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🔗 Book Basics

AUTHOR
Eugène Ionesco

YEAR PUBLISHED
1959

GENRE
Comedy, Satire

ABOUT THE TITLE
The title Rhinoceros refers to the animal into which all of the characters mysteriously transform throughout the play, with the exception of the protagonist, Berenger; it can also be a symbol of brute force and mob mentality.

🔗 In Context

The Theater of the Absurd

When Eugène Ionesco wrote the play The Bald Soprano (1950), he unknowingly helped to begin a new movement in theater. Inspired by his play, other playwrights also began to employ its style, which came to be known as absurdist. For example, in 1952 Samuel Beckett wrote Waiting for Godot—a play with no plot and a circular structure. In contrast, traditional plays have a structure that builds to a climax and ends with some type of resolution. In 1958 the British playwright Harold Pinter used elements of the absurd in his first full-length play, The Birthday Party.

The combined work of Ionesco, Beckett, Pinter and others came to be called the Theater of the Absurd, with the writers focused on using their absurdist, often seemingly nonsensical style to provide a unique view of the world. Although the Theater of the Absurd began to decline in the mid-1960s, elements of absurdist plays have been incorporated in mainstream theater. These elements include:

- fragmented language
- word play
- frequent use of pauses
- illogical plot without a resolution
- contradiction
- blend of comedy and tragedy
- symbolism
- minimalism
- relationship with audience challenged
Albert Camus

All of the absurdist writers were strongly influenced by the writer and philosopher Albert Camus, especially by his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). In this work Camus expresses his view of human existence as being meaningless and without a purpose. This is essentially the philosophy of existentialism, although Camus denied being an existentialist. He did, however, embrace absurdism, particularly the idea that meaning and logic do not exist. Because of this view, Camus saw human life as being absurd, but he also believed that each individual needed to forge his or her own meaning. Ionesco and other absurdist writers adopted some of this viewpoint. As a result, their plays reject logical structures and often have little dramatic development. Even so, absurdist plays tend to have characters who are very busy, but their activity really changes nothing. The characters often speak in a repetitious manner while using clichés and non sequiturs, as seen in *The Bald Soprano*. Because of this, the dialogue ends up sounding nonsensical—an attempt by the playwrights to stress the difficulty of meaningful communication.

Fascism

During the 1930s when Eugène Ionesco was studying at the University of Bucharest, a political movement called fascism was gaining strength in parts of Europe, including Germany, Italy, and Romania. Fascism promoted an authoritarian government, often led by a dictator who controlled all aspects of a nation, including political, cultural, economic, and religious elements. In addition, fascism stressed an extreme form of nationalism, which involved unquestioning loyalty to the state. In Italy during the 1920s a fascist party led by Benito Mussolini seized control of the government. In the early 1930s the Fascist Nazi Party led by Adolf Hitler was voted into power in Germany. By the late 1930s a fascist group called the Iron Guard was gaining power in Romania.

The oppressive rule of fascist governments left a strong mark on the young Ionesco. Fascist nations required citizens to maintain total devotion to a government led by a dictator. Any questioning of the government's authority was condemned. Secret police used imprisonment, execution, and torture to crush any opposition. Also, fascist government strictly controlled a nation's information through censorship of the media, including newspapers and radio. In an effort to avoid fascist oppression, Ionesco moved his family from Bucharest to Paris and then to Marseilles.

The effect of Ionesco's experience with fascism can be seen throughout *Rhinoceros*. In this work people begin to transform into rhinoceroses—brute beasts with thick skins. Despite the horror of this transformation, more and more people allow themselves to change into these animals. It is important to note that these transformations are based on choice. Unlike an epidemic, where a person contracts a disease, a person's metamorphosis into a rhinoceros in the play only happens if he or she is willing to let it happen. Because of an unquestioning attitude, a lack of personal responsibility, and a need to fit in, people allow themselves to be changed into mindless beasts. Ionesco in his life witnessed a similar process in nations ruled by fascism. Despite the harshness and injustices of fascism, people submitted themselves to this ideology and thereby rejected the more humane sides of their personalities, which may have included self-doubt, the questioning of authority, and a sense of compassion.

Author Biography

Eugène Ionesco was born in Slatina, Romania, on November 26, 1909. The following year the Ionesco family moved to Paris. As a boy, Ionesco developed an early interest in theater by watching puppet shows, especially the ones performed in the Luxembourg Gardens, which he attended on Thursdays. Ionesco's parents divorced in 1916, and his father returned to Romania. Both Ionesco and his sister Marilina suffered from poor health. As a result, their mother sent them for a rest cure to a peasant family in La Chapelle Anthenaise in northwestern France, where they stayed for several years.

In 1925 Ionesco joined his father in Romania, attended high school, then enrolled in the University of Bucharest in 1928, where he studied French literature. In 1931 he published a volume of surrealist poetry called *Elegy of Miniscule Beings*. Three years later he released a collection of essays entitled *No*, meaning "now" in Romanian. Ionesco married Rodica Burlanu in 1936 and began teaching in a Bucharest high school. However, he continued his literary pursuits and in 1938 received a government scholarship to research and write about the theme of death in French poetry. Around this time Ionesco had his first contact with fascism, a political ideology that places nation and race above individualism under a
dictator, that was gaining momentum in Romania among other places in Europe. He moved with his wife to Paris, but the threat of fascism followed them when the Nazis invaded France in 1940. Because of this, Ionesco and Rodica moved again, this time to Marseilles, where they stayed for the duration of World War II. In 1944 their daughter Marie-France was born.

In 1945 Ionesco and his family returned to Paris, where he worked as a proofreader for a company that published administration materials. In learning English Ionesco found the process of copying and memorizing passages ridiculous. Most of these passages conveyed mundane truths, such as a week consisting of seven days and the floor being down and the ceiling being up. Although he knew these statements to be true, Ionesco began to see them absurdly. He imagined two strangers having a conversation in which they manipulated the truisms of these statements. They became “pseudo-clichés and pseudo-truisms; they disintegrated into wild caricature and parody.” Eventually, the conversation disintegrated into “disjointed fragments.” This line of thinking greatly affected Ionesco’s future writing.

Ionesco decided eventually to convey this experience in a play called The Bald Soprano (1950). This work rejected the traditional development of plot and characters and created a new type of comedy, which emphasized the meaninglessness of people’s lives in a random universe. The play deals with two strangers who exchange everyday banalities, such as comments on the weather and where they live, and in the process discover by chance that they are married. For many The Bald Soprano explores themes of communication and self-alienation.

The Bald Soprano was Ionesco’s first play, performed in Paris at Le théâtre des Noctambules in front of very few people with borrowed costumes and scenery. It quickly became a sensation, thereby thrusting the middle-aged Ionesco into the spotlight. News about this absurd play soon spread throughout Europe and the United States. Ionesco followed this work with other short, absurd plays including The Lesson (1951), The Chairs (1952), and The New Tenant (1955). Soon critics divided into two camps concerning Ionesco’s plays. One camp led by the critic Kenneth Tynan attacked these works as an attempt to destroy traditional realism in theater. However, the other camp led by Ionesco claimed these plays were trying to call attention to the meaninglessness of cultural practices and the futile nature of most attempts at communication.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Ionesco wrote several longer plays, including Rhinoceros (1959). Many critics view Rhinoceros as being Ionesco’s finest work. This play explores one man’s struggle to resist the seductive force of conformity by maintaining his unique identity. Also, the play reflects Ionesco’s experiences with fascism and his concern about how banalities can inhibit meaningful communication. Like previous works by Ionesco, critics tended to view Rhinoceros from either a pro-absurdist or anti-absurdist viewpoint. However, the pro-absurdist often reached varying conclusions about the meaning of the play. For example, the critic Howard Taubman claims Rhinoceros is satirizing traditional ideas and established institutions. Critic Rosette C. Lamont asserts that the play attempts to debunk rationalism by showing how it can be used to blind a person to horrible events. Other critics, such as David Caute, state that the play explores conformism and mob hysteria.

