

Woyzeck as a symbol for powerlessness and suffering



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Woyzeck is a very politically charged production with a great deal of room for symbolic interpretations, however, with the circumstances of Buchner's political life taken into consideration, it's clear that they follow a pattern. Buchner's revolutionary tendencies bleed into the script of Woyzeck in showing the shortcomings of the societal system that he operates in, and how that system leaves its subjects powerless. Woyzeck's powerlessness in his society ultimately is what leads to his downfall as he's attacked on all fronts.

To break this down a bit, Woyzeck's powerlessness is emphasized in several key parts of the script, specifically the scene in which he is shaving his commanding officer and the officer directly belittles him for his position in the world, and the scenes in which he is utilized as a test subject for experimentation, and of course, his partner's alleged affair with the drum-major. In the first example, Woyzeck is subjected to a show of power that is admittedly cliché, but effective nonetheless, as he is given the means and the power to easily assert his dominance over his commanding officer with a knife to the throat, and yet, is unable to act on that impulse, as he has neither the choice nor the ability to not submit to the authority of his superior. This is one of the first examples we see of his powerlessness in life, and it is one of the most straightforward ones, which gives it the least amount of weight, but regardless, still sets him on the path to self-destruction, which Buchner makes clear in his play was nearly unavoidable. With the world that Woyzeck inhabits, his only choices are to be destroyed by the oppressive world that is driving him into madness or to be destroyed by himself.

In the experiment scenes, we see a bit more of how the world drives him to the low-point at which he chooses to destroy himself, as he is stripped of his humanity and dignity. Placed on a peas-only diet, he finds himself urinating on the street and suffering from mild delusions and hallucinations, and is encouraged by the doctor to lose increasingly more of his humanity and is treated more as a test-subject than as a person. Furthermore, he is put on display in front of the audience being bitten by a cat that is being bitten by a flea and showcased in a meta-narrative showcase of Woyzeck as the embodiment of human suffering. Although he is referred to as a “truly human specimen”, the fact that he is labeled in that way brings both himself and the concept of the human race down to a more animalistic level. As animal imagery is so present in the script via the circus scenes, this serves to invert the symbol and use the label of “human” ironically in order to drive the point still further of humanity being a creature that was made to suffer and being repressed by an institution that exploits him for the gain of socially elite.

Then, of course, the crux of the production is the hardest hitting display of powerlessness as he is rejected in his social life. His partner’s infidelity with the drum-major is both a humiliation and a final defeat, as the most important figure in his private life rejects him and is the last straw that sends him spiraling into madness. She chooses a socially superior man in the drum-major, who is more animalistic, but simultaneously more powerful (both in status and physique, as is proven when Woyzeck picks a fight with the drum-major to defend his honor and Woyzeck loses by a wide margin). It is then that Woyzeck decides to make the only choice he can to assert his own

power and dominance in any facet of his life by killing his partner, which ironically is one of the most powerless things that he could have possibly done, as it is a completely self-destructive act. While it does liberate him from the torment of a powerless life and alleviates some of his hallucinations, it does also lower his status to that of a fugitive and makes him ultimately responsible for the wrongs in his life rather than the system which has wronged him. This is even further exaggerated when he tries to collect his child after the fact and the child also rejects him for the act that he has done: pushing away the innocent bystander, who is also the only person that had yet to usurp his power.

Understanding these facets of the play is more explicitly clear when understanding Buchner's life, and it becomes apparent that his intended symbolism was a dark message on how deeply flawed the political and social system was, and that *Woyzeck* was a commentary on why it needed to be overturned. As Buchner died before the play was completed, it's an ironic truth that it showcased his own powerlessness as much as it did *Woyzeck's*.