

Metaphor and Modern Identity: Cultural Resonances in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*

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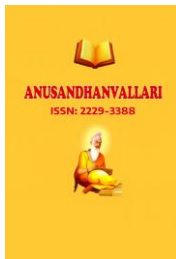
Abstract

The present paper undertakes a literary analysis of Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (1959), focusing on the evolving function and symbolism of the rhinoceros within the structure of the play. Initially emerging as an absurd and comic intrusion into everyday life, the rhinoceros gradually transforms into a powerful metaphor for the collapse of individual identity and the disintegration of coherent communication. By tracing this symbolic trajectory, the paper examines how Ionesco employs absurdist techniques—such as repetition, proliferation, and linguistic dislocation to explore the nature of transformation and the price of conformity. Rather than confining the play to its mid-20th-century context, this study foregrounds its continued relevance in an era shaped by viral trends, and algorithm-driven consensus. By focusing on the interplay between form, language, and spectacle, the essay highlights *Rhinoceros* as a profound meditation on the pressures of social alignment. In a time when public discourse is increasingly shaped by performative consensus, Ionesco's play invites renewed reflection on the costs of belonging and the quiet courage of standing apart in one's own individual selfhood.

Keywords: Rhinoceros; Culture; Identity; Social Alignment; Absurdist.

Introduction

Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* is a three-act tragic farce first performed in 1959, often read as a cornerstone of the avant-garde "Theatre of the Absurd" movement. Originally written in French, the play presents a surreal scenario wherein the inhabitants of a small provincial town undergo absurd transformations into rhinoceroses. Since its first performance, the play has been predominantly interpreted in the context of its contemporary political regimes, and seen as a polemic critique of totalitarian regimes that the playwright had witnessed in different forms, in different places- growing up in Romania which saw the proliferation of the Iron Guards as the Nazi movement grew, in France with the growing influence of its communist party and the cold war, with the symbol of the rhinoceroses, and their proliferation being seen to exemplify the dangers of totalitarian regimes, even as some critics attempt to locate it within existential (Esslin 1961) and psychological (Schechner 1963) frameworks. While all of these are indeed essential modes of critical intervention into the text, in today's world—characterized by the ubiquity of digital media, social networks, and cultural homogenization—the



metaphor of the rhinoceros retains fresh significance, positing newer semantic possibilities of re-reading the play retrospectively as a critique of the modern day viral trends, mass consumerist practices, pressures of herd-like social formations.

The symbol of the rhinoceros which begins as an absurd intrusion in the play eventually evolves into a powerful metaphor for the erosion of individuality, the allure of the collective, and the challenges of communication. Through repetition, linguistic disruption, and the spectacle of transformation, Ionesco crafts a theatrical parable that dramatizes the conflict between the desire for belonging and the preservation of selfhood. This symbolism, the present paper argues, resonates with contemporary experiences of social pressure, viral conformity, and the negotiation of identity in a landscape increasingly shaped by collective dynamics. Therefore, in line with this thesis the present paper seeks to reexamine *Rhinoceros* through a literary lens that highlights its continued cultural relevance and its profound inquiry into the nature of individuality and social belonging. This literary approach is particularly relevant today, in a rapidly changing society shaped by technology and social media, where pressures to conform persist and meaningful communication often suffers. Reinterpreting *Rhinoceros* in this way allows for a deeper understanding of the ongoing struggle to maintain individuality while being part of a community.

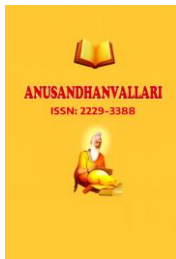
Review of Literature

Since its first performance in 1959, Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* has attracted a wide array of critical interpretations, many of which emphasize its political and philosophical underpinnings. Early critics of *Rhinoceros* mainly looked at the play through the lens of existentialism, especially in the context of post-war Europe as exemplified in Martin Esslin's book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) which placed Ionesco alongside other writers like Beckett and Genet. Esslin focused on how the play shows the breakdown of reason and the absurd nature of human life in a world without order. For Esslin, Berenger's final act of resistance is ambiguous—neither wholly triumphant nor entirely tragic—but emblematic of a last-ditch attempt to assert individuality in a meaningless world. While this reading acknowledges the play's philosophical weight, it flattens the symbol of the rhinoceros into a mere instrument of existential crisis, missing its dynamic metamorphosis across the acts.

