



Set Text Guide: Woyzeck

AS and A Level Drama and Theatre

Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced GCE in Drama and Theatre (9DR0)

**Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in
Drama and Theatre (9DR0)**

GCE Drama 2017: Woyzeck

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Summary

Scene 1

The woods

Woyzeck is in the woods with his companion Andres. They are soldiers. He tells his friend that this place is cursed. He is hallucinating, and seems agitated and paranoid. Andres cannot see or hear the things that Woyzeck does. Eventually the drums sound and they must return to the barracks.

Scene 2

Marie's house

Marie, Woyzeck's partner, is looking out of her window holding her baby. She and her friend, Margaret, are admiring the Drum-Major as he marches outside on the street. He salutes Marie. Margaret notices how friendly Marie's acknowledgement is and points out to her how her eyes are still shining. Marie does not take kindly to this; they insult each other, and Margaret leaves.

Marie tells her baby that it is the child of a whore anyway, and then sings to it. Woyzeck arrives at the window, manic. He tells Marie about his hallucinations, then hurries off. Marie is left frustrated that he didn't even look at his baby.

Scene 3

The fairground at the edge of the woods

Marie and Woyzeck are at the fair. They are invited into a show tent by a showman, who tells of all the wonders inside. As they go in, the Drum-Major and the Sergeant enter the fairground. They both ogle Marie, then go inside the tent.

The showman presents an astronomical horse, which performs tricks with which to mock mankind. After the show is finished, the Sergeant orders Woyzeck to help the showman attend to his effects. This is done as a diversionary tactic while the Drum-Major follows Marie off by the woods. Finally, Woyzeck is released and he runs out, shouting for Marie.

Scene 4

Marie's room

Marie is tucking the baby into its crib. She is bemoaning Woyzeck's blind obedience to orders. She is admiring her new earrings, which we assume have been bought for her by the Drum-Major. When Woyzeck enters, she tries to conceal her ears, but when he spots them, she says she found them. In his naivety, he is just amazed that she found two identical earrings. After he leaves, Marie curses herself to hell, exclaiming that she ought to cut her own throat.

Scene 5

The Captain's room

The Captain is sitting in his chair awaiting a shave from Woyzeck. He mocks Woyzeck, saying that he has no virtues. Woyzeck argues that if he had money he would have morals and virtues. This scene shows the disjunct between the classes, as neither of the men truly understands the other's situation.

Scene 6

The street

Woyzeck is urinating against a wall. He is caught by the Doctor, who is not at all pleased. We learn that the Doctor is paying Woyzeck to be his lab rat. Woyzeck is on a peas-only diet, and the Doctor is examining the physical and mental effects this has. He is delighted to hear of Woyzeck's strange philosophising about nature, and concludes that he is set for an asylum. Woyzeck seems oblivious to the ramifications of this, and is happy to continue as the Doctor's guinea pig while he is being paid.

Scene 7

Marie's room

The Drum-Major is with Marie, marching round the room for her pleasure. He makes an advance on her. At first, she fights him off, but then gives in to him.

Scene 8

The Doctor's teaching room

The Doctor is presenting Woyzeck to an audience of students. He explains the peas-only diet, and asks the students to observe Woyzeck's irregular pulse and peculiar eyes. This scene highlights the inhumane treatment of Woyzeck.

Scene 9

The street

The Doctor and the Captain jest with each other. Woyzeck arrives and the Captain insinuates that Marie is having an affair with the Drum-Major. Woyzeck initially thinks he is joking, tragically explaining that he has nothing but her in the world. When he realises it isn't a joke, he runs off.

Scene 10

Marie's room

Woyzeck confronts Marie. He is in a fit of grief over the news of her infidelity. Marie evades his accusations, insisting that he is delirious. He calls her a whore and exits.

Scene 11

The guardroom

Woyzeck is with Andres, who tries to convince him to come dancing at the inn. Woyzeck is preoccupied with thoughts of Marie and the Drum-Major. His mental state is rapidly deteriorating, and does so from now until the end of the play. (It is important for the actor playing Woyzeck to appreciate that they will need to allow room for this deterioration to progress. That is to say; if one were to rate madness on a scale of 1–10, do not come in at 10 and leave yourself with nowhere to go.)