Ionesco’s plays became part of a movement called the Theater of the Absurd, which included the authors Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter. Following the success of Rhinoceros, Ionesco continued to write longer plays, including Exit the King (1962) and Stroll in the Air (1963). In 1970 Ionesco was elected into the greatly prestigious Académie Française and became a knight of the Légion d’Honneur, which is an order of high merit in France. He died at his home in Paris on March 28, 1994.

Characters

Berenger

Berenger is a person who has difficulty fitting in with society. He is lazy, has a disheveled appearance, and drinks too much. However, Berenger is not a complete outcast. He holds a job in a legal firm, where he apparently has worked for some time. But he could be seen as a misfit who does not think and behave like most people. For instance, as opposed to most people, Berenger constantly doubts himself and has little ambition to improve his life. His one passion is his romantic interest in Daisy. However, despite his lack of ambition, Berenger has a warm heart and shows true concern for his friends. For example, after he realizes people are turning into rhinocerous, he focuses on apologizing to Jean instead of on the developing rhinoceroses epidemic. Indeed, Berenger often
feels guilt, which is an emotion none of the other characters feel. Berenger's character develops from a person who takes the rhinoceros sightings in a nonchalant way to someone who is more shocked about the rhinoceroses than anyone and defiantly resists changing into one. Berenger feels the horror of the rhinoceros epidemic as it unfolds while other people go along with the epidemic. Berenger's qualities as an outsider enable him to see the tragedy of the epidemic, whereas other people are so focused on conforming to society they feel drawn to conform to the rhinoceroses as they become the new norm.

Jean

Jean is an impeccably dressed man who feels supremely confident in his own opinions and in his place in society. He feels disappointed in the way Berenger leads his life and feels the need to make his friend like himself. When Berenger questions any of Jean's opinions, Jean takes offense and becomes stubborn, believing himself to be infallible. At first Jean is shocked by the rhinoceros sightings, viewing the animals as a menace to society. However, when Berenger visits Jean in his room, Jean gradually transforms into a rhinoceros as his attitude becomes more pompous and belligerent. It's as if Jean's hostility takes physical form as he turns into a brute beast.

Daisy

Tenderhearted, Daisy and the waitress show the most sympathy for the housewife mourning her dead cat. Also, Daisy shows little interest in the silly argument between Berenger and Jean and instead tells Berenger he shouldn't have made his friend angry. In the office Daisy argues with Botard about her seeing a rhinoceros because Botard is being unreasonable. Daisy knows what she saw. After a rhinoceros destroys the stairs leading to the office, she shows a practical attitude by calling the fire department. Berenger loves Daisy, and she seems to return his affections. She and Berenger end up being the last two people who have resisted changing into rhinoceroses. Perhaps her concern for people instead of the rhinoceroses enables her to resist. However, Daisy will eventually change into a rhinoceros because of her use of love to escape life's problems, specifically the rhinoceroses epidemic. In contrast, Berenger tries to use his love for Daisy to block out the epidemic but can't. He continues to be horrified by the transformations and therefore strives to resist them. Daisy, though, wants to escape into a lovely fantasy world. But her fantasy cannot block out the epidemic no matter how hard she tries. In the end she starts to see beauty in the rhinoceroses, not in her love for Berenger.

Dudard

Dudard is an intelligent man who has received a strong education. Influenced by his schooling, Dudard prides himself on seeing events in a detached and objective manner. At first he admits changing into a rhinoceros is not a good thing. However, he also sees being horrified by the transformations as an impediment to understanding the phenomenon. To figure out why the changes are happening, Dudard insists the facts must be gathered and analyzed in a scientific manner.

Logician

The logician is a well-educated man who sees himself as possessing a wisdom that places him above most other people. This wisdom consists of using a type of logical thought process when dealing with any aspect of reality. Because of this attitude, the logician considers himself as a teacher. For example, he spends a large part of Act 1 teaching the old gentleman about syllogisms, which can be absurd. The logician also places himself apart from the masses. When Berenger, Jean, and other townsfolk argue about whether the rhinoceroses were African or Asiatic, the logician does not take part in the discussion, but rather just observes it. Later, he presents his logical pearls of wisdom about how the rhinoceroses debate should be approached. However, because of his strict use of logic, the logician ends up devising conclusions that contradict reality. The logician concludes that a dog is a cat based on a series of assumed truths. In addition, the logician has no way of
dealing with an absurd occurrence, like a rhinoceros charging through the town. His attempted explanations confuse Berenger. Eventually, the logician ends up going along with the trend of people changing into rhinoceroses. Therefore, his use of reason is inadequate in preventing him from transforming into a brute beast.
Full Character List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berenger</td>
<td>Berenger is something of a misfit in society who resists becoming a rhinoceros.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>Jean is a well-groomed, pompous man and Berenger’s best friend.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>Daisy is a legal secretary who becomes romantically involved with Berenger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dudard</td>
<td>A coworker of Berenger, Dudard prides himself on being analytical and objective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logician</td>
<td>The logician is obsessed with using logic to explain everything, even if his logical conclusions contradict reality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Boeuf</td>
<td>Mr. Boeuf (never appearing as a human) is a legal worker and the husband of Mrs. Boeuf; he changes into a rhinoceros and destroys the staircase at the law office where he works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Boeuf</td>
<td>Mrs. Boeuf is the wife of Mr. Boeuf, a legal worker; she joins her husband after he changes into a rhinoceros.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botard</td>
<td>An ex-teacher, Botard has a know-it-all attitude and feels oppressed by the establishment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Café proprietor</td>
<td>The café proprietor views the rhinoceros sightings as an outrage that the authorities should take care of.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fireman</td>
<td>The fireman helps Berenger and his coworkers get out of their office after the stairs have been destroyed by a rhinoceros.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grocer</td>
<td>Despite the rhinoceros sightings, the grocer is mainly concerned about getting more business and taking part in trivial disputes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grocer’s wife: The grocer’s wife is mainly concerned about helping her husband get more business and taking part in trivial disputes.

Housewife: The housewife mourns her cat after it has been trampled to death by a rhinoceros.

Little old man: The little old man thinks Berenger is calling him because he has the same first name as Jean; eventually, the old man turns into a rhinoceros.

Little old man’s wife: The little old man’s wife nags her husband and later turns into a rhinoceros.

Old gentleman: The old gentleman is a polite person who shows interest in learning about logic.

Mr. Papillon: Mr. Papillon is the office chief of the law firm where Berenger works. Despite the rhinoceros sightings, Mr. Papillon is mainly concerned about having his employees get their work done.

Waitress: The waitress works at the café; she and Daisy show more sympathy than anyone else for the housewife grieving her dead cat.

Plot Summary

At a café in a French town, *Rhinoceros* begins as Jean, a seemingly average man, meets his friend Berenger. Jean is well dressed, highly disciplined, and prides himself on his high morals and education. In contrast, Berenger is poorly dressed, has a drinking problem, and finds life worthless. As Jean criticizes Berenger’s behavior and appearance, they see a rhinoceros galloping through town. Jean and other townsfolk are shocked, but Berenger remains calm, thinking there must be a good explanation. Berenger’s response annoys Jean, who exclaims that a rhinoceros roaming the street is dangerous. Then Berenger notices a young woman, his coworker Daisy, pass by. Because of his infatuation with Daisy, Berenger is ashamed of having her see him in his disheveled state. Noticing this reaction, Jean tries to get Berenger to improve his life to
impress Daisy. Berenger agrees to stop drinking and to refine himself.

Berenger, Jean, Daisy, and other townsfolk again see a rhinoceros storming through the town. A townsman wails because it has trampled her cat to death. Townsfolk comfort the housewife as Jean and Berenger get in an argument about whether they saw the same rhinoceros or a second one. Soon the townsfolk become more interested in the argument than in comforting the housewife. Jean leaves in a huff. A logician at the café, too, becomes involved and calmly and elaborately explains to Berenger that he is approaching the debate in the wrong manner because he doesn't state the problem correctly. Berenger regrets quarreling with Jean and has a drink.

