

Rhinoceros by

Plot Overview

Rhinoceros begins in a small town square where Jean, an efficient, refined young man, meets his semi-alcoholic and fully apathetic friend, Berenger, for a drink. Jean upbraids Berenger for his drinking habits and his aimlessness. Soon, a rhinoceros runs through the square (off-stage), shocking all the townspeople with the exception of the indifferent Berenger. Jean lectures Berenger about will-power while a rational Logician explains the concept of a syllogism to an old man. Berenger concedes that he has a crush on Daisy, a typist at his office, but worries that she favors Dudard, an up-and-coming co-worker. Jean recommends will-power and cultural self-improvement to garner Daisy's affections, and to improve his life in general. Another rhino rushes by and tramples a cat. The townspeople debate whether or not it was the same rhino and what breed it was. Berenger and Jean get in a fight over the physical specifics of the rhino, and Jean storms off after calling Berenger a drunkard. The townspeople ask the Logician to clear up confusion, but his lengthy analysis makes no progress. The townspeople vow to stop the rhinos. Berenger expresses remorse for fighting with Jean, then says he's too upset to culture himself as planned and instead drinks.

In Berenger's office, the co-workers argue with Botard, an old skeptic who doesn't believe in the rhinos. Berenger arrives late, but Daisy sneaks him in. The employees ask Berenger if he saw the rhino. Botard claims the illusory appearance of the rhino is an example of "collective psychosis." They return to work, proof-reading law proposals, and wonder where co-worker Mr. Boeuf is. Mrs. Boeuf rushes in and says her husband is sick and will be back in a few days. She tells them that she was just chased by a rhino, which is now downstairs. The rhino crushes the staircase it tries to ascend, stranding the workers. Mrs. Boeuf recognizes the rhino as her husband. Daisy telephones the fire station to rescue them. The men give Mrs. Boeuf practical advice for dealing with this setback, but she is too devoted to her rhino-husband and vows to stay with him. She jumps down to the ground floor and (off-stage) rides off on his back. More rhinos are reported in the town. The

firemen arrive to help them out the window. Botard vows he'll solve the rhino-riddle. Berenger passes on an offer to drink with Dudard so he can visit Jean.

Jean coughs in bed at home. Berenger visits and apologizes for their argument the previous day. At first, Jean has no recollection at all about the rhinoceroses. Jean's voice grows more hoarse, a bump on his nose continues to grow, and his skin gets greener by the moment. He becomes more misanthropic and savage. Berenger informs him of Mr. Boeuf's transformation, which Jean applauds. He moves in and out of the bathroom, each time appearing and sounding more like a rhino. He pronounces humanism dead, sheds his itchy clothes, tries to run down Berenger, apologizes, and runs into the bathroom. Berenger is about to escape, but follows Jean into the bathroom to help him. Off-stage in the bathroom, Jean attacks Berenger. Berenger escapes and closes the bathroom door behind him (but is pierced by a rhino horn) as Jean, now a full-blown rhino, tries to break free. Berenger alerts the tenants in the building to the rhino's presence in the building, but everyone else has transformed as well. Berenger looks out the window, where a herd of rhinos march. The bathroom door is on the verge of breaking. Berenger throws himself against the wall and breaks through it. He runs through the street, yelling "Rhinoceros!"

Berenger wakes up from a nightmare in his room and inspects himself for any impending rhino-signs. Still human, he struggles not to drink, but eventually does. Dudard visits and they discuss Jean's transformation, which Berenger feels guilty about. They discuss the metamorphoses as an epidemic. Berenger takes another drink, under the premise that alcohol is an immunization. Dudard urges Berenger not to feel too guilty. Dudard reveals that Papillon, their boss, has turned into a rhinoceros. Berenger believes that for a man of Papillon's human stature to change, it must have been involuntary. Dudard considers the metamorphoses natural, while Berenger continues to find them abnormal. The flustered Berenger says he will seek the Logician's services in clearing this up. A herd of rhinos passes and Berenger spots the Logician's hat on a rhinoceros, a sign of metamorphosis, and vows not to become one as well.

