Spring Awakening and Anti-Conformity: An Ideological Criticism

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Introduction

Spring Awakening is a rock opera musical that "seem(s) to capture from within the uniquely teenage feeling that every emotion is the most tempestuous, frightening, passionate or exciting one ever experienced" and is "a show that bristles with rawness, vitality and urgency" (Rooney). *Spring Awakening: A New Musical* is based off of an 1891 play written by German dramatist Frank Wedekind. *Spring Awakening* was first performed with high censorship in Germany in 1906. In 1917 *Spring Awakening: A Children's Tragedy* was closed after its opening night in New York City "amid public outrage and charges of obscenity" (Dramatists). *Spring Awakening* is a controversial piece of art that tells the story of three teenagers, Melchior, Moritz, Wendla and their friends, as they attempt to discover their sexuality and their identities. Due to its content, including sex, suicide, homosexuality, abuse, and masturbation, the play was considered radical and degrading to audiences at the time.

Spring Awakening is one of many musicals that have brought crowds to their feet, along with other controversial shows such as *Rent* and *Hair*. Musicals seem to provide pure entertainment and nothing more because there is a wall separating the performance and the audience, creating two worlds in apparent disconnect. In reality, however, most musicals are used, just like many other forms of media, to relay social commentaries or particular worldviews to the audience and have the ability to become a very powerful form of rhetoric.

Musicals have intense rhetorical force because they combine music and dialogue. Music is a very influential form of media and it is very easy for an individual to connect

with a song when the lyrics and melody are in sync. Every human being, especially American youth, "selects and experiences musical phenomenon which shapes their attitudes, physical appearance, and social perspectives" (Bailey 20). Music has been a focus of rhetorical criticism for many years, and critics strive to discover how the music and lyrics combine in order to create a certain emotion or ideology.

Many people do not realize how much media affects them. According to Jennings Bryant, most scholars focus on media's influence on "the concept of 'attitudes,' or people's general predispositions to evaluate other people, objects, and issues favorably or unfavorably" (Bryant 127). All of these "attitudes" can also be considered ideologies. Most media have a purpose and pose as an attempt to influence their audience's attitudes and beliefs. Although media and its effects have received much attention, less of a focus has been dedicated to media's hidden ideologies that purposefully attempt to influence a person's behaviors or attitudes. Many media effects analyses have been done in aims to discover how violence and sex in the media affects individual behavior. Some examples of these are "The Influence of Media Violence on Youth" by Craig Anderson et al. and "Mass Media Influences on Sexuality" by Jane Brown. How music functions as a form of rhetoric has created interest, though few analyses have been done on the rhetoric of musical performances as a whole.

One example of musical criticism discusses the "ideological nature of the 'traditional' model of American musical and the tension held within this ideal" (Edney 936). Edney discusses the nature of the American Musical, but her analysis strays away from this ideology and discusses how *City of Angels* participates in a film genre more explicitly than the American Musical ideology (Edney). The analysis does discuss

ideologies, but does not discuss how *City of Angels* attempts to influence the audience into a particular action or belief.

The analysis that will be done on *Spring Awakening* differs from the previous analysis in that it does attempt to discover the ideologies occurring in the show that are geared toward influencing the audience to take a certain stance. *Spring Awakening: A New Musical,* presents an anti-conformity ideology through the content and style of the rhetoric, causing audiences to respond positively to the performance. This paper will first give background information needed on *Spring Awakening* in order to understand the analysis. Next, it will focus on the ideological method of rhetorical criticism. Finally, it will discuss the anti-conformist ideology present in *Spring Awakening*, and how its presences results in a positive reaction from audiences.

Background

Steven Sater first began wrestling with the idea of adapting Wedekind's play into a musical seven years before it opened on Broadway on December 10, 2006, at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre in New York. The play went through countless rewrites and workshops to create the final product which was seen off-Broadway for the first time on May 19, 2006. During those rewrites and workshops, Sater and his partner Duncan Sheik, who wrote the sheet music for the musical, selected teenagers to be a part of the cast, which is composed of five teenage girls, six teenage boys, and two adults, each playing all of the adult roles in the musical. The three main cast members include Lea Michele (Wendla), John Gallagher Jr. (Moritz), and Jonathan Groff (Melchior).