At the local law office, an employee named Dudard and the secretary, Daisy, try to convince another employee, Botard, about at least one rhinoceros galloping through the town. Botard remains unconvinced, saying that the rhinoceros sightings are unscientific. Berenger arrives a little late for his work there and says he also saw the rhinoceros, but Botard still isn't convinced. The office chief Mr. Papillon ("butterfly") tells everyone to get back to work, but Dudard and Botard soon resume their argument about the rhinoceros. Berenger mentions that Mr. Boeuf ("ox") is absent from work. Soon a flustered Mrs. Boeuf enters, mentions her husband has the flu, and claims a rhinoceros chased her to the office. Everyone hears trumpeting and the stairs crashing from a heavy weight. The office employees go to the stair landing and see a rhinoceros down below. Mrs. Boeuf reaches the landing and is shocked when she realizes her husband is the rhinoceros. Unwilling to leave her husband, she jumps down onto the rhinoceros's back and rides away. Stunned, Botard has difficulty explaining the rhinoceroses and eventually claims it's all part of a sinister plot. Firemen arrive and hoist a ladder to a window. The employees descend the ladder one by one.

Berenger goes to visit Jean at his apartment. Jean appears to be ill; his voice is hoarse and he has a cough. Berenger apologizes about the argument they had at the café. Jean admits he doesn't feel well but gets defensive when Berenger suggests what might be wrong. Berenger points out a small bump on Jean's forehead, which causes Jean to check it out in the bathroom. When Jean returns, Berenger notices his friend's green-looking skin and heavy breathing. Berenger tells Jean to call a doctor, but Jean gets angry and tells Berenger to mind his own business. Berenger mentions that Jean is being nasty and misanthropic. Jean claims that people disgust him as his skin becomes greener and his skin tougher. Jean says that he thinks Mr. Boeuf chose to become a rhinoceros because being such an animal is a good thing. According to Jean, human morals should be replaced by the law of the jungle. Berenger cannot believe Jean means this. Soon Jean's bump turns into a horn about the size of a rhinoceros horn. Jean charges into the bathroom and Berenger shuts the door, shouting, "He's a rhinoceros!" Berenger goes out on the stair landing and realizes other people in the apartment building have changed into rhinoceroses. Terrified, he goes back into Jean's apartment, looks out the window, and sees a herd of rhinoceroses charging past. The bathroom door is about to break loose from Jean pushing against it. Berenger flees down the street.

Back at his apartment, Berenger is paranoid about changing into a rhinoceros himself. Dudard visits and tells Berenger not to worry about it. Dudard can't explain the rhinoceros transformation, but he is calmly observing the facts to figure it out. Berenger claims the transformations are evil, but Dudard says they are a matter of personal preference. Dudard mentions Papillon has become a rhinoceros, which shocks Berenger. Dudard says people should rely on objective, scientific analysis to explain the rhinoceroses, but Berenger counters that relying on intuition is better. Berenger yells angrily at rhinoceroses on the street below and then notices one of them is the logician.

Daisy comes to visit, bringing food for lunch. She calmly mentions Botard has changed into a rhinoceros as have many other people. She also claims people are getting used to the rhinoceroses. Berenger realizes the rhinoceroses have destroyed the fire station and sees more rhinoceroses coming out of houses. Dudard feels compelled to join the rhinoceroses and leaves the apartment. The heads of rhinoceroses appear on the wall, and in some odd way, they begin to seem beautiful. Berenger and Daisy finally declare their love for each other and assert their love will protect them. Daisy tells Berenger to calm down and not to feel guilty because doing this would spoil their happiness. When Berenger answers the phone, he hears the noise of rhinoceroses over the receiver. Then he turns on the radio and hears more rhinoceros noises. Berenger and Daisy realize they are the only humans left. The noise of rhinoceroses surround them, causing the house to shake. Daisy wonders if she and Berenger are the abnormal ones, not the rhinoceroses. She becomes intoxicated by the sound and movement of the rhinoceroses and leaves the apartment, too.
Distraught, Berenger wonders if he should try to communicate with the rhinoceroses with the hope of changing them back to humans. He feels ugly and wants to look and sound like a rhinoceros. Suddenly, he declares he'll fight them all. He's the last man standing and intends to stay that way.
Introduction

1. Jean criticizes Berenger's appearance and behavior.

Rising Action

2. Jean, Berenger, and others see a rhinoceros in town.
3. Mrs. Boeuf realizes her husband is a rhinoceros.
4. Berenger sees Jean transform into a rhinoceros.
5. Dudard joins the people who have become rhinoceroses.
6. Berenger and Daisy realize they are the only humans left.

Climax

7. Daisy joins the rhinoceroses, leaving Berenger alone.

Falling Action

8. Berenger feels drawn to become a rhinoceros.

Resolution

Timeline of Events

**Summer afternoon**
Jean criticizes Berenger about his drinking problem and disheveled looks.

**Minutes later**
Berenger, Jean, and other people see a rhinoceros galloping through the town.

**Moments later**
Berenger, Jean, and other people see another rhinoceros galloping through the town.

**Next morning**
Dudard, Daisy, and Berenger try to convince coworker Botard they saw a rhinoceros.

**A short time later**
Jean tries to convince Berenger to reform to impress Daisy.

**Minutes later**
Berenger and Jean argue about the rhinoceros while the housewife mourns her trampled cat.

**Later that morning**
Firemen help Berenger and his coworkers leave the office.
Berenger visits Jean and apologizes about the argument they had yesterday.

After a few minutes
Berenger tells Jean his voice is hoarse and his skin is getting greener, which makes Jean angry.

Minutes later
Jean exclaims that people should adopt the law of the jungle as he grows a horn on his forehead.

Moments later
Berenger realizes with horror that Jean is changing into a rhinoceros as are many other people.

Days later
Dudard tries to calm Berenger, who is paranoid about becoming a rhinoceros.

A short time later
Daisy arrives and says that Botard and many others have changed into rhinoceroses.

Minutes later
Dudard feels he should join the rhinoceroses and leaves Berenger and Daisy.

Soon
Daisy and Berenger realize they are the only humans left.

Moments later
Daisy starts to see the rhinoceroses as beautiful and leaves Berenger.

Almost immediately
Berenger feels drawn to become a rhinoceros.

Moments later
Berenger defiantly declares he will resist becoming a rhinoceros.
Act 1

Summary

Act 1 takes place in a square of a provincial town, which includes a grocer's shop and a café. Berenger and Jean meet at the café. Jean is impeccably dressed, but Berenger has an unkempt appearance with disheveled clothes and messy hair. They sit at a table on the café's terrace. Soon Jean begins criticizing Berenger for being a drunkard and for his sloppy look. Berenger seems to have a bored, uncaring attitude about himself and about life in general. Soon they hear a noise of a beast galloping and panting, which quickly gets louder. Jean sees a rhinoceros on the loose and shouts, "Oh, a rhinoceros!" The waitress, grocer, and grocer's wife all make similar exclamations about seeing a rhinoceros.

A housewife runs out into the square carrying a cat and a basket. Frightened by the rhinoceros, she drops her basket, scattering the contents and breaking a bottle of wine in the process. An old gentleman rushes into the café, and a logician positions himself near the grocery entrance. The noise of the rhinoceros fades away as all of the characters, except for Berenger, exclaim in unison, "Well, of all things!" The housewife claims the rhinoceros gave her a scare. The logician comments that fear is irrational and, because of this, a person should "yield to reason."

Jean is astounded by Berenger's disinterest about seeing a rhinoceros. As the logician explains what a syllogism is to the old gentleman, Berenger explains to Jean why he is so indifferent about the rhinoceros sighting. The rhinoceros probably escaped from a zoo or a traveling circus. Jean refutes both explanations. Berenger then gives whimsical explanations, such as the rhinoceros coming out from under a stone. Jean accuses Berenger of making fun of him. Even though Berenger denies it, Jean seems insulted when Berenger contradicts him. Jean asserts that a rhinoceros roaming around a town is dangerous and shouldn't be allowed. Berenger agrees that a rhinoceros should not be allowed free, but he doesn't think the topic is worth arguing about. Berenger then sees his coworker, a young woman named Daisy, pass by and seems ashamed about her seeing him unkempt.