Daisy visits Berenger, which makes Dudard jealous. Daisy appears not to care too deeply about the epidemic. She informs them that Botard has metamorphosed. Berenger can't believe it, but then later rationalizes it. Daisy and Dudard iterate that acclimating oneself to the rhinos is the best solution, but Berenger resists. They start to have lunch, but are interrupted by a crumbling wall outside. The fire station has been sacked, and the firemen have turned into rhinos. Dudard leaves; he wants to experience the epidemic first-hand. Berenger tries to stop him, but Daisy lets him go. Dudard soon turns into a rhino outside. The sights and sounds of the rhinos become more beautiful despite their savagery. Berenger laments Dudard's demise, and Daisy reminds Berenger that they have no right to interfere in other's lives. She pours some brandy for Berenger and removes his bandage—still no signs of a transformation. Berenger claims he will defend her. He blames himself and Daisy for contributing, through lack of sympathy, to the transformations of Jean and Papillon, respectively. Daisy convinces him to shrug off the guilt. The phone rings, but they hear only rhino trumpeting on the line. They turn to the radio for help, but the rhinos have taken that over, as well.

Upstairs, a rhino stampede disrupts the house's foundations. Daisy believes they must adapt to their new neighbors, but Berenger proposes they regenerate the human race, like Adam and Eve. Daisy finds the power of the rhinos seductive. Berenger slaps her, then apologizes and declares that he'll never surrender and that he will protect her. She pledges her loyalty to him. The noise of the rhinos becomes more musical to Daisy, though Berenger still finds it savage and argues with her. Daisy breaks up with him and leaves. Berenger barricades his room and plugs his ears. He doubts his own humanity. He inspects photographs and cannot recognize any of his former friends—but he does identify himself and hangs three of his pictures on the wall beside the rhino heads. They turn out to be pictures of unattractive people and, compared to the elegant rhino heads, are even more grotesque. He envies the bodies of the rhinos, but at the brink of desperation, he nevertheless decides that he will fight the rhinos.

Character List:

Berenger

Berenger's transformation is the true metamorphosis in *Rhinoceros*. While the other characters physically turn into rhinoceroses, embodying the savage natures they had formerly repressed, Berenger's change is moral and completely opposite from his position at the start of the play. He begins as an aimless, alienated Everyman who drinks too much and who finds little worth in life, except for the beauty of Daisy, his co-worker. He is bored by his work, too lazy to culture himself, and wonders if life is a dream—that is, if its absurdity is the product of a dream-like state of absurd logic, and if life, like a dream, is controlled by unconscious desires. Despite his escapism through alcohol, he holds on tightly to his human identity, never comprehending why someone would want to be anyone else. While his passivity is the underlying cause of the metamorphoses, helping promote the climate of irresponsibility and indifference, it is his recognition of life as an absurdity that prompts him to change his character, rather than accept the presence of the rhinos. Yet he remains indecisive nearly to the very end, losing his faith in humanity and finding the rhinoceroses beautiful. In the last line of the play, however, he overturns his weak will and lack of responsibility by deciding to save humanity against the tyranny of the rhinos.

Berenger's decision, however, is not totally unforeseen. His love of Daisy, as mentioned above, reveals he has emotional desires for another human. At one point, when it seems to him that he and Daisy will be united at the expense of their co-worker Dudard's departure and metamorphosis, Berenger exclaims "Happiness is such an egotistical thing!" Yet his desires turn out not to be so self-centered. Even when Daisy abandons him to become a rhino, and when other friends insult him and do the same, he feels guilty for pushing them out, although they would have metamorphosed without him. He does not love Daisy alone; he loves humanity, and is willing to take responsibility for its fate. This "will" of responsibility, rather than the will of power the other characters treasure, is what ultimately galvanizes Berenger's final line of resistance, "I'm not capitulating!"

Jean

Jean epitomizes the Nietzschean conception of the "super-man" who is above morality. He believes in the strength of his will and rationalist intellect. His arrogance and unspoken disdain for the common man, especially for Berenger's lackadaisical attitude toward life, foreshadows his metamorphosis into a savage, vicious rhinoceros. As the most fleshed-out character who transforms into a rhino, he symbolizes the Nietzschean "will to power" of the fascist rhinos, their use of strength and will to circumvent morality and return to a primal state of nature. Yet Jean is riddled with hypocrisies and contradictions. He shows himself from the start to be as irresponsible as Berenger, showing up late to their meeting and refusing a day of culture to nap and drink. In fact, his appreciation for self-improvement seems to stem from his view of education as cultural capital, and not as an exploration of his humanity. He always rationalizes these lapses after the fact, drawing on his vast reserves of logic to skew the discussion. When Jean vows, as a rhino, that he will trample Berenger and anyone who gets in his way, it is clear that his transformation was a mere exchange of bodies, and not of morality.