Scene 12

The tavern

Woyzeck arrives at the tavern, and sees the Drum-Major dancing with Marie, leaving him grief-stricken. He spirals into deeper madness, eventually running out.

Scene 13

The woods

Woyzeck is rambling in a crazed state. He seems to be having a conversation with his conscience, debating whether he must stab Marie. The conclusion appears to be that he must.

Scene 14

The guardroom

Woyzeck tells Andres that he cannot sleep, as everything spins when he closes his eyes. His friend is half asleep, and tells him to go to bed. Woyzeck is caught in his thoughts of stabbing, and goes out into the night.

Scene 15

The tavern

Woyzeck confronts the drunk Drum-Major at the tavern, by insubordinately whistling at him. This enrages the Drum-Major, who, after the provocation, beats up Woyzeck.

Scene 16

The guardroom, the following morning

Woyzeck quizzes Andres on what he has heard the Drum-Major saying about Marie. Andre does not see the need for Woyzeck to know what was said, and gives him a potentially facetious, chauvinistic quote. Whether this is verbatim from the Drum-Major or not, it is enough to cause Woyzeck to storm off.

Scene 17

The Jew's shop

Woyzeck arrives at the Jew's shop and first asks how much a gun costs. Once he establishes that he cannot afford this, he settles for a knife. It is for the director to interpret why he is initially looking for a gun, when the voices in his head have been talking of stabbing. For example, this could be a subconscious way of him trying to avoid committing the act, or it could be viewed as cowardice, as to stab someone to death involves more engagement than shooting.

Scene 18

Marie's room

Marie is reading to her baby from the Bible. She is clearly wracked with guilt over her infidelity. It is as though she is asking God for forgiveness, and to be absolved of her sins.

Scene 19

The guardroom

Woyzeck is going through his kitbag in the guardroom with Andres. He is talking to Andres about his belongings as though he will not be coming back. Andres urges him to report sick, as there is clearly something wrong with him.

Scene 20

The street

Marie and Margaret are standing in the street by the Grandmother, who is seated. Margaret sings for her, but the old woman does not like it. They ask her to tell them a story. She tells a dark tale about an orphaned boy who is alone and searches fruitlessly for happiness for all eternity. This story could be representative of the play: it highlights the futility of mankind. The scene ends as Woyzeck arrives and leads Marie away, saying 'It's time'.

Scene 21

The woods

Marie is scared, as Woyzeck has led her into the woods. He stabs her, holds her head back, and cuts her throat. After letting the body fall, he turns and runs. It is the job of the director and actors to decide how exactly this death scene plays out. There are numerous questions to ask of the characters: does Marie suspect her life to be in danger from the start? Does Woyzeck stab her aggressively, or in a calm and ruthless manner?

Scene 22

The tavern

Woyzeck bursts into the tavern and joins the dancing. He is in a blood-soaked frenzy. Margaret notices that he has blood on his hand. The crowd turn on him, realising that he is covered in blood. Woyzeck hastily denies that he is a murderer, and rushes through the crowd and out of the door.

Scene 23

The woods

Woyzeck returns to Marie's lifeless body in the woods. He talks to her as though she can hear him, asking her questions which, of course, she cannot answer. It is as though he is revelling in the mockery. He lifts her body and descends with it into the water, claiming he is going to wash her. The two journeymen come by the wood and hear drowning.

Scene 24

The morgue

Marie and Woyzeck's corpses lie under sheets in the morgue. The Doctor enters and inspects the bodies. First he investigates the cadaver of Marie, concluding that her death was caused by a slit to the throat. He then moves onto the body of Woyzeck, concluding that he was drowned. The Captain enters, claiming that he knew Woyzeck would come to a nasty end. The doctor makes an incision in Woyzeck's body and is dumbfounded to discover there is no blood.