Steven Sater wrote the book and lyrics for *Spring Awakening*. He is a writer and lyricist who originally went to Washington University. While he was there, he fell out of a window during a fire which caused severe spinal chord injuries. During his recovery, he decided to pursue the arts at Princeton University. After he graduated, Sater met Duncan Sheik through a Buddhist Organization. Sheik is a singer-songwriter and composer who worked with Sater on various projects preceding *Spring Awakening*. Sater originally thought the adaptation of the show was a good idea simply because he "knew and loved the play. [He] had long felt it was a sort of opera-in-waiting, and…somehow [he] could already 'hear' Duncan's music in it" (Sater VII). After these original feelings, the shooting at Columbine pushed him to seriously begin the process of rewriting the rebellious play because "its subject felt all the more urgent" (Sater VII). Sater makes it clear that the purpose of the adaptation was not to rewrite musical theater or to simply "do something different" (Sater XV). All he knows is that "we had a story we wanted to tell and a way we all felt we wanted to tell it" (Sater XV).

From the beginning, *Spring Awakening* was an "overnight hit, taking more than $50m at the box office" (Thorpe). The show ran nine performances, six days a week with each lasting two hours and twenty minutes. It closed after 888 performances on January 18, 2009. It proceeded to win eight Tony Awards including Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical, Best Original Score and Best Featured Actor (John Gallagher Jr.). After the Tony's, it was clear that *Spring Awakening* had achieved all that Sater and Duncan had dreamed of.

Although it contains the same controversial material as Wedekind's play, this adaptation is not seen as degrading or obscene by any means. The show received

excellent reviews, and seats were filled every night. Each audience was different, though it seems as though Sater targets young people who are trying to find themselves. The musical centers on teenagers trying to find their place in life and push through the barriers set by their society, and it is clear that he wants to connect with a younger generation. In the preface of the libretto Sater states, "Subtitled 'A Children's Tragedy,' Wedekind's play is full of the unheard, anguished cries of young people. It struck me that pop music—rock music—is the exact place that adolescents for the last few generations have found release from, and expression of, that same mute pain" (Sater VII-VIII). By deciding to create interior monologues of the characters using rock music, Sater targets the generations that appreciate and connect with the type of music depicted in the show.

Synopsis

Spring Awakening takes place in Germany in 1891. It follows the story of Wendla, a girl whose mother will not tell her where babies come from, Melchior, a radical and intelligent boy, and Moritz, a troubled boy who is haunted by his newfound sexuality. The stage transforms from an 1891 setting to teenagers performing at a rock concert with handheld microphones and flashing neon lights. The music does not carry the story, but clues the audience in to how the characters are actually feeling. Wedekind's play contained many impressive monologues, which Sater exchanged for musical pieces. The songs became a sort of "subtext" for the show. "…Songs as confession...Songs as denial…or admission…" (Sater VIII-IX) were implemented in order to "remain true to Wedekind's fierce original intent" (Sater VIII).

The show opens with Wendla, a teenage girl, exploring her "newly matured" body (Sater 15). She calls her mother in and asks her to tell her where babies come from. Her mother refuses, and tells her that in order to have a baby a woman must "love her husband. Love him, as she can love only him" (Sater 17). Frustrated, Wendla goes to school where she and her friends Anna, Thea, and Martha daydream about the boys their age, including Melchior Gabor and Moritz Steifel. It is during this same conversation that Wendla finds out that her friend, Martha, is being abused by her father. Her friends beg Martha to tell someone, but Martha refuses, stating that she does not want to be thrown out of her house like Ilsa, a girl who told someone about her father's abuse.

Wendla then goes into the woods where she finds Melchior, her crush. Melchior is a radical who is extremely educated from the books, and does not agree with the methods of teaching implemented by the schools in the village. Wendla tells him of her friend and asks him to beat her because she has "never…felt…*Anything*" (Sater 48-49). Melchior refuses at first but then gets carried away and throws her to the ground. Melchior runs off, leaving his journal on accident. The next day Wendla finds Melchior in his hayloft and returns the journal. Reluctantly, they both give in to their sexual feelings and participate in intercourse. Afterwards, Wendla feels guilty and starts to feel very sick. Her mother calls a doctor and they tell Wendla that she is suffering from anemia. After Wendla has left the room, the doctor informs her mother that Wendla is pregnant. Frau Bergman becomes extremely upset and demands information out of Wendla, but Wendla does not know how to answer because she does not understand how she could be pregnant. Her mother forces her to go away to an underground doctor in order to receive an abortion, where Wendla dies of apparent complications.

