, and has also surpassed him in claiming the attention of Marie, Woyzeck's mistress. With Woyzeck being made to submit to the various demands of the three unnamed yet controlling characters, the author reveals economics as a prime consideration in the dehumanization of an individual. Because Woyzeck is seen as inferior, those in positions of authority take it upon themselves to pronounce this fact even more—through the Captain's presumption of Woyzeck's lack of intelligence, the Doctor's unethical use of his knowledge and credibility to impose studies on Woyzeck, and the Drum Major's trespassing of Woyzeck's familial territory. Woyzeck, owing to his standing in society, blindly allows such violations to take place. III.

Animal Imagery in "Woyzeck" The actual use and mention of animals in the text are purposely done to further confirm the concept of dehumanization—and this is apparent in the allusions to Woyzeck himself. Various animals are used to refer to him, and most of these—spider, dog, cat, and donkey—are

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adjudged to mirror his qualities. The Captain sarcastically describes Woyzeck as taking off “ like the shadow before a spider” (p. 42), which shows the amount of respect accorded to the latter. But the most explicit comparisons to animals are made by the Doctor, who recounts how Woyzeck “ pissed on the wall like a dog” (p. 37).

and even directly refers to him s “ you dog” (p. 49). Alternatively, the Doctor constructs relations between Woyzeck and a cat, mentioning how the latter “ holds the [cat] so tenderly, like it was his own grandmother” (p. 49). He widens the realm of choices by stating how Woyzeck “ represents a transition to the donkey..

. from being brought up by women” (p. 49), brought upon by Woyzeck’s failure to wiggle his ears. The most important example of animal imagery is exposed during the Barker’s presentation and pronouncement of a dressed-up monkey—which he uses to establish his opinion on how providing an animal with “ art”, referring to human clothing and manner of appearance, already makes it on an equal level with man. He concludes by visualizing the monkey shooting “ a pistol, stands on one leg” (p. 30), which then makes it a soldier, whom he believes is the “ lowest level of the human race” (p. 31). This entire scene demonstrates the perception and level of acceptance accorded to Woyzeck, who, as a mere soldier, is not expected to think or rationalize—quite like a regular animal. Then again, not all animal references are equated with negativity and condescension, as evidenced by Marie’s proclamation of the Drum Major standing “ on his feet like a lion” (p. 28). Because the lion is known to be a huge and powerful animal, comparisons

appear to be on a positive note. The horse, meanwhile, is portrayed in the text almost on the same level as humans, as it is mentioned in various situations that may even create confusion as to the difference between man and animal.

Clearly, the traditional representations of horses—from power to stance to sexuality—are supposed to be conveyed. IV. Reason vs. Instinct Though Woyzeck is depicted to be of average intelligence, at least in the beginning, he is shown to have several episodes of profundity unexpected of his level. When he attempts to discuss religion and morality with the Captain, sharing his view on his own reality and practicality, the latter dismisses him.

In fact, Woyzeck had been able to expound on a significant insight common among the righteous and pretentious in any society: the belief that adhering to the rules of organized religion may erase any complex and questionable circumstance, and that any situation not bearing religious approval is considered wrong and immoral. This shows the kind of hypocrisy present in most societies, which upholds the dictates of establishment without considering the particular situations humans are forced to be in; and because these are always associated with those who hold power, then there is no chance for the common man to rise above the dregs to which he has been relegated. Because of this general reception to his initial forays into philosophizing, Woyzeck has no other choice but to do exactly what is expected of him—to stop thinking, and simply perform the duties and roles assigned. However, due to the Doctor's manipulation of his diet and continuous observations and experimentation on his physical and mental behavior, Woyzeck starts developing visions and emotions that run beyond <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-naturalism-in-henry-schmidts/>

the call of reason. He starts hearing and seeing things, which heightens emotions such as jealousy and anger, that would probably not have overwhelmed him completely had he been of sound mind and right physical state. This ultimately leads to his murder of Marie, a result of the seed of jealousy planted by the sight of his mistress and the Drum Major.