Scene 25

The woods

Andres is chopping sticks. He hears whistling. He discovers blood in the sticks, and assumes he must have cut himself. He hears the whistling again, and begins to scabble in the sticks, which are covered in blood and gore. The Grandmother appears behind him, in a hood. He realises that the blood is coming out of the ground. The Grandmother laughs, and he runs off. This final scene is abstract. There are questions for the director to consider: Is the blood coming out of the ground that which was absent from Woyzeck's body? What power does the Grandmother have, and what are her motives? Because of the disjointed structure of the play, there are many ways of interpreting moments like this. It may even be that the production does not give definitive answers, leaving theories about the play's meanings up to the audience. However, it is crucial that the actors make clear choices about the motives and thoughts of their individual characters.

Characters

Andres

A soldier, and Woyzeck's companion. He provides a contrast of sanity against Woyzeck's madness.

Woyzeck

The protagonist. He is a soldier, working class and poor. He is inherently good, but the world around him causes him suffering. The authority figures of the Captain and the Doctor exploit him. He is eventually driven mad, to the point that he murders Marie.

Marie

Woyzeck's common-law partner and mother of his illegitimate child. She is frustrated by his lack of interest in the baby and in her. This leads her to infidelity with the handsome Drum-Major. This is the catalyst for Woyzeck's anger which leads to her murder.

Margaret

Marie's neighbour. She remarks on Marie's interest in the Drum-Major.

Drum-Major

A specially privileged senior NCO used as a mascot and for recruitment purposes. Chosen for his physique, he is splendidly uniformed and is excused normal duties. He seduces Marie.

Showman

From the travelling fair; he performs tricks with a horse.

Sergeant

An associate of the Drum-Major.

The Captain

An army officer for whom Woyzeck acts as a barber. He mocks Woyzeck for his lack of morals, but ultimately he simply has no respect for him due to his class. He is partly responsible for Woyzeck's emotional downfall.

The Doctor

He is performing a bizarre experiment on Woyzeck, in which he forces him to eat only peas. He treats Woyzeck as an animal, presenting the findings of his experiment to students. He shows total disregard for Woyzeck's mental and physical well-being. He is also partly responsible for Woyzeck's demise.

Grandmother

An old, blind woman. She tells a foreboding, dark fairy tale which is indicative of the struggle faced by Woyzeck.

Journeyman

Artisans beyond apprenticeship who must serve a period in another area before they become master craftsmen. They wore a black uniform with headgear.

Social, cultural and historical background

Georg Büchner was a German dramatist, born in 1813. He was one of the forerunners of the Expressionist school of play-writing in the early twentieth century.

Büchner was the son of an army doctor, and studied medicine. This tallies with *Woyzeck* being a soldier and the presence of the doctor, along with the in-depth medical terminology used in the play. He was interested in economic and political revolution, and founded a radical society, the Society for Human Rights. He was wanted for arrest for this, but he evaded capture and was able to complete his dissertation in Strasbourg.

Büchner wrote three plays: *Danton's Death*, *Leonce und Lena* and *Woyzeck*. All his work was politically and socially driven. His plays all featured short, abrupt scenes. Structurally they were ahead of their time. His legacy was only truly established posthumously, and today the most important literary prize in Germany is the Georg Büchner Prize.

Büchner never finished *Woyzeck*; it was finished posthumously by various authors and translators. It has since become one of the most influential and most performed plays in German theatre. It is thought that Büchner began writing the play in the summer of 1836. It remained in fragments and unfinished until the time of his death in 1837. It wasn't published until 1879, and not performed until 1913.

It was rare at the time of writing for a play to focus on the working classes. *Woyzeck* is often seen as a working-class tragedy. It was loosely based on the true story of Christian Woyzeck, a soldier who, in 1821, murdered his wife in a fit of jealousy.

There have been many adaptations, and due to the unfinished and fragmented nature of the original manuscripts, the structure and ending of the adaptations vary. The order of the scenes varies: in some versions, *Woyzeck* does not drown at the end, but instead returns to the town and is executed for murder. This ending is, in fact, closer to the true story it is based on, as Christian Woyzeck was beheaded for the murder of his wife.