Richard Schechner's 1963 essay, "*The Inner and the Outer Reality*," extends this existential framing by focusing on the psychological dimensions of Ionesco's theatre. He emphasizes how the absurd stage reflects not just external political absurdity but also the internal fragmentation of the self. However, while this psychological lens highlights the play's engagement with the instability of identity it still treats the rhinoceros as a static metaphor rather than a progressively evolving theatrical device.

By the 1980s, however, there was a significant shift in the interpretation of the play came with critics like Emmanuel Jacquot who sought to ground the play in the playwright's personal and political biography. In her essay "*Ionesco's Political Itinerary*" (1982), the play becomes a dramatization of how mass ideologies absorb the individual—transforming even those with strong ideological convictions. While persuasive, this historical contextualization risks limiting the play's relevance to a Cold War-era critique, treating the rhinoceros as a historically specific figure of authoritarianism rather than as a transhistorical metaphor of social assimilation.

In the subsequent decade, building on Jacquot's work, Matei Călinescu sought to provide a more detailed biographical and political lens. Călinescu's essay "*Ionesco and Rhinoceros: Personal and Political Backgrounds*" (1995) connects Ionesco's personal experiences in Romania to the play's central tensions, arguing



that *Rhinoceros* stages the psychic trauma of witnessing friends and intellectuals succumb to ideological fanaticism. However, like Jacquot, he focuses primarily on *Rhinoceros* as a political allegory, underplaying its formal experimentation and its broader existential and communicative concerns.

In recent times, scholarship on the play has begun to move beyond both the existential and political binaries as illustrated in Cristina Nicolaescu's 2024 article, "*The Semantics of Language in Eugène Ionesco's Plays*," which represents a significant turn toward linguistic and semiotic analysis. For Nicolaescu, the rhinoceros becomes a signifier for the breakdown of dialogue itself, a process that unfolds on the level of language as much as on the level of plot.

However, despite the richness of these contributions, there remains a gap in the critical literature regarding how the symbol of the rhinoceros functions dynamically within the evolving structure of the play, particularly in terms of how its absurdist techniques such as repetition, proliferation, and linguistic dislocation create symbolic and semantic shifts across the play. Previous interpretations have often fixed the rhinoceros to a singular metaphorical framework (e.g., totalitarianism, existential despair, or language breakdown), overlooking how the symbol changes over time—from a comic absurdity to a social epidemic to a profound threat to individuality and expression. Furthermore, few studies explore the continued relevance of these symbolic transformations in the age of digital consensus, viral culture, and algorithmic belonging, where the pressures of conformity may be less overtly ideological yet equally pervasive.

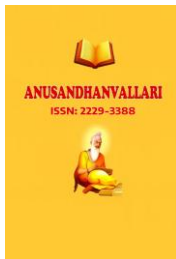
The present study aims to address this gap by foregrounding the interplay between symbol, form, and contemporary resonance, thereby reactivating *Rhinoceros* as a literary parable of identity negotiation. By tracing the evolving symbolism of the rhinoceros throughout the play and situating its absurdist strategies within modern contexts of social media and cultural mimicry, this paper offers a new perspective on Ionesco's work—one that bridges formal analysis with present-day cultural critique.

Critical Analysis and Discussion

The Making of a Symbol

The central symbol of eponymous play, the rhinoceros, starts out as a manifestation of the 'absurd' component of the play- coming out of nowhere into a provincial town in France and the first few transformations and subsequent discussions about them add to the farcical element of the play. However, the symbol becomes progressively sinister as the plot unfolds, beginning with the trampling of a cat and ending with widespread chaos and breakdown of communication. The title of the play, taking its significance from the symbol that drives its content and form, can be understood by analyzing the evolving associations and ramifications of its central symbol as this essay will aim to do.