Jean again criticizes Berenger for drinking so much. In response Berenger claims drinking helps him endure the anguish of feeling out of place in life. The logician continues to explain a syllogism to the old gentleman by giving an example. Berenger confesses he barely has the strength to keep living. Jean encourages Berenger to start thinking, believing this will make him feel more alive. Knowing Berenger cares for Daisy, Jean exhorts him to pull his life together to attract her. Berenger should stop drinking, educate himself by going to the theater and museums, and dress properly. As the old gentleman attempts to understand the syllogism example offered by the logician, Berenger agrees to change. However, when Berenger invites Jean to accompany him to the theater, Jean declines by saying he has to rest.

The sound of a rhinoceros galloping is heard coming from the opposite direction. Berenger, Jean, the logician, the old gentleman, Daisy, and other townsfolk are astounded when they see the rhinoceros. As the noise of the galloping rhinoceros fades away, the housewife enters, holding a dead cat. She wails about the rhinoceros trampling her cat, and everyone shows some sympathy for her.

Jean asserts that the rhinoceros they saw was different from the first one. He claims the first rhinoceros had two horns, identifying it as Asiatic. However, the second rhinoceros had one horn, identifying it as African. Berenger accuses Jean of speaking nonsense because he didn't have time to notice the horns. According to Berenger, the Asiatic rhinoceros has one horn and the African has two horns. Jean and Berenger get into a heated argument about the subject. Other townsfolk begin to ignore the grieving housewife as they get involved in the dispute. Jean and Berenger insult each other, and Jean leaves in a huff. Berenger feels bad about arguing with his friend. Even though Jean's inability to admit being wrong is infuriating, Berenger feels he shouldn't have lost his temper. Some of the townsfolk continue to debate about the number of rhinoceroses. The logician informs them that what matters is presenting the discussion in the correct manner, instead of whether they saw one rhinoceros or two. This approach doesn't satisfy Berenger because it doesn't answer the question being discussed. When the housewife carries away her dead cat in a box, the grocer and café proprietor insist they will not stand for their cats being run over by rhinoceroses, no matter how many. Berenger continues to regret quarreling with Jean and orders a double brandy.
Analysis

Contrasting Characters

Ionesco begins Act 1 by showing the contrast between the main characters. Jean is shown as a person who has his act together. He is very well dressed and seems to have high morals. He doesn't drink to excess, he cultivates his mind by reading and going to plays and museums, and he practices self-control. Jean proudly states, "I'm strong because I have moral strength." In contrast, Berenger seems to be falling apart. He dresses sloppily, is unshaven, and seems apathetic about most things in life except for Daisy. To cope with his malaise, Berenger drinks excessively. He complains about his body feeling like it "were made of lead." Then he claims, "As soon as I take a drink, the lead slips away and I recognize myself."

Ionesco intensifies the contrast between Jean and Berenger by showing each character's view of himself. Jean is proud of his high moral character. He believes he is a person beyond reproach and, as a result, cannot ever admit being wrong. Berenger, though, often admits his mistakes. The section where Jean and Berenger argue about the rhinoceros clearly shows this. Jean insists an African rhinoceros has one horn and an Asiatic rhinoceros has two horns. Berenger contradicts his friend, saying the reverse is true. In truth Berenger is correct. Even so, Jean cannot admit even the possibility of being mistaken. Instead, he flies into a rage, calling Berenger a fool. Even though Berenger is correct, he feels bad about losing his temper. Berenger says, "I'm sorry I wasn't more accommodating." Berenger, therefore, is a person who readily admits his fallibility, while Jean is a person who must maintain a veneer of absolute strength that will be tested as the play moves along.

During the argument, Ionesco interjects the symbol of the rhinoceros. For the author the rhinoceros represents brute force, narrow vision, and a pack or mob mentality. Jean insults Berenger by saying, "If anybody's got two horns, it's you! You Asiatic Mongol!" In reality, though, Jean is acting more like a rhinoceros through his belligerent, narrow-minded attitude. Ionesco shows this in the next act when Jean begins to transform into the beast. In response to Jean's insult, Berenger says, "I've got no horns. And I never will have." This statement foreshadows Berenger's resistance to changing into a rhinoceros.

Limits of Reason

Through the logician, Ionesco develops the theme of absurdity. The author does this by emphasizing the limits and misuse of reason or logic. The logician tries to demonstrate the value of logic by explaining to the old gentleman what a syllogism is. However, the logician misuses the syllogism, thereby arriving at a nonsensical conclusion. The logician claims a cat has four paws and that the gentleman's dogs each have four paws. Therefore, the gentleman's dogs are cats. Such a conclusion is completely absurd, thereby showing how logic can be used to create nonsensical lies. As the logician tries to make the old gentleman understand syllogisms, Jean tries to make Berenger reform his life. By contrasting these two threads, Ionesco suggests that Jean's plan to control his own life and Berenger's life is absurd. Life has too many unexpected and inexplicable occurrences to fit neatly into any person's plan. The galloping rhinoceroses provide evidence of this. Seeing a rhinoceros running loose is unexpected and absurd, so Jean and other townsfolk are shocked when they see it. Such a sighting does not fit into Jean's carefully planned life, which unnerves him. In contrast, Berenger takes the rhinoceros sighting in stride. He does not have a strict plan for his life, which allows him to more easily accept the unexpected.

What's Trending

Ionesco conveys the theme of trends mostly through the use and repetition of banal phrases and platitudes that everyone seems to use one after the other. When townsfolk first see a rhinoceros, most of them exclaim, "Oh, a rhinoceros!" Later, many of them say in unison, "Well, of all things." Ionesco repeats this type of pattern throughout Act 1. When townsfolk see the housewife's dead cat, many of them say, "Poor little thing!" By doing this the author emphasizes how people often respond to specific events in a similar manner. Such a response is a type of conformity, because people are responding as a mindless group rather than individually to whatever is happening. Because of this, such a group response is shallow and meaningless. The author shows this through the townsfolk's fickleness toward the housewife mourning her cat. Although they all express sympathy in banal ways, the townsfolk are soon distracted by a silly argument about rhinoceroses. The townsfolk fail to show any deep empathy for
the housewife. Their banal expression gives the impression of sympathy while providing little.

For Ionesco the dead cat is a part of people's narrow views and their use of brute, mindless strength as represented by the rhinoceros. People quickly forget such innocent victims as they conform to a common identity.

By having townsfolk use the same expressions, Ionesco stresses how they are all conforming as part of a system. Because of this, they tend to blend together and lose their individuality. At times many of the townsfolk can be seen as acting like a machine that follows an interlinked process. When the first rhinoceros gallops away, the proprietor says, "Well, of all things!" Jean says the same comment, which is then repeated by the housewife. Then all three repeat this comment in unison. These people can be seen as one unit or machine responding in a connected way, which culminates in their united response. It is important to note that Berenger usually responds differently than the other characters. When other people comment, "Well, of all things," Berenger says, "It certainly looked as if it was a rhinoceros." No one else makes a similar comment. Indeed, Jean is frustrated with Berenger about his indifferent response to the beast. By doing this Berenger shows he doesn't fit into the system, which eventually helps him resist being changed into a rhinoceros. At one point Berenger states, "I feel out of place in life, among people."

**Act 2, Scene 1**

**Summary**

Act 2, Scene 1 takes place in a law office. An employee named Dudard and the secretary, Daisy, try to convince another employee, Botard, that a rhinoceros trampled a woman's cat. Dudard shows a newspaper article as proof, and Daisy insists she saw the rhinoceros. Even so, Botard rejects their claims. Priding himself on his rational, methodical mind, Botard says the supposed sightings of the rhinoceros are unscientific and therefore have been made up. He says he never trusts newspapers because journalists fabricate stories all the time.

Berenger enters a little late, and Daisy sneaks him the time sheet, which he signs. Berenger also says he saw at least one rhinoceros, but Botard implies it was a hallucination brought on by excessive drinking. When Berenger expresses doubt about seeing one or two rhinoceroses, Botard points this out as a sign that Berenger is lying. Although the office chief, Mr. Papillon, is concerned about the rhinoceros sightings, he tells his employees they need to stop arguing and get to work. The employees try to focus on their jobs, but bickering soon resumes between Dudard and Botard about the rhinoceros. Berenger mentions to Mr. Papillon that Mr. Boeuf is absent from work, which annoys the chief. In fact, Boeuf will never appear in human form.