On the other side of things, Melchior is extremely happy after having sex with Wendla. He writes Wendla, telling her of how much he wants to do it again, and he cannot wait for them to be able to. Melchior, not only a smart, but curious teenager, knows everything about sex and the female anatomy. Moritz, however, is haunted by this same information. At first, Moritz does not understand what sexuality is, and is frightened by his wet dreams. He knows that Melchior understands, and asks him to write an essay so that he, too, can understand. After reading the essay, however, Moritz continues to lose sleep and his wet dreams become more prominent and more common. Not only is Moritz concerned about his sexuality, he also worries about passing his classes in order to move up in school the following year. He does pass his midterms, but is failed by the headmasters because they can only pass a certain number of people. He is extremely upset by this information and is yelled at by his father. He feels as though he has no where to go, so he takes his father's gun and runs into the woods. In the woods he meets Ilsa, the girl who got thrown out of her home because her father sexually abused her. She reminisces with him about when they were little and asks him to walk her home. He refuses, telling her of all the work he has to do for school. Ilsa leaves and Moritz hates himself for not going with her and proceeds to shoot himself in the head.

Following Moritz's death, the school finds the essay that Melchior wrote for Moritz. They expel Melchior and after his parents find out about his relations with Wendla, they send him to a reform school. Wendla writes him, telling him about the baby and how she wants to keep it. This is news to Melchior, so he decides to head home to find Wendla and to be there for her. He writes a letter to Wendla and gives it to Ilsa to deliver. He tells her to meet him at the graveyard at midnight. As midnight approaches,

Melchior becomes concerned and goes to Moritz's grave for comfort. There, he sees a freshly dug grave that reads "Wendla Bergman" and grows extremely upset. He takes a razor out of his pocket and is planning to kill himself when he feels the presence of his deceased friends around him giving him the will to go on, and hope for a better future.

Within this storyline, Sheik and Sater portray a world where closed-minded rules and teenagers must fend for themselves for information. Through this "juxtaposition between stern conservatism and the radical rock 'n' roll spirit," (Park) the audience becomes exposed to an ideology that attempts to influence their ways of thinking and behaving.

Method

The concept of an ideology was significantly addressed by Karl Marx. Marx never gave an exact definition of an ideology, but he stated that an ideology was formed through the "production of ideas…concepts…and consciousness" and includes opinions of "politics, laws, morality, religion, etc" (Marx 47). Along with his insights to ideologies, Marx also introduced the concept of hegemony. Hegemony occurs when the ideology of one group dominates over the ideology of other groups, even though multiple ideologies exist in a culture. Marx describes the ideologies as "ruling ideas", and states that the "ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas…" (Marx 64). There are two ways to obtain this type of social control: soft and hard. Soft coercion "is co-optive…pressing others through attraction and persuasion to change their ideas, beliefs,

values, and behaviors" (Haviland 382). Hard coercion, on the contrary, occurs when a group threatens a person or another group if they do not adopt their ideology.

Although there are many different opinions on how to define an ideology, I will be using the term to mean a "system of collectively held normative and reputedly factual ideas and beliefs and attitudes advocating a particular pattern of social relationships and arrangements, and/or aimed at justifying a particular pattern of conduct, which its proponents seek to promote, realise, pursue or maintain (Hamilton 38). Because an ideology centers on beliefs, an ideology must be evaluative. This means that there must be an opposing view to what the ideology is saying. For example, war is not an ideology because it does not have anything opposing it. Anti-war, however, is an ideology. The antithesis of this viewpoint is pro-war. Both pro-war and anti-war are ideologies because they influence how a group of people looks at the world, and encourages differing attitudes depending on which ideology they support.

It is not entirely clear how ideologies come to be, or why certain ones dominate others. One possibility, however, is the use of speeches and rhetoric to forward an individual's beliefs onto an intended audience. Public discourse is used as an opportunity to influence people and share opinions with others (Burgchardt 1). As a result of rhetoric, human beings in collectivity behave and think differently than humans in isolation. This is because they are constantly being influenced by the people around them. "When one appears to 'think' and 'behave' collectively…one has been tricked, self-deluded, or manipulated into accepting the brute existence of such fantasies as 'public mind' or 'public opinion'…" (McGee 452).

The possibilities listed above do not give enough explanation as to how ideologies really function and why certain ones are dominant over others. Ideological criticism attempts to explain these questions within a particular artifact. It is important to participate in this type of criticism because artifacts are shaped by, and shape ideologies, and the criticism is used to discover and understand how and why ideologies work. "The primary goal of the ideological critic is to discover and make visible the dominant ideology or ideologies embedded in an artifact and the ideologies that are being muted in it" (Foss 243). An ideological critic must also "…seek to explore the relationships between language, power, physical conditions, and the fundamental attitudes, values, and beliefs of a culture" (Burgchardt 451).

