

## **The Meaning of Life in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros***

**by David Dunson**

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- Zero. **The meaning of life in "Rhinoceros", by David Dunson (Translation into French).**
0. **Three criticisms on Rhinoceros (sept. 96 in Los Angeles)**
- Zero. **Bald Jack, or Is It The Soprano Submission?: Ionesco's Personal Explorations of Language, Meaning, and Life Revolutionize Theatre, by Jane K. Dominik \_Obituary in The New York Times**

**English  
3rd hour  
5/21/93**

**The play *Rhinoceros*, written by absurdist playwright Eugene Ionesco, reflects a view that holds the universe to be ultimately meaningless, irrational, and absurd. In his essay, "Notes and Counternotes," Ionesco writes, "I see myself torn apart by blind forces rising from my innermost self and clashing in some desperate unresolved conflict . . . it is clear that I can never know who I am, or why I am." Ionesco writes his plays to present his inner conflicts with what he sees as an incomprehensible universe and also to express his difficulties in coming to terms with his own existence. He says of his own work in theater, "I try to project onto the stage an inner drama . . . I want only to render my own strange and improbable universe" (Notes and Counternotes). In his play *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco reveals his fears about the savagery latent in the human heart and also, through the character of Berenger, projects himself and his own struggles into his drama. To achieve a clear rendering of his themes, Ionesco uses many unconventional dramatic techniques. Through such techniques, Ionesco presents a visual portrayal of the underlying existential conflicts of the play. The various thematic and dramatic elements of the work combine to present a picture of Ionesco's disjointed, chaotic inner world.**

**One method by which Ionesco conveys his themes is through the senselessness of the characters (besides Berenger) in the first and second acts. This ridiculousness can be seen especially through their reactions to the two rhinoceroses that run past the caf?in the first act. The people say, almost simultaneously, "Oh, a rhinoceros!" and then "Well, of all things!" Their comments are all very similar, and they seem to lack the ability to make original judgments. Even at this early point in the play we see something of a "mass mind" at work, in which each person unthinkingly repeats the actions and words of someone else. As the dialogue progresses it becomes clear that no one sees the rhinoceroses as portents of a future trend or understands the meaning behind their appearance at all. After**

seeing the first rhinoceros, the housewife panics, runs onto the stage, and drops her basket of food. The grocer's wife sees the rhinoceros only as an instrument of revenge upon the housewife for not buying food from the grocer (11). The old gentleman shows only passing interest in the rhinoceros. He is mostly interested in winning the affection of the housewife by helping her gather the scattered provisions. (As she finishes picking up and prepares to leave, he offers to accompany her.) After the second rhinoceros runs over the housewife's cat, she commences a pitiful mourning which continues until the logician addresses the question of the rhinoceros at the end of the first act. These peripheral, single-minded characters are incapable of understanding the significance of the rhinoceros, and it is this lack of thought that assures their eventual transformation into rhinoceroses.

Besides ridiculing the narrowness of the characters' concerns, Ionesco mocks the characters that have pretensions to sensibility and logic. Their reasoning is nothing but a comic farce, which is in some cases made more ridiculous by an egotistical belief in their own intellectual superiority. This group of characters consists primarily of Botard and the logician. The logician is considered to be the wisest and most reasonable person among the characters in the first act, and they look to him to resolve their dispute about the rhinoceros. His answers to their questions, along with his earlier "proof" that Socrates was a cat, reveal his logical propositions to be nonsense. Botard, although not so highly regarded by his colleagues, prides himself on his "methodical mind," and he holds a precise, scientific view of life (40). He scoffs at the reports of the rhinoceroses and attributes them to the imaginations of journalists. Even after seeing a rhinoceros, Botard says, "I can't see a thing. It's an illusion." (48). After it becomes abundantly clear that Botard was wrong, he denies ever having doubted the existence of the rhinoceroses. He says that he has been following the problem from the very beginning, and furthermore he claims to know who is responsible (54). He is unwilling to admit his own mistakes, and he contradicts himself and makes totally unfounded accusations to avoid doing so. Through the illogic of Botard and the logician, Ionesco presents his view that human reasoning, despite its pretensions to the contrary, is essentially meaningless. Ionesco's inner world is irrational and absurd, and he sees no overriding set of logical rules that tie the universe into a comprehensible whole. According to Ionesco, human reasoning is incapable of bringing order into the world because it itself amounts to nothing but nonsense.