Even this negative emotion, the farthest in the spectrum from reason, had actually sufficient causes; the pair of earrings given to Marie by the Drum Major and the latter's win in a duel with Woyzeck often justify retaliation in the real world. But Woyzeck's undernourished body manifested its effects on his mind, and brought him to commit the gravest act that could be equated with lack of rational thinking. This final blow still did not wake Woyzeck from his ill condition—upon seeing Marie's dead body, his mind could not define reality; all he could see, in the red slash across her neck, was a necklace that could have been from another man. Throughout the play, Woyzeck and other poor characters would often muse about their unfortunate conditions; from Marie's acceptance and declaration of her being a whore, and its transference to her son; the Grandmother's narration of a strange fairy tale that goes against all rules; to Woyzeck's own admission of his being a poor man with no money, and therefore without virtue. He even believes that people like him should only "act like nature tells us" (p. 35).

This is typical of the parameters set by the ruling class in every society—keep the power among themselves, and let the rest function in ways that will only enhance the upper class' status, further widening the gap between the rich and the poor. Such is the kind of reality that has existed for centuries, and is perhaps one of the tenets highlighted by Naturalist thinking. V.

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The Marriage of Science and Art  
The Naturalist thrust was to depend entirely on science to explain their views of life as one of despair and bleakness, but uses this methodology to show the effects through art. The product was a complete involvement in the beauty of negativity and pessimism, quite the opposite of the ideals of Romanticism that heralded the power of man's imagination to live beyond the undesirable circumstances of life.

In 'Woyzeck', the Doctor represents this aspect of Naturalism—his penchant for experiments and the effects of unsuitable conditions on Woyzeck exhibits the occurrence of the same in the world. When the Doctor tries to discover how a strict diet of peas would affect a man's mental, emotional, and physical state, the Naturalist in the author actually tries to convey the results of insufficiencies supplied by the universe to humanity. The Doctor also appears quite inhuman himself—unconcerned with the permanent effects his experiments were having on Woyzeck, and would even compensate him with higher wages and pay raises when the latter would report new regressions in his condition. The same may be said of the world, according to Naturalists; that the continuous and increasing presence of situations and impositions that are incompatible with the nature of humans will only continue to strip people to their very core—thus revealing the innate strength of instinct, which is all that is left. Naturalist literature aims to present this proof, through works like "Woyzeck", of science or nature being the essence of humanity. VI.

Conclusion  
Buchner's decision to use a true story as the foundation of his play works within the parameters of Naturalism; compared to literature of other disciplines, Naturalist writers intend to present the complete  
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experiences of their subjects, in order to preserve the evidence of dehumanization as a product of reality. Many may assume 'Woyzeck' to be a social commentary, a depiction of the lives of the poor and unfortunate in the midst of the powerful, which may be so, yet the foremost intention is to showcase the effects of man-made negativity and evils on humans, who are simply victims of these ills. Through the absurd and almost senseless tone appropriated by the author, the Naturalist in Buchner is successful in communicating the same qualities evident in life as experienced by people. It is interesting to note how "Woyzeck" does not carry the typical ideals of traditional literature of this era—employing morals and retribution—and thoroughly depicts the main character as one who is truly unlucky and unfortunate. This is precisely the essence of Naturalism, wherein humans are not presented with the right to choose, or a chance for redemption.

Everything is dependent in predetermined laws, on scientific methods, and on the designs of nature. Imagination and willpower, often upheld as catalysts in most literary works, have no place in this thinking as they invoke the ability to reason and defend a particular view or choice." Woyzeck" is not a story about the poor overcoming the odds, but rather a revelation of reality as a convergence of non-negotiable negativity. Like Woyzeck, Naturalists believe humans are already given their set of expectations based on their status in life—and there is nothing one can do to reverse the cycle, since society and environment will always be infested with the evils of hypocrisy, mental instability, and class distinction.