Themes

Poverty and the working classes

Woyzeck is working class, and as such he faces physical and emotional suffering. His need for money causes him to participate in the Doctor's experiment, which causes his physical and mental health to deteriorate. The Doctor, Captain and Drum-Major represent the privileged middle class. The Doctor exploits Woyzeck's poverty and treats him like an animal. The Captain has Woyzeck shave him, whilst being condescending to him. The Captain does not believe Woyzeck is virtuous, and Woyzeck agrees, thinking virtue to be a trait that comes with wealth. Like the orphan boy from the Grandmother's fairy tale, searching for happiness as a member of the working class is portrayed as a futile ambition.

Madness

In the opening scene Woyzeck is hallucinating. His mental state spirals to the point of murder through the play. Andres advises him to seek medical help, though ironically it is the Doctor who is causing his psychiatric collapse. Woyzeck converses with a voice that tells him to stab Marie. Were it not for this, he may not have reacted to her infidelity in such an extreme way.

Suffering

Woyzeck's suffering is representative of the suffering of humanity in general: it is undeserved and unavoidable. His anguish is both mental and physical, and though he is inherently good, it is as though the world is punishing him. This is also the case in the fairy tale told by the Grandmother, where the orphan boy cannot avoid suffering.

The biblical

Woyzeck was born on the day of the Feast of the Annunciation, the day that marks the conception of Christ. His suffering could be representative of that of Christ, however, he does not react to his torture in the same way. Marie's name could be a connection to the Virgin Mary. It is as though by being offered this comparison, we see that were it not for their poverty and the constraints of society, they too could have been elevated to archetypal greatness.

Violence

Woyzeck is a soldier, therefore at his moment of greatest despair, violence comes naturally to him. The murder of Marie is hyperviolent, and Woyzeck is almost in a hypnotic state whilst stabbing her. His hallucinations have been violent since the first scene. In the final scene, even the ground bleeds.

Sex

Though Woyzeck talks of having once desired Marie, he seems to show little or no sexual desire. This lack of sex drive may have been caused by his peas-only diet, or simply as a side-effect of his increasingly fragile mental state. This leaves Marie sexually unfulfilled, which leads to her infidelity with the Drum-Major, and ultimately to her death.

Resources

Recommended edition

Woyzeck by Georg Büchner

It is advisable to use the Edexcel version of the script, which can be downloaded free of charge from the Drama section of the website.

Further reading

A.H.J. Knight, *Georg Büchner*

Maurice Benn, *The Drama of Revolt* (1976)

Online resources

<http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/books/woyzeck-iid-155191/do-9781784603557-div-00000003>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2002/sep/28/theatre.artsfeatures>

Useful soundtracks to use in the classroom

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dp10D7GYPBI&list=PLiT2fSOfS4_vAW4Y4zQ1zkKViw_u5SctQE

The music of Chopin is not only time-specific, but also may help the actors to discover madness.

Practical exploration activities

Actors

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *Woyzeck*. Some of the exercises may help actors to consider how key roles might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'.

Woyzeck is classed as naturalism. One major challenge for the actor playing Woyzeck is how to portray a man going mad. As stated during the summary, the play opens with him hallucinating, so it is important for the actor to give themselves somewhere to go with the madness. **Try an exercise where you assign numbers from 1 to 10 to different levels of madness.** Explore physically what it is like to move along this scale. Is it possible to move in both directions? And can you jump from 1 to 10, or do you need to move through the stages?

Off-text improvisation is a useful explorative technique to consider the 'before and after' life of the play. You might explore moments from the play that are alluded to but not seen, for example:

- Woyzeck and Marie when they first met
- Woyzeck and Andres in happier times relaxing in the guardroom
- The Doctor when he first approaches Woyzeck to use him as the subject of his experiment
- The Drum-Major giving Marie the earrings
- The Captain interviewing Woyzeck to join the army.

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting method to develop characterisation. It helps actors to 'flesh out' their understanding of the characters. Using their imagination and the information provided in the given circumstances will allow the actors to consider the voice, attitude, and physicality of the character they are exploring.