One area of criticism that is related to the analysis of theatrical performance is musical criticism. Music has been of rhetorical interest and an important area of study in criticism for many years. There are many different ways to go about doing this type of criticism, but it is imperative to understand the basics in order to begin analyzing a musical. Although a musical is not the same as a single song, some of the key elements of the analysis are constant.

One of the main contributions to musical rhetoric was done by Root, who expands the conception of music into two different realms: the performative and audience-interpretive realms. The performative realm focuses on the importance of the actual presentation of the music, while audience-interpretive discusses why certain groups of people identify with different types of music (Bailey 24). The music should be analyzed by the "original act and the response it evokes in the listener" (Bailey 27).

These beginning ideas about how to critique music are solidified through the works of Sellnow and Sellnow. According to them, “lyrics and music work together to offer messages comprised of both conceptual and emotional content through the constructs of virtual experience (lyrics) and virtual time (music)” (Sellow and Sellnow 395).They address three steps a critic should use in order to fully understand a piece of music. The first step is to discover the message of the lyrics and discover the content of the words. The second step is to analyze the score and discuss the emotive aspects of the actual music. The final step requires the critic to compare the first two steps and discover the relationship between the two (Bailey; Sellnow and Sellnow).

Although these three steps present an effective way to analyze a piece of music, this is not necessarily the way to analyze a theatrical performance. Because *Spring Awakening* includes both songs and dialogue, the first step of musical analysis will be the main focus. The words said by the characters have such a great impact on the audience, that the musical notes are not imperative for the audience.

The analysis will first address what ideology is being shown in the artifact. It will focus on the rhetoric and use it to identify the nature of the ideology within the text. After identifying the ideology demonstrated in the artifact, the rest of the analysis will be dedicated to strategies in support of the ideology. This step of the analysis also focuses on the rhetoric, but the goal is “to discover the rhetorical mechanisms used to advocate for and defend the ideology” (Foss 245). Most critics “Focus on rhetorical strategies used to persuade others to consider or adopt those ideologies and to defend them from those who offer alternative ideologies” (Foss 245). There are many different strategies available to a rhetor which will help support their ideology. The two strategies that will be focused on

are the content and the style of the rhetoric. These strategies will be explored within the artifact to determine how the artifact successfully supports the ideology, while protecting the audience from alternate opposing ones.

In any particular artifact, there are bound to be numerous ideologies in effect at the same time. In certain cases, however, there is one ideology that clearly sticks out and can be viewed as the dominant ideology of a text. This is the case with *Spring Awakening*. The ideology most prevalent in *Spring Awakening* is anti-conformity. In order to fully understand what is meant by anti-conformity, it is imperative to first discuss what conformity means.

When a person conforms, they are "expressing agreement with the majority of a group as a result of group influence" (Tyson 226). Conformity is seen in large or small groups and can occur because of force or other influences an individual is not aware of. A person may conform to practically anything that a group does, whether it be how they dress, how they talk, or what they believe in. Tyson and Kaplowitz describe three circumstances that make conformity possible: surveillance, unanimity of others and ambiguous stimuli (Tyson 226). These circumstances contribute to the likelihood that conformity will occur. There will be "more conformity when the subject's responses are public than when they are private" (Tyson 226). There will also be more conformity when everyone else agrees with an idea then when there are mixed opinions about an idea or behavior. Finally, conformity will be increased when individuals do not trust their initial judgments of an issue or behavior (Tyson 226). Conforming to a particular group can also occur when a person acts in accordance to prevailing standards or customs (Merriam-Webster).

A common antonym for conformity is nonconformity, which is the absence of agreement to a group's ideals. This term, however, does not fully encompass the ideology presented in *Spring Awakening*, which is why I will use the term anti-conformity.

Anti-conformity encompasses the main idea of nonconformity, but it also contains the notion of actually going against conformity. The main character, Melchior, is not only a nonconformist, but he speaks out and discusses his issues with conformity. He sees it occurring and recognizes how it is having a detrimental effect on society, while also resisting it despite the unanimity of opinions in his community. The show itself illustrates the issues that the characters, as well as the rhetors, have with conformity. Anti-conformity is clearly occurring in this piece of rhetoric, and is evident through the style of the dialogue and performance choices, as well as the content of the storyline.

Analysis

The text can be divided into two categories: that which explains the society the young characters live in and the text that is evidence of going against conformity in this society. From these texts, and the fate of the characters, it is clear that the rhetors wish to depict an anti-conformist ideology in *Spring Awakening*. In order to understand the extent of the ideology present, it is important to first take a look at the society and social norms in the text, and how the pressure to conform has an impact on the young characters.