Soon Mrs. Boeuf enters. Flustered, she informs Mr. Papillon her husband is ill with the flu. After sitting in a chair to calm herself, Mrs. Boeuf says a rhinoceros chased her to the law office. The beast is on the first-floor entrance to the office. Suddenly, trumpeting and a crashing sound is heard as the stairs crumble from a heavy weight. Daisy and Berenger attend to Mrs. Boeuf and try to calm her down. Meanwhile, Mr. Papillon, Botard, and Dudard go to the landing and spy the rhinoceros down below. Berenger and Daisy soon join them. Berenger focuses on whether the rhinoceros is Asiatic or African, while Daisy shows sympathy for the beast. Botard claims the rhinoceros is part of an infamous plot and points to Dudard, saying, "It's all your fault!"

Mrs. Boeuf comes to the landing and is shocked when she recognizes the rhinoceros is in some way her husband. She faints, and Berenger, Dudard, and Daisy carry her to a chair. Botard asserts that the union will stand by Mr. Boeuf, even if he has changed into a rhinoceros. Hearing the rhinoceros's trumpeting, Mrs. Boeuf says, "He's calling me." Daisy wonders how everyone will get out of the office, now that the stairs have been destroyed. She calls the fire department.

Rising from her chair, Mrs. Boeuf says she will not abandon her husband and runs to the landing. Startled, Berenger, Dudard, Mr. Papillon, and Botard follow her. Berenger tries to restrain Mrs. Boeuf but she jumps, leaving him holding her skirt. Based on the spectators' descriptions, Mrs. Boeuf lands astride on the back of the rhinoceros and rides away. Daisy informs her coworkers that the fireman cannot come immediately because they are attending to other emergencies involving rhinoceroses throughout the town. Apparently as many as 32 rhinoceroses have been reported. Dudard and Daisy challenge Botard to explain the rhinoceroses, but he has trouble doing so. Finally, Botard claims it's all part of a sinister plot that he's aware of and will eventually unmask when the time is right. Dudard accuses Botard of bluffing.
The firemen arrive and hoist a ladder to an office window. Daisy is the first to climb down the ladder. Mr. Papillon tells his employees work will resume as soon as possible. He then heads down the ladder holding business papers under his arm. Before Botard descends, he gives a short speech about taking up the mystery with the proper authorities. He then climbs down the ladder. Dudard and Berenger try to outdo each other with politeness, each of them insisting the other go down the ladder first. In the end they exit via the window together.

Analysis

Thematic Interrelation

In Act 2, Scene 1 Ionesco interrelates the theme of strength of belief with the theme of absurdity. The author presents Botard as representing supposed certitude. Botard is an ex-schoolteacher with a strong leftist, populist ideology. He prides himself on his analytical ability and being able to see things in a scientific manner. Because of this, he rejects any reports about rhinoceroses as irrational nonsense. However, most of the characters would agree that a rhinoceros roaming through the streets is irrational. The main difference between Botard and the others is his sense of feeling right. Even though Daisy and Berenger have actually seen the rhinoceros, Botard insists they are mistaken and has no doubt about his viewpoint. In fact, his defense of his position becomes absurd. He ends up thinking of sinister plots being hatched that somehow involve the rhinoceros. Berenger, Daisy, and Dudard all view Botard's explanations as ridiculous, which they are. Ionesco seems to be saying any rational explanation of the absurd is in itself absurd. Botard cannot deal with the absurd and stubbornly continues to uphold his rational position, no matter how outlandish it may seem.

Ionesco also interrelates the theme of absurdity with the theme of conformity to trends. The author accomplishes this through banal comments from the characters, Mr. Papillon's focus on work, and Berenger's and Daisy's differences. Some of the most humorous parts of this scene are conveyed through banal comments, such as when characters realize Mr. Boeuf has transformed into a rhinoceros, Dudard asks, "Is he insured?" Later, when Mrs. Boeuf rides away on the rhinoceros, characters make more commonplace remarks, such as Botard claiming, "She's a good rider." Despite the amazing, absurd situation, most of the characters fall back on banalities to deal with it. They conform to the expected responses. As a result, these banalities seem absurd and ludicrous. Another example happens at the end of the scene, where Dudard and Berenger try to outdo each other with politeness. They still conform to social conventions even when a rhinoceros epidemic seems to be spreading.

Conformity versus Individuality

Ionesco uses Mr. Papillon's obsession with work to convey conformity. As expected, Daisy and Dudard are alarmed by the rhinoceros sightings and want to talk about it. Although Mr. Papillon is also somewhat alarmed, he orders people to get back to work. So for Mr. Papillon, the standard of work must be upheld no matter what crisis is taking place. For him people should always conform to this standard. By the end of the scene, Mr. Papillon's attitude becomes so extreme it ends up being absurd. A rhinoceros has destroyed the stairs, Mrs. Boeuf has ridden off on the rhinoceros, and other people are apparently changing into rhinoceroses. Even so, as Mr. Papillon is about to leave the office via a ladder, he remains focused on getting work done and orders Berenger to bring him some business letters to take home with him.

Ionesco mainly shows individuality through Berenger and Daisy. The author again depicts Berenger as a person who doesn't fit in with society. He shows up late for work and has to secretly sign the time sheet to avoid being reprimanded. Also, Berenger and Daisy often respond differently than the other characters. When Mrs. Boeuf collapses in a chair, Daisy and Berenger tend to her instead of following the others to the stairway landing to gawk at the rhinoceros. Later, when Dudard wonders if Mr. Boeuf was insured, Daisy confronts him, asking, "How can you collect insurance in a case like this?" When Mr. Papillon and Botard get ready to climb down the ladder, they show a selfish concern about how the appearance of these rhinoceroses will affect them and their worldview. However, Berenger mentions that he plans to visit his friend Jean to make up with him concerning a quarrel. So Berenger's focus has nothing to do with the rhinoceroses but rather is about interpersonal relationships.

Ionesco also introduces trends through the side stories that are part of the action. Although her husband has transformed into a hideous beast that destroys things, Mrs. Boeuf feels drawn to be with him. When the rhinoceros calls her by
trumpeting, she leaps onto his back and rides off with him. The author is pointing out how people tend to join in with something despite its brutality. Apparently, other people are following the urge of joining the rhinoceroses. According to Daisy, seven rhinoceroses were sighted in the town in the morning, but since then the number has increased to 32.

Civilization versus Destruction

Ionesco continues to develop the symbol of rhinoceroses by showing that people actually change into these animals in the play. So the rhinoceroses not only represent brute force and a thick-skinned callousness but also people adopting these attitudes. The author hints at this through an interchange between Mr. Papillon and Daisy. When he makes an unwanted advance on Daisy, she responds by saying, "You keep your horny hands off my face, you old pachyderm!"

In general the rhinoceroses are linked with destruction. When the housewife first saw a rhinoceros in Act 1, she dropped her basket containing a wine bottle. In this act a rhinoceros destroys a stairway. Ionesco is gradually building up the symbol of broken objects, which represents the destruction of civilization. Botard alludes to this when he wonders how people can turn into destructive beasts in a civilized country.

Act 2, Scene 2

Summary

Act 2, Scene 2 takes place in Jean's apartment and in the hallway outside his apartment. Berenger knocks at Jean's door and calls his name but doesn't hear a response. Finally, Jean gets out of his bed, opens the door, and returns to bed. Berenger wonders why his friend is not at work and apologizes for the argument they had the day before about the rhinoceroses. At first Jean doesn't remember the argument and then admits he doesn't feel well. His voice is hoarse and he has a cough.

In a way, Berenger says, he and Jean were both right about the rhinoceroses because some have one horn and others have two horns. But what really matters is that the rhinoceroses exist, not how many horns they have. Although Jean repeats he doesn't feel well, he becomes defensive when Berenger suggests what might be wrong. Jean says he has a headache and Berenger points out a small bump on Jean's forehead. Concerned, Jean goes into the bathroom to check out the bump. When Jean returns to his bedroom, Berenger notices his friend's green skin and heavy breathing. These observations again make Jean defensive. Berenger suggests that Jean should see a doctor, which makes Jean angry. Berenger becomes alarmed when he sees Jean's skin getting greener and harder. Jean gets annoyed and tells Berenger to mind his own business.