Tracing the growing presence of the rhinoceros in the play reveals that the first semblance of the rhinoceros is in Act I, at the auditory level when a noise is heard "far off, but swiftly approaching, of a beast panting in its headlong course, and of a long trumpeting" (Ionesco 1959 p.6). The powerful animal is soon seen and identified by the inhabitants of the provincial town, with the cry "Oh, a rhinoceros", repeated by all present (except Berenger). The 'repetition', meant to occur simultaneously on stage, evokes the comic element as well foreshadowing the sinister transformation of the townsfolk into the 'herd'. Startled by the rhinoceros' appearance, a housewife drops her basket of groceries, and a little while later, the crowd sees her cat reduced to a "blood



stained corpse” after being trampled on by the animal. The sudden trampling of a cat by the beast marks a sharp tonal shift, introducing violence and the symbolic threat of conformity.

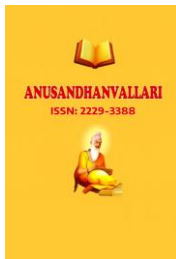
This incident builds up the association of the rhinoceros with chaos and violence and a sinister element is shown at play in its characterization, symbolizing the gradual dissolution of individual identity into a collective mass. This metaphor transcends its historical associations, inviting reflection on universal human experiences of social influence, fear of exclusion, and the allure of belonging. In the twenty first century context, an era marked by social media trends and viral phenomena, the rhinoceros’s symbolic charge thus echoes the subtle yet powerful ways that individuals can be swept into collective movements, often at the expense of personal identity. In this context, however, it is interesting to note that everyone *but* Berenger, is affected by the appearance of the rhinoceros and begins discussing it. This marks him as someone who is outside the ‘herd’ from the very beginning, as he remains even in the end.

The image of the rhinoceros, thus, can already be seen evolving into a symbol of mass conformity and ideological transformation observed by Ionesco in his environment as he saw his friends transforming into fanatical Nazis. This symbol, partly based on a nightmare, made him feel the need to “show how a mutation is possible in collective thought” which manifests itself in the transformations of characters into rhinoceroses in his play of the same name. In a telling diary entry, he writes of a world much like that lived in by Berenger (since the end of Act II), in the play which grows out of this vision, “The police are rhinoceroses. The judges are rhinoceroses. You are the only man among the rhinoceroses... It is something of a sin to not be a rhinoceros”. However, while past readings have tied this statement in particular and the play *Rhinoceros* only to specific political regimes, its broader thematic architecture invites reflection on more perennial human patterns—such as the desire for belonging, the fear of exclusion, and the tendency toward mimicry.

Private Spaces and Personal Transformations

As the rhinoceros invades public and private life alike, its power grows as the herd’s impact intensifies across scenes, with repeated phrases, irrational reactions, and eventual chaos. The second and third acts see the increasing penetration of rhinoceritis into the private domain tracing a trajectory from the public square, to the office, to Jean’s room and finally that of Berenger. After its/their appearance in the public square, the rhinoceros(es) are mentioned next in the office which leads to a discussion about the validity of the sighting. This discussion exposes two contradicting view points within the office- that of M. Dudard and M. Botard, insistent on a vehement denial of the reports of these ‘lying journalists’.

It is interesting to note that both M.Dudard and M. Botard, each with a ‘methodological mind’ or so they would have us believe, transform into rhinoceroses by the end of the play. By showing characters with completely different worldviews succumbing to rhinoceritis, Ionesco is perhaps trying to highlight the universal appeal of widespread and non-discriminatory nature of this phenomenon. The office scene also contains Mrs Boeuf’s recognition of the rhinoceros which has been following her and has destroyed the staircase, as her husband. Convinced that he is calling for her, she jumps out of the window, leaving behind her skirt in Berenger’s hand as she rides away on the rhinoceros (Mr Boeuf). This scene forms the peak of the farcical element in the play and while simultaneously showcasing the irrational pull of transformation.