Logician

Although he appears only in the first act, the Logician, as his name suggests, represents the other rationalist characters (Jean, Botard, Dudard) and one of the underlying premises of the play and existentialist philosophy, that logic cannot explain everything. In fact, Ionesco severely mocks the Logician's circular, comic train of thought, which focuses on all the wrong questions and ends up with completely incorrect answers or answers that re-pose the original question. We must recognize the universe as absurd and nonsensical, Ionesco believes, in order to take any meaning from it; the Logician and other characters resist this, though they often succeed only in proving themselves absurd.

Daisy

Daisy appears as if she, along with Berenger, cares deeply about humanity, but she continually urges Berenger to acclimate himself and not to feel guilty about the rhinoceroses. Her love for him appears as an ephemeral desire that flickers on and off, and in the end love for only one person

does not necessarily make one into a truly loving person. In order to commit one's life to something outside oneself, as the existentialists were concerned with, one must love all humanity. Daisy's constant avoidance of responsibility and her lack of concern for her fellow man reveals her desires for Berenger as selfish despite the good intentions she often has for him (she tries to limit his alcohol intake, for instance, and wants to assuage his guilt to make him happier). Understandably, she is seduced by the beauty and power of the rhinos, something that offers her greater pleasure than the "weakness" of human love, as she puts it. Her final betrayal of Berenger in joining the rhinos incites his dramatic decision to save humanity; it is his love for her (and the loss of it) that makes him feel guilty and responsible and which allows him to see how much he loves humanity, and not a single person, after all.

Botard - Botard is a senior member of Berenger's office. He is cynical and skeptical, and jealous of Dudard's rising stature. He refuses to believe at first the presence of the rhinos and seeks rational explanations for everything.

Dudard - Dudard is a co-worker of Berenger's and a rival for Daisy's affections. He prides himself on his intellect and rationality.

Papillon - Papillon is the head of Berenger's office. He privileges work above his employees.

The Boeufs - Mr. Boeuf, another co-worker of Berenger's, appears off-stage only as a rhinoceros. His wife remains devoted to him despite his new form.

Townspeople - The Old Gentleman, the Grocer, the Grocer's Wife, the Housewife, the Café Proprietor, and the Waitress appear in the first act. They are characterized largely by their trivial concerns, though the Old Gentleman is very interested in the Logician.

Themes:

Will and Responsibility

The transformation of Berenger from an apathetic, alcoholic, and ennui-ridden man into the savior of humanity constitutes the major theme of *Rhinoceros*, and the major existential struggle: one must commit oneself to a significant cause in order to give life meaning. Jean continually exhorts Berenger to exercise more will-power and not surrender to life's pressures, and other characters, such as Dudard, seem to do just that as they control their own destinies. Berenger does not have great conventional will-power, as demonstrated by his frequent recourse to alcohol and his tendency to dream (both daydreams and nightmares). However, he maintains a steadfast, latent sense of responsibility after Act One, often feeling guilty for the various rhinoceros-metamorphoses around him—in a sense, his initial apathy was the cause, helping promote a climate of indifference and irresponsibility. Furthermore, he shows early on that he at least cares about Daisy, the only evidence in the play, other than Mrs. Boeuf's devotion to Mr. Boeuf, of sincere love for another human. By Act Three, his powerful guilt and sense of responsibility indicates that Berenger practices the most selfless kind of love—unconditional love for all humanity, whereby he is concerned for the welfare even of those who have scorned him. This all-encompassing love is what gives his life meaning.

The supposedly strong characters, like Jean, fail the ultimate test of will-power, the rhinoceros epidemic, and their crumbling wills are foreshadowed by their subtler evasions of responsibility—Daisy, for instance, wants to live a guiltless life. Their idea of will borrows from Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of "the will to power." For them, will is a means to metamorphose into Nietzsche's "super-man," a powerful being beyond human morality. The savagery of the rhinos, and Jean's transformation and statements in Act Two, exemplify this desire for power. He becomes violent, claims humanism is dead, and tries to trample Berenger. The play's final irony is that Berenger becomes the true super-man, gathering his resources of will, built on a foundation of love for his fellow man, to take responsibility for humanity.

Logic and Absurdity

Rhinoceros exposes the limitations of logic, and absurdity reigns as the dominating force in the universe. Self-proclaimed rational characters, such as the Logician, Botard, and Jean, either

flounder in their proofs (the Logician, especially) or ridiculously rationalize their incorrect presumptions—consider Botard's accusation of a conspiracy in Act Two. The Logician's attempts to uncover how many rhinoceroses there were in the first act, and what breeds they were, results only in re-posing the original question. In Act One, Berenger calls Jean's ideas "nonsense," and this word resonates throughout *Rhinoceros*. The world is nonsensical, absurd, and defies the extent of logic. As Berenger says, if one were to read about the rhinoceros events in a newspaper, away from the action, one could be rational and detached, but in the midst of things one can't help getting involved. The balance between detached distance and intimate confusion divides the supposedly logical characters from Berenger. They maintain their logical distance until confronted with a real problem, when their logic implodes. Berenger concedes absurdity from the outset—"life is a dream," he says, alluding to the inexplicable randomness around him—and this enables him to understand the absurdity of the metamorphoses better, even though he never arrives at a logical "solution." Recognizing the world as absurd, Ionesco suggests, is the first step in cobbling together a meaningful life.