Within the first minutes of the show, one of the main aspects of the society is established. The adults in the society do not want their children to be influenced by the liberal minds of those outside their culture. This is exemplified when Wendla's mother will not tell her how babies are made. She tells her daughter that "the stork finally

visited," and that in order to bear a child a woman must "love her husband…with her whole…heart" (Sater 17). From the beginning, the audience sees this woman creating an ignorant child so she will not be easily influenced by outside forces. The young characters rely very heavily on their parents' viewpoints and opinions. When Anna begins discussing how she will let her own children be free, Thea states, "How will we know what to do if our parents don't tell us?" (Sater 44). These teenagers are programmed to believe what their parents tell them and to not question their authority.

This type of control at home is seen throughout the show in many different instances. For example, when Martha tells her friends that she is being abused, she immediately regrets the decision because she does not want anyone to find out. If someone told, her parents would "throw [her] out for good" (Sater 44). Even Martha's mother conforms to what her husband believes. If Martha disobeys, her mother simply states "We have rules…" (Sater 43) and watches her child get beaten. The last time someone told on an abusive parent, the child was shunned for speaking out against her family. This presents another aspect of the society. The adults are extremely aware and concerned with what the other people in the culture think of them.

Ilse, the abused child, now lives "who knows where…with who knows who" (Sater 44) because the town was too afraid to address the issue. Both Martha and Ilse recognize the problem with being abused, but do not say anything at first for the fear of what others will say and think. They sing about their troubles in "The Dark I Know Well" stating that they "don't scream. Though [they] know it's wrong. [They] just play along" (Sater 45).

Another example of the fear people have of the judgment of society occurs when Moritz tells his father that he has not passed his grade. His father is not concerned about his son and why he has failed. He simply starts yelling about the family's public image. He exclaims, "I can't say I'm surprised…What are your mother and I supposed to do?...How do we go to church?...My son failed…Thank God my father never lived to see this day" (Sater 51-52). Herr Stiefel is so troubled by being different and judged, he does not provide the support his son needs. He is consumed by the social norms that seem to have been in place for generations. It does not appear that they have changed much since he was a child, considering his father would be just as disappointed and appalled as he is with Moritz.

The school system is also very narrow-minded and protective of their societal image. Melchior describes school as "a world where teachers—like parents—view us as merely raw material for an obedient and productive society" (Sater 47). In the beginning of the show, Moritz incorrectly recites a line of Virgil and Melchior stands up for him, stating that Moritz' answer could be an interpretation of the line. In return, Melchior gets beaten by the teacher who informs him that they are just there to recite, and not make conjectures (Sater 20). Just like the family setting, the schooling system is afraid of change and new thought. Melchior also describes the adults in his life through the song "All That's Known." All the adults say is "Trust in what is written" and Melchior believes that "Thought is suspect, and money is their idol, and nothing is okay unless it's scripted in their Bible" (Sater 21). By stating that the Bible is "theirs", he is separating himself from them and is set apart from this very traditional society that believes in the Truth in the Bible and the Aristotelian teaching style.

Based on this society of control, it becomes clear that Melchior wants to stray away from it, as well as do the other young characters. This is most evident through Melchior's dialogue, and is accented by the fate of the four main characters.

First, Melchior shows his views of the school system when he defends Moritz and tries to analyze the text they are reciting despite the consequences. Melchior realizes that he can achieve great things if he pushes the limits of society. He reads forbidden books and is extremely educated about most things, including sex. He challenges the culture's silence about this subject as he writes in his journal. He states, "Shame. What is its origin? And why are we hounded by its miserable shadow? Does a mare feel shame as she couples with a stallion?...until we grant them a marriage license?...I think not…" (Sater 32). Melchior not only states his incongruent beliefs, but he provides an explanation for them, which highlights his intelligence and makes it easier for the audience to relate to his plight. Melchior goes a step further to show the audience that he is truly going against the societal norms by having sex with Wendla, even though he is fully educated on the matter, and knows it is not an acceptable action.

Melchior believes that "Shame is the product of education" (Sater 32). He clearly does not agree with the method of teaching his society employs, as he previously states that the students are being molded to create "an obedient and productive society" (Sater 47). His actions in the classroom directly support this opinion. For example, when he is defending Moritz, he challenges the teacher, questioning him as to why they even attend class if there is "no further room for critical thought or interpretation" (Sater 20).