A more theatrical way to explore hot-seating might be to combine this exercise with an off-text improvisation. For example, following on from the examples above, after we have watched a scene play out, we could immediately interview the character and ask them probing questions to discover thoughts the actor may not have considered.

Exploring accent and dialect can also help actors to consider character choices. Though the play is German in origin, obviously, this is an English translation, so performers need not feel they must perform with German accents. This is of course a valid option, but more important for the audience might be how accent and dialect inform status and class.

Non-verbal communication is often a highly effective way to explore character, subtext, tension and silence. How does each character behave in moments of silence? For example, you might see how different characters behave when they are on their own. How does this differ, if it does, from how they behave when they are with other characters?

Key scene work / alternative viewpoints

Another useful exercise to consider involves **staging and rehearsing a key scene with a particular focus** then trying it in an alternative style. For example, the actors might explore status in conjunction with the director. The director calls out numbers from 1 to 20 for the actors in the space: 1 is the lowest status, that of a slug, if you will; 20 is the highest status, the king, perhaps. By playing this game we can begin to discover how bodies in space can signify status, and this might give us a good indication of how to stage certain pivotal moments in the play, where status plays a crucial role. This is especially interesting for exploring the class divide in *Woyzeck*. Woyzeck has such a low status that the Doctor treats him as an animal. This exercise may be a useful way for the actors playing the Doctor, Captain and Drum-Major and Sergeant to find ways to exert their status and authority over Woyzeck. Don't just focus on the extremes though, as interesting discoveries can be made when exploring the dynamic between two characters of similar status. For example, the Doctor and the Captain jostle for position with each other. If each man's status is given a number, can it change during a scene as the balance of power shifts?

Designers

The following exercises and ideas are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the opportunities, themes and ideas that are central to *Woyzeck*. Some of the suggestions may help designers to consider how key aspects of the play might be communicated and realised and from 'page to stage'.

It might be useful to set up a **production meeting and pitch** for your student designers, as this will help them to consider the play as a whole and root their practical ideas in aims and intentions. Remember that audience impact is key, and that setting up small groups of potential theatre makers might help students to consider the text in a holistic way. For example, a group could consist of a set, costume, sound and lighting designer; smaller groups simply take on more than one area of responsibility. It is important that each designer questions the aims and intentions of the others, so that each member of the production team is able to think in a holistic and collaborative way. The design 'pitch' could then be offered to the teacher (producer). This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It can work at the start of a scheme of work to initiate ideas/contextualise themes and key moments, or at the end of a scheme of work as a way of ensuring all aspects of production are considered. It would also make an excellent 'active' revision session in time for the exam. TIP – each member of the production team should justify their ideas with key moments from the play.

Creating a model box of a potential set design is a useful exercise and can be as simple or as elaborate as required. It is often useful for students to see how each scene will be played in a potential space, and by creating a model box they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas in a specific space. *Woyzeck* has certain locations that are explicitly named for each scene. A designer might write these out to see the specific spaces their design has to evoke in order to create a set that can cater for all these spaces.

Exploring different music and sound effects for key scenes is another effective way of considering how design can play an important role in the development of a key idea or theme. The dancing in the tavern may require music. However, do not feel that a sound design must be focused solely on music. How might sound effects be used to help convey Woyzeck's madness?

How can lighting help to create shadow and suspense? Have a **look at previous productions and lighting designs** to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact. If you don't have access to lighting, you might want to consider the effect of torches or candles (safety first!) Think about Woyzeck's hallucinations: how might lighting help the audience to experience what he is seeing inside his mind?

Another useful exercise that helps to build the world of the play and develop ideas for performance is **sourcing and designing potential costumes**. Research is key, and will help students who are initially daunted about the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. The main thing is that they approach the design of the production in a holistic way. Is their costume design expressionistic, representational, or more naturalistic? What is their aim and intention? Does their costume design root the production and performance in a particular time period or style? The fact that it was written in the nineteenth century does not necessarily mean the characters must wear nineteenth-century German clothing. Of course, there is a strong military theme, but again, do not feel with any aspect of design that you must strictly stick within conventional boundaries. Ultimately, the story comes first, and if the design helps to tell the story, then it is doing its job.