Fascism

The "epidemic" of the rhinoceroses serves as a convenient allegory for the mass uprising of Nazism and fascism before and during World War II. Ionesco's main reason for writing *Rhinoceros* is not simply to criticize the horrors of Nazis, but to explore the mentality of those who so easily succumbed to Nazism. A universal consciousness that subverts individual free thought and will defines this mentality; in other words, people get rolled up in the snowball of general opinion around them, and they start thinking what others are thinking. In the play, people repeat ideas others have said earlier, or simultaneously say the same things. Once other people, especially authority figures, collapse in the play, the remaining humans find it even easier to justify why the metamorphoses are desirable. Ionesco is careful not to make his play a one-sided critique of the brutality of Nazism. The rhinos become more beautiful as the play progresses until they overshadow the ugliness of humanity, and the audience is forced to recognize that an impressionable individual might have similarly perceived the swelling ranks of Nazis as superior. In fact, Dudard's desire to join the "universal family" of the rhinos points to the notion of the rhinos

as an Aryan master race, physically superior to the rest of humanity. Nevertheless, they are still morally repugnant, escalating their violence over the course of the play. Ionesco carefully traces an argument against John Stuart Mill's "harm principle," which states that individual freedom should be preserved so long as it does not harm anyone else. Ionesco demonstrates that passively allowing the rhinos to go on—or, allegorically, turning a blind eye to fascism, as individual citizens and entire countries did in the 1930s—is as harmful as direct violence.

Symbol:

Rhinoceroses

The rhinoceroses are a blunt symbol of man's inherent savage nature but, to Ionesco's credit, the articulation of this idea deploys slowly throughout the play: the first rhino causes no apparent damage; the second one tramples a cat; later ones destroy more property and Jean-as-rhinoceros attacks Berenger. They represent both fascist tyranny and the absurdity of a universe that could produce such metamorphoses. These ideas crystallize into one question: how could humans be this savage, allowing the barbarity of World War II Nazism? Ionesco answers this in a variety of ways. He equates the epidemic of the metamorphoses with the ways the ideals of Nazism can infect the unconscious minds of individuals. Yet the rhinos become more beautiful and humans more ugly by the end of the play. They are beautiful, however, because of their brute strength and power; true beauty, as Berenger demonstrates when he finally decides to fight the rhinos and save humanity, lies in moral strength.

Theatre of the Absurd

In the tradition of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, and Harold Pinter's plays, Ionesco's drama combines abstract philosophical ideas with concrete humor. The various rationalizations that characters come up with to explain their previous errors delight us with their silliness, but they also suggest deeper ideas about logic and responsibility. As many of the plays from the Theatre of the Absurd go, *Rhinoceros* is conscious of itself as a play, as when

Jean suggests Berenger sees one of Ionesco's plays, but more so in the ways that it forces the audience to recognize the production before them as a play and not as a diversion. A production with back-lit rhinoceros heads stakes no claim to the typical drama's attempts to suspend the audience's disbelief, but this is the point: Ionesco breaks the "fourth wall" of the theater (and numerous other walls and structures explode in the play) to make the audience leave the theater feeling that the absurdity they witnessed was somehow more real than a "realistic" play.

Bourgeois life

Ionesco makes a number of critiques of the emptiness of the bourgeois working world. The root of Berenger's apathy seems to spring from his boring job, and Act Two presents us with the drudgery of his office, its repetitive work, and its shallow relationships built to serve the corporation. Jean recommends that Berenger improve his cultural vocabulary, but Jean's appreciation for the avant-garde theater, for instance, is clearly only a surface interest or he would not succumb so easily to the rhinoceroses. Berenger's reliance upon alcohol is understandable—the ennui of daily life is too great not to escape. In fact, the escapism of alcohol is a trope for the escapism of the metamorphoses; both Berenger and the others feel they regain their lost identities in their respective escapes. The others, then, are similarly oppressed by their jobs (Jean feels it is something one must get used to), though Berenger seems to be the only one who has a deeper awareness of the way bourgeois life crushes his spirit.