Melchior further shows his differences from the rest of society by explicitly stating that he is an atheist (Sater 26). The society he lives in strives on faith and accepts

that God is the truth in everything. Melchior, on the other hand, senses that "God is Dead" (Sater 25) and calls God a "bitch" while he and his friends sing about the troubles of their lives (Sater 25). This aspect of society, and Melchior's resistance to it, is the sole reason why the girls find him attractive. They admire him because "he's such a radical" and "doesn't believe in anything. Not in God. Not in Heaven" (Sater 28). The girls then go into a dreamy song where they sing about their crush on the far-reaching Melchior Gabor. This makes Melchior and his atheism extremely attractive to the audience. He is a teenager whom even the characters admire for his rebellion and anti-conformity. This highlights his ideals and makes the audience very aware of the attractiveness of his morals.

Even after Melchior is sent to the reform school, he continues to push the barriers of society. This is exemplified through his letter to Wendla where he states that he now understands "How everything is turned to dirt" in this "bourgeois society" and how they "must build a different world" (Sater 79). He also emphasizes how he cannot wait to touch Wendla again, even though he has been punished for the first time he had intercourse with her.

It is easy to see how Melchior goes against his society through his words and actions, but to fully understand how anti-conformity is presented in the text, it is important to take a look at the fate of the main characters. Moritz and Wendla do not survive because of the society they live in, while Ilse and Melchior not only survive, but are hopeful for a future that is unlike the present. This aspect of the script is one of the most important contributions to the success of the ideology present in the musical.

From the beginning, Moritz Stiefel has trouble coming to terms with the idea that he is not like the rest of society. Learning about sex only makes him feel more uncomfortable in his skin and makes him feel less normal. Moritz is so used to his society and how it works that he just wants to be like everyone else. He does not have to make a conscious decision to be different. He simply is. The conformity and the desire to be like everyone else consume him, and when he fails out of school, it only reinstates the fact that he is not similar to everyone else. He ends up killing himself because he does not see a way out and feels like he is alone.

After Moritz dies, Melchior realizes how Mortiz' family and school have destroyed his friend. Through the song "Left Behind," Melchior pushes the blame onto society. This is never explicitly stated, but the "you" he addresses throughout the song never seems to have a direct recipient. He asks, "were you really so blind, and unkind to him?" (Sater 71). At first glance, it seems as though he is referencing his father, but later in the song he mentions Moritz' parents in the third person by saying "All the things his mama wished he's bear in mind; And all his dad ever hoped he'd know" (Sater 71). This makes it clear that Melchior is not referring to his parents, and makes it possible that he is addressing everyone in the culture, stating that they did not pay enough attention to him. In the end, Moritz is consumed by the conformity of the society, and kills himself as a result.

The second person that society beats is Wendla. Wendla's mother raises her daughter to be ignorant and to believe everything she tells her. When Wendla sleeps with Melchior, she does not know the actual impact of her actions because her mother has

failed to inform her. It is likely that Wendla is unaware of society's control over her and her mother.

Wendla does have a moment of going against society, but it is too late. After she learns that she is going to have a baby, she writes to Melchior, "I have such remarkable news. Something has happened…Something I can barely understand" (Sater 83). She emphasizes her hope for the new life growing inside her and believes it is a second chance for her and Melchior. Wendla finally realizes the magnitude of her actions, but continues to be ignorant in the fact that she believes society will accept her pregnancy at fourteen. She becomes filled with hope without realizing that her mother cares what others think. Frau Bergman did not tell her where babies come from and then becomes furious when Wendla "pretends" she does not know how she became pregnant. Frau Bergman takes Wendla to an underground doctor to perform a secret procedure that Wendla never returns from. Wendla's realization that she needs to change society comes too late, and her ignorance brought on by a controlling mother attempting to conform to society brings her to her death.

On the other side of the spectrum are the characters Isle and Melchior. These two characters dare to go against the ideals of their parents, teachers and society, and end up surviving. Isle is shunned before the start of the show because, as we find out, she spoke up against her abusive father, which is not allowed or respected in her society. During the show, she lives at the Artist's colony where everyone lives by the Bohemian culture, which is extremely different than the conservative culture in which she was raised (Sater 67). Ilse lives in the moment with people who want to "dress [her] up and paint [her]!" (Sater 67). She has become a happy, carefree person since she has begun living a

different lifestyle, and at the end of the show, she is the one singing of the hope that radiates from the stage. Isle is the constant character throughout the show that never wavers. She is portrayed as a lucky girl because she no longer has to participate in the culture of the town. Isle's anti-conformity pays off and although she may not live the ideal life, she is alive and is the least corrupt of the young characters.