Berenger replies that he's just trying to be a good friend. Jean says, "There's no such thing as friendship." Berenger points out that Jean is being misanthropic, and Jean agrees, saying he likes being nasty to people. Jean explains that people disgust him, and he'll run them down if they get in his way. Berenger becomes alarmed as Jean's skin turns greener. Jean sees this change as an improvement. Feeling warm, Jean goes back into the bathroom, where he laughs about Mr. Boeuf turning into a rhinoceros. Failing to see the humor, Berenger says Mr. Boeuf probably did not want to become a rhinoceros. However, Jean thinks Mr. Boeuf might have chosen this change. When Jean comes out of the bathroom, his skin is greener than ever and his voice is so hoarse it's almost unrecognizable.

Jean claims Mr. Boeuf saw his change into a rhinoceros as a good thing. Berenger can't believe Jean means this and says the rhinoceroses might destroy humans' moral standards. Jean is sick of moral standards, seeing them as confining. Instead, he sees the law of the jungle as superior. Jean begins pacing like a caged animal. Berenger asserts that human civilization should be preserved, but Jean thinks it should be destroyed.

As Berenger claims Jean can't mean what he's saying, Jean returns to the bathroom. Jean then sticks his head out, showing his bump has grown into something about the size of a rhinoceros horn. Alarmed, Berenger says Jean must be mad. Jean lunges at Berenger, who gets out of the way. Jean then charges into the bathroom.

Berenger enters the bathroom and exclaims that Jean's horn is getting longer. Jean yells, "I'll trample you down!" Frightened, Berenger shuts the bathroom door and shouts, "He's a rhinoceros, he's a rhinoceros!" Berenger steps out onto the stairway landing and yells for the police. An old man pokes his head out of a doorway and tells Berenger to be quiet because he's disturbing the peace. Berenger shouts for the porter, but when the porter's door opens, the head of a rhinoceros sticks out. Then the old man's door opens, and two rhinoceros heads stick out. In a panic Berenger heads back into Jean's
apartment. The closed bathroom door shakes from Jean pushing against it. When Berenger looks out a window, he sees a herd of rhinoceroses heading down the street. Terrified, he goes to various exits, but the sight of rhinoceroses always stops him. The bathroom door is about to break loose. Surrounded by rhinoceroses, Berenger pushes against the back wall, which yields, and he flees down the street.

Analysis

Process of Change

In Act 2, Scene 2 Ionesco focuses on how the themes of strength and trends affect the process of Jean changing into a rhinoceros. The author sees Jean's belligerence and inability to admit fault as the key to his transformation. In Act 1 Ionesco showed Jean possessed these traits through his superior attitude toward Berenger and his insistence on knowing what was best for his friend. In this scene the author shows Jean sick in bed, thereby making a direct connection between his attitude in Act 1 and his illness in Act 2, Scene 2. Ionesco reinforces this connection as Jean becomes more like a rhinoceros. When Berenger suggests what might be ailng his friend, Jean stubbornly refuses to admit anything is wrong, asserting, "I'm sound in mind and limb." Later, when Berenger points out that Jean's subconscious might have something to do with his illness, Jean again refutes this suggestion, saying, "I think straight. I always think straight." Jean continues to reaffirm his strength. The more he does this, the more he changes into a rhinoceros.

As seen in the previous scenes, Ionesco sees the rhinoceroses as representing a brute and destructive force. Rhinoceroses are shown charging mindlessly, destroying whatever gets in their way. The author sees people who join group actions and ways of thinking as having the same effect. By refusing to see the error of joining the trend, Jean blocks out the horror of his transformation. He thinks whatever state he is in must be the right one. The fact that other people, such as Mr. Boeuf, have changed into rhinoceroses only confirms the righteousness of this transformation. Jean has always been very assured of his own position and the positions of others in society. He is proud of this role and most likely sees others who perform their expected roles as praiseworthy. So for Jean, belonging or conforming to the whole is vital. He has no tolerance for being different, unlike Berenger. When he learns that others are changing into rhinoceroses, he feels the need to conform. He and the other rhinoceroses must have discovered a better form of existence, which does away with a civilized worldview, as evidenced by his claim, "When we've demolished all that, we'll be better off!"

Ionesco further develops the symbol of broken objects to convey the destruction of civilization. As Jean changes into a rhinoceros, he destroys more and more things. He trashes the mirror and other objects in the bathroom. During this change, Berenger and Jean talk about how people transforming into rhinoceroses will destroy moral standards, which have "taken centuries of human civilization to build up." Berenger sees such destruction as a terrible thing; Jean sees it as an improvement. Consumed by his own righteousness, Jean considers his impervious attitude as superior to being human and caring for others. The symbol of the broken objects is a visual representation of Jean's new worldview.

Fascism

It is important to note that Jean's unquestioning belief in the rightness of the crowd connects directly with the potential for fascism. Ionesco witnessed firsthand people readily adopting fascist ideas. Anything that opposed their views should be destroyed. If this meant destroying the civilized world, so be it. Ionesco witnessed millions of people conforming to this wrongheaded fascist ideology, despite its cruelty.

In Act 2, Scene 2 Ionesco uses absurdity as a theme to focus on the process of Jean changing into a rhinoceros. Such a transformation is unthinkable and absurd, but Berenger sees it happening to his friend, similar to how Ionesco saw people he knew become fascists. Adding to this absurdity is the fact that Jean has apparently chosen to change into a rhinoceros. Although the transformation of people into rhinoceroses could be seen as an epidemic, it does not seem like an epidemic that forces itself on people. Rather, people apparently use their free will to accept it. Jean suggests as much when he asks, "And what if he [Mr. Boeuf] did it on purpose?"

Act 3
Summary

Act 3 takes place in Berenger's apartment. Wearing a bandage on his head, Berenger seems paranoid about turning into a rhinoceros. Dudard enters, expresses concern about Berenger's anxious state, and tells him not to worry about the rhinoceroses. Dudard admits he can't explain why people are changing into rhinoceroses but is calmly trying to observe the facts. When Berenger hears rhinoceroses galloping in the street below, he gets flustered again. He tries to reassure himself that a person will not turn into a rhinoceros if he or she doesn't want to. According to Dudard, the rhinoceroses really aren't bad. However, for Berenger, just the sight of the animals gives him a bad feeling.

Berenger claims the transformations are evil and, because of this, people should take action against them. Dudard asserts that the changes have nothing to do with evil but rather with personal preferences. He then mentions that the office hasn't resumed work because Mr. Papillon has changed into a rhinoceros. This news shocks Berenger. Dudard says Botard was outraged by Mr. Papillon's transformation. Dudard prefers a more detached approach, which uses logic to understand the phenomenon. Berenger states that a person turning into a rhinoceros is abnormal, but Dudard is not sure about this. Berenger says people should not rely on theory with these transformations but rather on intuition. For Berenger his intuition tells him that people changing into rhinoceroses is horrible. He yells, "You devils!" at rhinoceroses passing below on the street. He then notices one of the rhinoceroses is wearing the logician's hat and realizes this animal is the logician. Berenger wonders whom a person can turn to for help.

Daisy enters. Berenger is pleased to see her and informs her that the logician has changed into a rhinoceros. Daisy already knew this and seems more concerned about Berenger's health. She says Botard has also turned into a rhinoceros. Shocked, Berenger can't believe this news, but Daisy calmly says she saw him transform. Berenger tries to comprehend Botard's change, as Dudard discreetly flirts with Daisy. Dudard claims mildly that Botard changed because his so-called community spirit triumphed over anarchy. Berenger counters that the rhinoceroses are anarchic because they are in the minority. Daisy says they're becoming a much bigger minority and names several people she knows who have changed into rhinoceroses.

