

Three Act Play

Rhinoceros — Ionesco Part 1
2 parts each.

Written in 1959, The Theatre of the Absurd.

1st performed in 1959

Character list - Benenger, Jean, Rhinoceros,

Logician, Daisy

Theme 'symbols'

Will and Responsibility

The transformation of Beengen from an apathetic alcoholic and loner - hidden man into the saviour 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 Beengen to exercise more will power and not surrender to life's pressures and other characters, such as Dedard, seem to do against that as they control their own destinies. Beengen does not have great conventional will power, as demonstrated by his frequent recourse to alcohol and his tendency to dream (both day dreams 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 we

in the play, other than Mrs. Boenig's devotion to Mr. Boenig, of sincere love for another human. By Act three, his powerful guilt and sense of responsibility indicates that Berenger sacrifices 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 like Rhinos epidemic and their crumbling hills are foreshadowed by their subtle erasing of responsibility - Daisy for example wants to live a guiltless life. The 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 "superman" a powerful being beyond human morality.

The savagery of the Rhinos, and Jean's transformation and statements in Act 3 exemplify this desire for power. He becomes violent, claiming humanism is dead, and tries to trample Berenger. The play's final irony is that Berenger becomes the true superman 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, Bolard and Jean either flounder in their proofs or ridiculously rationalize their incorrect presumptions — consider Bolard's accusation of a conspiracy in Act Two. The logicians attempt to uncover how many rhinoceroses there were in the first Act and what breeds they were, results only in repeating the original question.

In Act One Berenger calls Jean's ideas 'nonsense' and this word resonates throughout Rhinoceros. The world is non-sensical, 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 emotional 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

It says alluding to the unpredictable 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 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 other authority figures collapse in the play, the remaining human find it even easier to justify why the metamorphoses are desirable.

(5)

Conesco 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, Dudaerd'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. Conesco 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. Conesco 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 1930s — is as harmful as direct violence.

QMB question

Date _____
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Q What are the unrealistic elements in Ionesco's Rhinoceros? (6)

Q Theme of the play (6)

Q Title of the Play (6)

Q Symbolism / Allegory (6)

Q Character of Berenger (6)

Q Plot Structure of the play (6)

Q Rhinoceros is an absurdist play in which the citizens of a small French town transform into rhinoceroses. This premise of the play is the central unrealistic —

Q How do the characters conform with the mob? What techniques and characterization are involved in this conformance?

C People of the mob become savages. All who become rhinoceros behave demonstrable savage behaviour.

Q How do relate theme to the Nazism?

Q How can you call it an absurd drama?

Q Mention a few qualities of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Q Existentialism

Q How do you read European history through the individual mind?