Thus, Ionesco presents his themes through the interaction between all of the characters as they reveal themselves to be completely irrational. Another vehicle that Ionesco uses to convey his ideas is the character of Berenger. Berenger's struggles with life reflect those of Ionesco himself. He, much more than any of the other characters, sees the reality of life, and he drinks to escape his vision of it. In the first scene especially, Berenger seems disconnected from the events happening around him. He pays little attention to the first rhinoceros, and he gives the impression of being generally incoherent. When pressed to speculate upon where the rhinoceros came from, Berenger finally says, "Perhaps it's been hiding under a stone? . . . Or maybe it's been nesting on some withered branch?" (15). Berenger appears

to be similarly disconnected from and disinterested with life in general. He tells his friend Jean that "life is a dream" (14), and he later says, "Sometimes I wonder if I exist myself" (19). Such existentialist concerns reflect Ionesco's interest in the philosophical problems of his own existence.

Berenger represents Ionesco in other ways as well. He, like Ionesco, searches for ultimate meaning and truth in life. Berenger admires his friends, especially Jean, and he looks to them to find what he is searching for. He cannot understand them because they are foolish and nonsensical, but he assumes that they are too wise and knowledgeable for him to understand. He knows that he has not found ultimate truth in life, but he believes that if he could just become smart like the logician or cultured like Jean, he would find that for which he is searching. His admiration for his friends provides some clue as to why he is so upset when they begin to transform into rhinoceroses. He believes and trusts in them, and he tries to become like them himself. When they become rhinoceroses, Berenger feels let down and also has a sense of personal betrayal. He says, after Jean has turned into a rhinoceros, "I never would have thought it of him, never!" (69). Berenger cannot comprehend the reason for Jean's transformation, and he tries to rationalize it by saying that Jean was "temporarily unbalanced" (75). Berenger is especially distraught when the logician changes because he thinks that the logician would have been able to prove to Dudard that the rhinoceroses are intrinsically evil and not just a natural phenomenon. Berenger's world becomes overshadowed by an encroaching nightmare as his friends succumb to the rhinoceroses one by one. His beliefs in reason, culture, and ultimately love are slowly but inexorably shattered. He is thus cast, alone and adrift, into a hostile, incomprehensible universe.

Besides basic elements of plot, Ionesco uses many non-traditional dramatic techniques to present the absurdity of life visually on stage. Most obvious is his use of the rhinoceros as a poetic metaphor of the essential savagery of human beings and also of the meaninglessness of the universe. Up to the time of the writing of this play, such a wild and savage image as the rhinoceros had normally not been used in drama. The rhinoceros contrasts starkly with the images of beauty and nobility which characterized plays of earlier eras. Several different physical objects fall or are destroyed in the play, adding to the violent visual effect of the rhinoceros. For example, the housewife's cat is run over, and Berenger crashes through a wall as he flees Jean's apartment. Logical, ordered dialogue is also rejected in the first scene, and the interwoven conversations combine to give the impression of chaos. Ionesco uses such techniques to give a sensory expression of his own inner turmoil.

As we have seen, the themes of *Rhinoceros* are presented through dramatic and rhetorical techniques, the absurdity of the supporting characters, and the life struggles of the main character, Berenger. Inexorably, Berenger's beliefs and hopes for reforming himself are shattered, and there is finally nothing left for him to do but shout his defiance against a hostile world. He is unable to find ultimate meaning in life because, according to Ionesco, there is no meaning in life to be found.