Daisy has brought food and suggests eating lunch. She had trouble finding food because the rhinoceroses have plundered many shops. Berenger suggests the rhinoceroses should be corralled, but Daisy says doing this would be difficult because everyone has at least one friend or relation who has transformed. Besides, people are getting used to the rhinoceroses. Berenger realizes the rhinoceroses have destroyed the fire station and sees more rhinoceroses coming out of houses. Dudard feels his duty is to stick by his friends and employers, who have all changed into rhinoceroses. He runs out of the apartment as Berenger shouts at him to come back.

Berenger looks out the window and can only see rhinoceroses "as far as the eye can see." The sound of the rhinoceroses becomes almost musical. Stylized heads of rhinoceroses appear on the wall, and these heads seem to become beautiful. Berenger declares his love for Daisy and says they do not need to fear anything if they are together. Daisy agrees that nothing can hurt them but says Berenger should calm himself. Berenger feels guilt about not being nicer to Jean. Daisy tells Berenger not to reproach himself because guilt could spoil their happiness.

The phone rings, and Berenger answers it. The sound of trumpeting rhinoceroses are heard over the receiver. To get news Berenger turns on the radio, but again only the sound of trumpeting is heard. Daisy and Berenger realize they are the only humans left. The noise of the rhinoceroses comes from everywhere, causing the house to shake. Even so, the noise has a rhythmic, musical quality. Berenger says they could have children and regenerate the human race, but Daisy replies that doing this would be too difficult. According to Daisy, she and Berenger might be the abnormal ones who need saving, not the rhinoceroses. When Berenger declares his love for her, Daisy says she feels ashamed of love because it is a type of weakness. Daisy imagines the rhinoceroses playing and dancing and calls them gods. Berenger rebukes Daisy for saying this. When Berenger inspects himself in the mirror, Daisy slowly leaves the apartment. Realizing Daisy has left, Berenger yells for her to return.

Berenger blames himself for Daisy leaving. He considers trying to convince the rhinoceroses to change back and wonders if the changes are reversible. But to convince them, he would have to learn their language, and they would have to learn his. Berenger questions the language he is speaking. He feels ugly compared to the rhinoceroses and wishes he has their
features. The noises of the rhinoceroses begin to sound charming to him, and he tries to imitate them but can't. Berenger now feels he's the monster. Suddenly, he declares that he doesn't care if he's the monster. He shouts that he'll fight all of them. He's the last man left and intends to stay this way.

Analysis

Causes of Conformity

In Act 3 the theme of conformity to trends takes center stage. For Ionesco conformity has two main causes: people failing to hold strong to their own beliefs, including paying attention to the emotional aspect of beliefs, and the popularity of trends, which involves the use of social pressure to conform. For Dudard the calm, scientific use of logic and reason is by far the best way to deal with life. He prides himself on being objective, fair, and seeing all sides of an issue. Dudard states, "One has to keep an open mind ... everything is logical. To understand is to justify." In this way Dudard is similar to the logician. His calm use of reason entraps him. At first he shows no desire to become a rhinoceros, but his objectivity and desire to understand the opposing point of view seduces him into joining the pack. Before he leaves to join the rhinoceroses, Dudard says, "But if you're going to criticize [the rhinoceroses], it's better to do so from the inside." So he uses the idea of scientific inquiry to justify becoming a rhinoceros.

For the author, failing to attend to emotions is very dangerous. In Act 1, when the housewife expressed her fear of seeing a rhinoceros, the logician replied, "Fear is an irrational thing. It must yield to reason." Later, when the housewife was grieving for her dead cat, the logician told her, "What do you expect, Madame? All cats are mortal! One must accept that." In both cases the housewife's emotions are perfectly natural, but for the logician, feeling one's emotions is an inferior thing, which should give way only to reason. In Act 3 Dudard tries to distance Berenger from his fear of the rhinoceroses. He tells Berenger, "You must learn to be more detached." Later, Dudard says, "I'm simply trying to look the facts unemotionally in the face." By doing this, though, a person can lose touch with his or her emotions. Such distancing from feelings has severe repercussions as more and more people change into rhinoceroses. Berenger remains terrified about transforming into a rhinoceros, which helps him resist such a change. However, other characters seem to rationalize the change, thereby making them more susceptible to it. By showing this misuse of reason, Ionesco is making a connection to the rise of fascism. The brutality of fascism horrified most people, but many blocked out or distanced themselves from this horror through over rationalization.

For Ionesco using reason to explain an absurd event is inadequate. An absurd occurrence, like people turning into rhinoceroses or adopting fascism, is irrational and therefore cannot be explained using reason. In addition, Ionesco sees the banal use of language as instrumental in people conforming to absurd and destructive behavior. For example, when Berenger and Daisy express their love for each other, they do so by using a series of platitudes and banalities, such as "I'm not afraid of anything as long as we're together." They are repeating what countless romantic couples have said throughout history, which allows the pressures of conforming to the rhinoceroses to break their relationship apart. In such absurd circumstances, their relationship would require a fresh use of language that conveys the truth of their specific situation.

The second major cause for conformity is the power of trends. Many of the people who first turned into rhinoceroses were probably in themselves potentially belligerent by nature and convinced of their own infallibility. However, as more and more people became rhinoceroses, the remaining people felt more social pressure to become rhinoceroses. It's what everyone else is doing, so it must be right. Dudard shows this before he leaves Berenger's apartment when he says, "It's my duty to stick by them [the rhinoceroses]; I have to do my duty." Botard also felt this pressure. His last words were, "We must move with the times!" Even Daisy succumbs to the pressure of the pack when she says, "Perhaps it's we who need saving. Perhaps we're the abnormal ones." In addition, as more people transform into rhinoceroses, being a rhinoceros becomes more attractive. The rhinoceros turns into the standard on how an individual should look and behave. Ionesco indicates this when he describes the rhinoceroses' heads on the wall becoming more beautiful and their noises becoming more musical. Near the end of the play, Daisy becomes intoxicated by the desire to be like the rhinoceroses when she says, "They're beautiful."

Mob Mentality

In Act 3 Ionesco continues to develop the symbol of the
rhinoceroses by having them represent the mob mentality. As more and more people become rhinoceroses, they become a destructive mob. The author uses the symbol of broken objects—such as the looted stores and the demolished fire station—to represent this destruction. Ionesco was fully aware of the destructive force of fascist mobs. For example, in Germany in November 1938, Nazi mobs attacked Jewish people and their property, which involved looting stores and destroying synagogues. This incident came to be called Kristallnacht, which means “night of broken glass.” It was only the beginning of long years ahead of mass destruction and mob rule characteristic of fascism. Like the rhinoceroses destroying the fire station and looting shops, the Nazi mob destroyed anything that got in its way.

Quotes

“I'm just as good as you are. I think ... I may say I'm better.”
— Jean, Act 1

Jean reveals his attitude toward Berenger. Because of his sense of superiority, Jean believes in his views about how life should be led. Jean becomes belligerent and angry when Berenger questions his views.

“Oh, a rhinoceros!”
— Jean, Act 1

Jean expresses his shock when he sees a rhinoceros rampaging through town. Soon after, the waitress and the grocer say exactly the same thing when they see the rhinoceros. Ionesco often has characters repeat the same banal expressions or say them in unison, thereby emphasizing how easily people conform.

“Fear is an irrational thing. It must yield to reason.”
— Botard, Act 2, Scene 1

The logician shows his reliance on viewing everything through the lens of reason or logic. However, the strict use of logic can contradict reality. People distancing themselves from their emotions can make them vulnerable to becoming a rhinoceros. Fear can be used to warn a person about something, such as the brutality of becoming a rhinoceros.

“I feel out of place in life ... and so I take to drink.”
— Berenger, Act 1

Berenger expresses his feelings about not fitting in with society. He constantly feels agitated and doubts himself, so he drinks to calm his nerves. Later, Ionesco shows how being an outsider helps Berenger resist becoming a rhinoceros.