Melchior, as described in the previous section, is the character who most explicitly addresses the issue of conformity and refutes it. Melchior does not go without pain, but he does survive in the end. He always has had his ideals and firmly believes in them. Because he is so set in his beliefs, being shunned does not have a detrimental effect on him. To add onto this, Melchior is given the extra strength to go on in order to make sure that the future hears the story of Moritz and Wendla. Melchior's determination to change the way his society functions is what saves his life in the end.

Along with the text, the style of the actual performance of *Spring Awakening* also emphasizes the ideology of anti-conformity. The first area of the performance that aids anti-conformity is the casting of the characters. All of the adult characters are played by the same two people. This means that one woman plays five characters, including Wendla's mother, Melchior's mother, and two characters in the school board, and one man also plays five characters. During the performance, it takes quite a bit of time to realize that the characters are different from one another. When I first saw *Spring Awakening*, I was very confused because I thought Wendla's mother was the same as Melchior's, which does not make sense. This simple casting choice makes it clear that all of the adults have conformed to their society and are practically identical. They do not

differ in looks or mannerisms, and each of the male and female characters mesh together as if there were only one male adult and one female adult.

The casting for the young characters, however, is done quite differently. Each child is played by a separate actor who largely differs from the next. The characters ranged from blonde to brunette, black to white, overweight to skinny, gay to straight. Not one of the young characters is identical to another. Also, to further emphasize these distinctions, the characters' hair and makeup are diverse. The girls dress drastically different, while the boys' hair styles are unique from one another. These differences and quirky adjustments help the audience distinguish one teenager from the next, and emphasize their individuality. Because of the style of casting, the conformity of the adults and the society is highlighted, as well as is the attempted anti-conformity of the younger generation.

Furthermore, the style chosen for the music further emphasizes the ideology presented in the performance. First, when speaking, the "scenes set out the world of nineteenth-century repression, while the songs afford our young characters a momentary release into contemporary pop idiom" (Sater IX). They pull out hand-held microphones and are suddenly a part of the contemporary twenty-first century, performing as rock stars. As soon as the music starts, neon lights begin to flash, while the teenagers turn to face the audience. The way they shift from being in a repressive society to bringing their true feelings to the surface makes it seem as though they are emerging from the society. When music is present, the whole atmosphere is adjusted, and the audience is able to see the true colors of the characters which are suppressed during normal dialogue.

Another aspect that distinguishes the adults from the teenagers is how they never get to participate in the contemporary rock concert. Only the teenagers are able to break through the societal barriers and express their feelings. As previously stated, the songs do not forward the plot; they simply share the emotions and inner-monologues of the characters. Because the adults never sing, the audience feels disconnected from them. It seems as though the adults are programmed not to feel emotions or express them to anyone. It is as if they keep them hidden because of the fear of what others will think. The audience is able to connect and relate with the teenagers because of the songs. They actually get to see, hear, and experience how they really feel about the situations that arise. This is especially true with the character of Melchior. When an audience becomes attached to a character, it is easy to see things from their point of view. This causes the audience to feel invested not only in Melchior's character, but also his beliefs. At the end of the show, I felt like I knew so much about the character, I identified with his plights, and saw society and conformity as the enemy. The songs and music allow the audience to become familiar with the teenage characters, allowing them to become connected to them in a way that they are not connected and invested in the adults.

Another minor aspect of the performance choices which influence the spread of anti-conformity is the staging. The way the stage is set up is very unique for musical theater. There is the main stage, but surrounding it, there are chairs formed in a U-shape. These chairs are filled with audience members, who get to watch the show from on-stage. This does not seem like it would be an effective use of space, but it adds a subtle element to the performance which enhances its effectiveness. This stage set-up allows for

characters to blend in when they are not performing, and then burst out into the open when they take part in a scene and want their feelings known.

The young characters are never off-stage. When they are not in a scene, they are sitting in chairs, mingling with the audience members. They are hidden, and unless a person looks for them, are incredibly hard to spot. They are seemingly invisible until the music begins. When these extra characters begin singing they stand up and make their presence known, and emerge from the surrounding people as individuals. This portrays the idea that the teenagers who do not go against conformity as blatantly as Melchior still do not agree with it. They simply go along with the societal norms until it is the time and place to express their feelings. The need for individuals to express themselves is emphasized through this choreography and stage direction, as well as is the detrimental effects of conformity on the young characters.

Conclusion

When doing ideological criticism on a theatrical performance, it is very important to analyze two artifacts: the script and the performance. These two unique artifacts are connected, and in order to fully understand how an ideology is presented, one must analyze both. Ignoring one of the two would produce an inadequate and incomplete analysis. If a critic solely focused on the script, all the aspects of the performance that contribute to the ideology would be overlooked. What the audience sees is incredibly important, and how the script is portrayed on stage alters the words and makes them come to life. In the analysis of *Spring Awakening*, if the performance was ignored, the emphasis on conformity in the society would not have been discovered. The critic would

not have known the impact of the role of costumes and actors by simply reading the script.