While the play has been understood in terms of its unambiguously political nature, read in terms of Ionesco's childhood in Romania, with the proliferation of Iron Guards and later in terms of the backdrop of the rising communism during the cold war period, on a larger, perhaps more ahistorical, social level, rhinoceritis and the play could perhaps be understood in terms of the 'herd mentality' that pervades most societies. The simultaneous repetition of phrases like "Oh, a rhinoceros!" and "Well, of all things" in Act 1 by different characters present on stage, could then be seen as Ionesco's critique of people who are "simply mechanisms", "don't think", "inhabit a world of the impersonal, the world of the collective" and pronounce only slogans to "save themselves the trouble of thinking" (Bonnefoy 1971).

The second scene of this act, takes us into the room of Jean where Berenger witnesses the transformation of his friend. The transformation of Jean is significant on multiple counts- it's the first transformation the audience is shown and provides rhinoceritis with concrete physical symptoms, secondly, it also brings in the disease into the personal realm of Berenger, making it something very immediate as opposed to something happening in some other country which could be discussed with objectivity. The scene which details the hardening of Jean's skin and its turning green as well as the emergence of the bump on his head, makes for a sinisterly marvellous theatrical spectacle. In showing the transformation of a person the audience knew in his pre- rhinoceros stage to a violent animal (who would perhaps have trampled his friend to death), the play represents the complete loss of humanity and descent into animality that accompanies the transformation, leaving Berenger terrifyingly alone, with rhinoceroses everywhere.

Language, Sound, and the Limits of Communication

Beyond its physical appearance, the herd is also characterized by the sounds it emits, 'charming' music, intelligible only to those who are a part of it or are about to transform. Associated with both violence and insanity, becoming a rhinoceros entails becoming a relentless and unyielding force, fixated solely on its objective, crushing anything that stands in its way with brute determination. Furthermore, the transformation also involves a breakdown of language as a means of communication between humans and rhinoceroses as the herd only communicates within itself, in sounds intelligible only to its members. This shift renders meaningful dialogue impossible between humans and the transformed. The collapse of shared language parallels the loss of individuality, the rise of collective identity, and foregrounds the irrevocable nature of the transformation.

The interplay between sound and silence, repetition and disruption, characterizes the play's absurdist form. The proliferation of rhinoceroses on stage, accompanied by rhythmic trumpetings and dust, heightens the atmosphere of confusion and despair. In contrast to this, the brief togetherness of Daisy and Berenger in the final act seems to promise a hope of a different kind of collective which is premised on caring, nurturing tendencies as well as understanding as opposed to the single minded members of the herd bulldozing through everything that doesn't agree with them. However, this is also denied in the play when Daisy, almost enchanted by 'charming song' leaves Berenger, possibly to become one of the 'beautiful' creatures. The end of the play involves Berenger standing alone on stage, with rhinoceros heads moving in front of him, responding to his speech by "fresh trumpetings, hectic racings and sounds of dust".

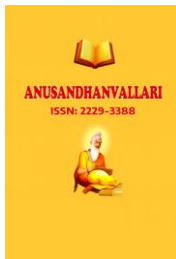


Resisting the Herd: Individuality and Reflection

The final act presents an extremely anxious Berenger who has still not come to terms with his friend's transformation, and is plagued by nightmares of the ordeal. He constantly checks himself for signs of a horn or a change in the colour of his skin. This anxiety is perhaps a symbolic representation of what Ionesco felt as a strong critic of collectivist regimes, with his friends and acquaintances consistently defecting to 'the other side'. Berenger is visited by Dudard who attempts to rationalize the increasing transformations as 'just another disease', asking him not to dramatize it or attach too much importance to it, calling Jean's transformation an 'average case', asking Berenger to see the "funny side of things". All of these lead up to him wavering at first ("I don't say it's a very good thing. And don't get the idea that I'm on the rhinoceroses' side...") and then slowly transforming his arguments, siding with the rhinoceroses, claiming to only be looking at "facts unemotionally in the face". His final transformation completely into a rhinoceros, indistinguishable from the herd, indicates the complete loss on individuality and mergence into the dominant ideology- similar to Jean's transformation. This echoes an entry from Ionesco's diary, talking about political transformations that begin with rationalizing the herd's views, when, talking about a colleague in *Present Past Past Present* (1988), Ionesco notes that he said it's strange sometimes: they seem, they seem to be right on one point...One point out of ten thousand, but all the same, in order to be completely objective..." and seeing the "strange light in his eyes whose meaning he could not mistake".