“It's my husband. Oh Boeuf, my poor Boeuf, what's happened to you?”
— Mrs. Boeuf, Act 2, Scene 1

Mrs. Boeuf reveals her compassion for her husband, who has transformed into a rhinoceros. Because of her sympathy and affection for Mr. Boeuf, Mrs. Boeuf joins her rhinoceros husband by leaping onto his back and riding away. Through this incident, Ionesco shows how people could allow themselves to become a symbolic rhinoceros because of family connections. Their need to keep the family together overrides the horror of turning into it.

“I hold the key to all these happenings, an infallible system of interpretation.”
— Botard, Act 2, Scene 1
Botard shows his conceit about his own view of life, namely that it is absolutely true. In reality Botard has no idea why people are turning into rhinoceroses, but he values putting on the façade of being a know-it-all more than the truth. Other characters share this trait, including Jean and Dudard.

“I do want to make it up with him ... It was all my fault."

— Berenger, Act 2, Scene 1

Berenger expresses his guilt about having an argument with Jean. Throughout the play, Berenger is the only character who feels guilt and doubts himself. Berenger and his coworkers realize many people are becoming rhinoceroses. Despite this shocking news, Berenger still focuses on apologizing to his friend. He values human relationships above all else.

“They'd better keep out of my way, or I'll run them down.”

— Jean, Act 2, Scene 2

As Jean transforms into a rhinoceros, his attitude becomes more belligerent and brutal. He comes to see people who oppose him as things to be destroyed rather than as humans to converse with and perhaps learn from.

“You must learn to be more detached and ... see the funny side of things.”

— Dudard, Act 3

Dudard tries to calm Berenger down by telling him to detach himself from the phenomenon of people becoming rhinoceroses. For Dudard this detachment allows him to remain calm and to see the rhinoceroses in an objective light. However, by doing this, Dudard separates himself from the horror of becoming a rhinoceros, thereby making him vulnerable to turning into one.

“The evil! That's just a phrase! Who knows what is evil and what is good?”

— Dudard, Act 3

In an effort to be objective, Dudard claims there is no such thing as evil. No matter how horrifying, unjust, and cruel an action is—such as rhinoceroses destroying civilization—Dudard refuses to see this action as being evil. Dudard is able to maintain this view because he has distanced himself from his emotions, including the terror of people becoming beasts.

“But I do feel you're in the wrong ... I feel it intuitively.”

— Berenger, Act 3

In contrast to Dudard, Berenger sees the value of keeping in touch with his emotions. They can act as an intuitive guide, warning him when something is wrong or evil. Because of this, Berenger feels horror about transforming into a rhinoceros and thereby resists becoming one.

“It's my duty to stick by them; I have to do my duty.”

— Dudard, Act 3

Dudard is drawn to join the rhinoceroses because their pack has become the majority. Instead of remaining an individual, he feels a duty to conform with what most others have done, namely turn into brute beasts. The fact that these beasts are destroying civilization doesn't really matter. He lacks the strength to be different.
“They’re like gods.”

— Daisy, Act 3

Daisy shows how, when a group becomes dominant, it can portray itself as being attractive, no matter how harsh it is. Because everyone has become a rhinoceros, their brutal behavior can be glorified as the ideal. Looking and acting like a rhinoceros becomes the new norm to conform to. Anyone who doesn’t conform appears ugly and weak, so Daisy sees the rhinoceroses as beautiful creatures or gods.

“People who try to hang on to their individuality always come to a bad end!”

— Berenger, Act 3

Because of society’s pressure to conform, people who maintain their individuality face constant difficulties. Such a person may be rejected or condemned by society, the way Berenger has been rejected by the rhinoceroses.

Symbols

Rhinoceroses

The rhinoceros is among the largest and most belligerent of all species. Should a rhinoceros suddenly appear among humans, chaos would ensue. A mob mentality would create hysteria as people sought an escape. In an absurd world, however, the rhinoceros can become the norm. People can suddenly find the rhinoceros desirable, even beautiful, and the hysteria can center on becoming part of the rhinoceros pack rather than trying to escape it.

Just as totalitarian regimes fed on the mass hysteria of crowds gathered to watch parades and shows of force, in *Rhinoceros* the people become infatuated with the beasts and choose to join the rushing, trumpeting animals. The beasts transform from brutes to creatures that inspire even Daisy to draw close to “the ardor and the tremendous energy emanating” from them. The animals stand for human willingness to join groups, even when the groups are destructive and savage.

**Broken Objects**

Broken objects represent the destruction of civilization. The author gradually increases the use of this symbol as the play progresses to show the process of civilization collapsing. In Act 1 a wine bottle breaks when the housewife sees a rhinoceros and drops her basket. This incident foreshadows the many broken objects to come as civilization continues to crumble. In Act 2, Scene 1 a rhinoceros destroys a stairway leading to a legal office, indicating the collapse of the justice system. In Act 2, Scene 2 Jean destroys objects in his room as he transforms into a rhinoceros, representing the destruction of personal relationships, such as Jean’s friendship with Berenger. In Act 3 the rhinoceroses destroy a fire station, symbolizing the destruction of civilization’s institutions.

**The Cat**

The cat represents the innocent victims destroyed by the brute force that often accompanies social upheaval. The cat does nothing wrong except get in the way of a stampeding rhinoceros. The same could be said for fascist movements, which are known for destroying anything, including people, that gets in the way of their growth. The author emphasizes how innocent victims like the cat are easily forgotten by society. At first townsfolk show polite sadness for the housewife and her dead cat, but they are soon distracted by a silly argument between Jean and Berenger. People’s sympathy for innocent victims of harsh, unjust behavior tends to be superficial as they are more concerned with the distractions of their own concerns.
Themes

Strength of Belief

It’s interesting to see how Eugène Ionesco plays with the concept of strength. Ultimately, the strongest character when it comes to sticking to one’s principles is Berenger—who is self-deprecating and whom other characters label as weak because of his drinking. But Berenger is the only person so sure of humans’ superiority over rhinoceroses that he refuses to succumb to society’s demands to conform and turn into a rhinoceros like everyone else. The strength of his beliefs serves him well as he becomes the last man standing.

In contrast, the characters who might normally be seen as the strong members of society are unable to resist societal expectations. For example, Jean, the smug member of the bourgeois; Dudard, with his total faith in science; and the logician: all three of these characters are weak when it comes to standing up for personal beliefs and defending them against the crowd. All of them become confused even as Berenger becomes more resolute in his convictions.

Trends

The conformity of day-to-day life prepares the characters to easily conform to the trend of becoming rhinoceroses. People often work rather mindlessly at dead-end jobs, doing what is expected from bosses like Mr. Papillon. People use banal expressions even when responding to surprising events like rhinoceros sightings, often speaking in unison like some sort of mindless chorus.

Ionesco highlights the absurdity of conformity by normalizing the trend of becoming a rhinoceros. Mrs. Boeuf can ride on the back of her husband, now a rhinoceros, without inciting any comment beyond “she’s a good rider.” Daisy suddenly sees rhinoceroses as beautiful and can easily accept Botard’s transformation as “sincerity itself.”

What Ionesco is saying is that people are not used to being different like Berenger, so they feel compelled to join the pack. As a result, something as ridiculous as being a rhinoceros can become a craze. However, because a rhinoceros is a brutal animal, this trend results in the destruction of civilization and human morals, such as love. Before Daisy joins the rhinoceroses, she says, “I feel a bit ashamed of what you call love—this morbid feeling.” This conformity to a brutal way of behaving can connect politically to the rise of fascism in the mind of someone who lived it, such as Ionesco.

Absurdity

The process of people turning into rhinoceroses is absurd. However, Ionesco believes absurd events happen all the time in a world devoid of meaning and logic. The rise of fascism could be seen as an example. Fascist Nazis concocted an absurd theory on the superiority of the Aryan race, which had no basis in reason or scientific fact. Even so, millions of people adopted this theory, which resulted in widespread destruction and the deaths of millions of Jews and other minorities during the Holocaust of World War II.

So without logic or reason to depend on, how can humans find meaning? Absurdist claim that there is no meaning, only frustration in trying to find it. Berenger doesn’t look for the meaning behind becoming a rhinoceros; he doesn’t seek to explain his gut feeling not to do it. He sees the futility of using reason to explain reality perhaps because reality itself is absurd or beyond explanation.

Suggested Reading