On the other hand, if the critic simply focused on the performance, they would miss out on many words that contribute to the presentation of an ideology. When basing a show completely on the performance, they miss out on the details and only look at the big picture. It is very difficult to understand everything being said and sung when watching a theatrical performance. The script is needed in order to pay attention to detail, and is used to perform close textual analysis of the play to truly understand its meaning. Because of this, both a show's text and the presentation of the text on stage are important aspects of the analytical process and cannot be ignored.

Spring Awakening presents the ideology of anti-conformity through the text and performance choices, and results in positive reactions from the audience. The rhetors familiarize the audience with the ways of the society in order for them to recognize when a character goes against it. The young characters' reactions to their society, as well as the fate of the main characters, depicts the ideology of anti-conformity in the text by showing that going against what a person knows and what people expect them to do is beneficial. The show demonstrates the idea that the anti-conformist will end up succeeding in life, while the person who follows society will end up corrupt and consumed by the ideals of society. The instances of anti-conformity are not as recurring as other actions, but there is emphasis on them by the performance choices made by the rhetors. The ideology that exists in the text is brought to life and solidified when performed onstage.

Overall, critics and viewers rave about *Spring Awakening* because it is different, innovative, and tests the boundaries of what is socially acceptable, much like Melchior's

character. To viewers, it is a "truly original musical," (Rooney) which creates its own unique style that "offers a trip unlike any other you're likely to experience" (Gardner). According to theater reviews across the board, *Spring Awakening* is appreciated because it brings up topics that are usually avoided and is "an affirmative expression of the rebellious imperatives of the young" that seem universal (Marks). This appreciation for rebellion and going against the repressive society is exactly the ideology Sheik and Sater portray throughout the musical.

Not only does *Spring Awakening* encourage anti-conformity within the actual performance, it itself is anti-conformist in nature, standing against current Broadway shows, making it that more attractive and enjoyable to audiences who believe it will lead Broadway in new directions. The very anti-conformist ideology spread to audiences through the storyline is also seen when taking the show in context with others being performed simultaneously. *Spring Awakening* distances itself from other Broadway musicals of its time, including *Wicked* and *Jersey Boys,* escaping the aesthetic trap in which Broadway lately finds itself, by throwing conventions away and creating indie-pop music around racy topics (McCarter). The musical is viewed as new and exciting and "represents the sort of imaginative boost that the American musical desperately needs" (Marks). Critics seem to be rooting for not only the main characters in the show, but also for *Spring Awakening*'s success on Broadway, despite its racy material and its inability to fit in with its fellow Broadway shows. This exemplifies how after viewing the show, many believe that taking chances and risks to stand out against the norm will pay off and should be pursued whenever possible. The viewers, especially the musical critics, further believe that going against the norm and standing out is beneficial due to the success of

Spring Awakening and the floundering of musicals which follow the typical American musical plot line. Critics hope that *Spring Awakening* stays on Broadway for years to come and believe that "Sheik and Sater are a team to keep rooting for" (Marks).

Charles Isherwood states that "A fresh breeze of true inspiration blows steadily through this ambitious if imperfect show" (Isherwood), while Eric Grode writes that Sater and Duncan "…capture the melancholy and mortification of adolescence with all of the intensity it deserves and none of the condescension it so often receives (Grode). He even goes as far as to say that "*Spring Awakening* is…the most thrilling rock musical of all time" (Grode). To all critics, it is clear that *Spring Awakening* is "a remarkable musical that every generation is likely to appreciate now and in years to come" (Sommers).

At first glance, certain media does not seem to push audiences to accept a given worldview. This is especially applicable to musicals since there are many different purposes surrounding their creation, including entertainment. Most critics and viewers believe that *Spring Awakening'*s purpose is to simply narrate the trials of teenage sexuality. After analysis, however, it is clear that *Spring Awakening* presents a much deeper meaning and purpose. With an in-depth approach of ideological criticism, the ideology of anti-conformity comes alive within the musical, and is proven to be extremely evident in both the text and performance choices of the rhetors, while also having a distinct influence in the audiences, as shown by critics' reviews of the show. Based off of this discovery, it is clear that both the text and the performance of an onstage production need to be considered when analyzing the presence of an ideology in an artifact in order to understand how it influences and impacts audiences.

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