The final moment and the speech are significant in so far as they form the crux of understanding both Ionesco's ideas as well as his play. The setting completes/ fulfils the technique of proliferation of objects which stifle which is typical of Ionesco's plays, as observed by several critics. Proliferation of rhinoceroses in the eponymous play continues the absurdist trend and heightens the sense of despair and Berenger's inadequacy being one single person against a collective of rhinoceroses. Questioning of the efficacy of language and its use is a running theme in the play which is revisited in the final monologue by Berenger. In his final speech he also expresses anxieties and doubts about identity along with his very mode of expression, both of which are familiar concerns in post-war European society. However, even though he is surrounded by characters mouthing slogans of the collective mindset that they become an indistinguishable part of, without a shred of individual thought as "empty minded creatures", Berenger's doubt, and anxieties (and through him Ionesco's), show that all is not lost. The questioning of language and possibility of a dialogue establishes in them (Ionesco and Berenger) the will to make an attempt despite being surrounded by despair.

Furthermore, as Ionesco says in one of his interviews, "If I really believed absolutely that communication was impossible, I wouldn't write". This statement suggests that despite the play's portrayal of despair, there remains hope and a call to resist conformity and engage in meaningful dialogue. Such a reading substantiates Michael Bennett's reassessment of the theatre of the absurd, who argues that Esslin's understanding of Camus and his translation of Ionesco talking about Kafka, on which he bases his understanding of the theatre of absurd is mistaken. Bennett (2011) argues instead that a better way of looking at the plays often labelled as absurd would be in terms of their 'parabolic' nature, suggesting that the "metaphor, paradox and a move to disorder, forces the reader or the audience member to confront his or her own worldview in order to create order out of the chaos presented on the stage". Such a reading then establishes these plays as more than just 'absurd', but rather deterministic and pessimistic commentary on social and political forces to a more hopeful interpretation focusing on human agency and resistance.



Therefore, despite the bleak portrayal of mass transformation, *Rhinoceros* ultimately affirms the value of reflection and self-awareness. Berenger's final stand, though filled with doubt and fear, underscores the play's commitment to the idea that individuality, though fragile, is worth preserving. As such, Ionesco's play continues to function not merely as a critique of specific political systems or historical events, but as a timeless meditation on the human condition—on the ongoing struggle between belonging and being, between speaking and being heard, and between losing oneself and standing firm in one's convictions. In doing so, *Rhinoceros* remains a vital text for interrogating how identity is negotiated and defended in an ever-changing world.

Conclusion

Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* therefore, emerges as a timeless work of modern drama, probing the fragile tensions between individuality and conformity. The rhinoceros itself serves as a potent multifaceted symbol embodying the complexities of transformation and the human yearning for connection. Through its absurdist form and innovative use of language, marked by repetition, linguistic fragmentation, and theatrical spectacle, Ionesco exposes the fragility of communication play and challenges audiences to reflect on their own positions within social collectives.

In our contemporary world, shaped by digital media, consumer culture, and subtle cultural conformity, the play resonates deeply, urging reflection on the enduring struggle to preserve selfhood amid pervasive forces that demand assimilation. However, rather than offering clear answers, *Rhinoceros* invites ongoing meditation on identity and belonging. Ultimately, Ionesco's work transcends specific historical moments, functioning as a timeless literary exploration of the human condition and the ongoing struggle to balance community and individuality, persisting as a powerful site for discussion and examination of complexities of identity and communication in an ever-evolving social landscape.

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