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**Authenticity VS Conformity: An Existential  
Study of Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros***

**By**

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**Abstract:**

The study focuses on the ways Eugene Ionesco projects the existential concepts of irrationality, absurdity, authenticity, frustration and futility of human existence in his play *Rhinoceros* (1959). Literally written as a “universal parable” on the subject of “conformism”, the play is a satire, not on any ideologies to which man may feel urge to conform, but specifically on the Nazi ideology. The main theme

of the play is betrayal of man by his own intellect. He is betrayed by the illusion of logic whenever he tries to exploit this illusion to justify the unjustifiable. Ionesco shows the existential concern that the true meaning lies in responsible action rather than conformity. He explores that only through the search of independent thinking and free expression of individualism, society can expect to eliminate all ideological victimization.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, individuality, absurdity, freedom, logic, authenticity

### **Introduction:**

The French playwright Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994) inaugurated and developed a drama that testifies to its wonders by means of the absurd and grotesque. He tried to expose the intimate reality by expressing the incomprehensible. Like existentialists, he believes in the subjective experience. According to Ionesco, the modern man is a puppet, a jumping jack. His tendency is not to give way to own thinking process and self-consciousness. His approach is that of an existentialist because that the central concern of his writing is an individual and his existence in this modern world.

Ionesco realized the need to understand the essence of our existence and hence attempts to “isolate this one element which he regards as the one that constitutes the theatre’s supreme achievement...and to restore an entirely theatrical” (Esslin 161). Existentialism is a philosophy that examines problems of existence. To exist means to stand out. Soren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre have shown that to stand out means also to stand out to oneself as another. The existential philosophy examines what it meant to be human, to be free and to be in a struggle with reason in the world, which is the struggle of “irrational man”. Existence is subjective and the first principle from which all else flows. On the other hand, essence is objective and refers to the true nature of things. By living, thinking and acting man defines his nature and forms his essence. It is a man who chooses and who is responsible for his own essence.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger is the central figure in existential thought. He shifts his emphasis from human existence to Being in its totality. Although Being is continuously manifesting itself in things, according to Heidegger, Being itself has been forgotten. Being has been reduced to a world of “objects” that are manipulated and dominated by human subjects through a sense of human made- logics. In *Being and Time*, the major theme is the evolution of “Dasein”. “Dasein” is the way in which the human beings, as distinct from things exist. Heidegger makes it clear: “The essence of Dasein lies in its existence” (67). In fact, as Heidegger in “Essence and Existence” says, man does not merely fall into errors, he lives in errors always. These errors are not specific mistakes, but man’s whole life. Nevertheless man has the potential to see through the errors of caring for things which continue to ruin him, and in the process rob him of his authenticity. In caring for things, we becomes things, we become “they”. Ionesco projected all these themes in his plays. An authentic existence can be found, according to Heidegger, only by being connected with the challenge of time and by taking account to death. What brings people to anticipate their death-is their realization that existence is launched between nothingness and nothingness and that it is nothingness that is real.

For Sartre, authenticity is the ultimate goal of human life and it is only through the acceptance of our responsibility that we very live in authenticity. Its opposite is bad faith. Many people are not consciously or visibly anxious. This merely is because they are hiding or fleeing from their responsibility. They act and live in self- deception or unauthenticity, what Sartre says that “the one who practices bad faith is heeling a displeasing truth, or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth” (49).

*Rhinoceros* (1959) is recognized as Ionesco’s most social and political drama. It is a manifestation of existentialism in its presentation of the struggle of an authentic individual against the collective. Ionesco sought to convey the beautiful, ridiculous and horrible aspects of individualized human life in both comic and tragic modes of experience. In this play he accomplished his task to reveal these aspects by exposing that how an individual is ensnared by the clichés and lies of language, cultural conventions, political conformism and philosophical idealization. The only way

to do away with all these evils is to choose responsibly and to live authentically. The play is an allegory of the absurdity of individualism, which directs itself at the alienation of man, at his existential angst, the pain of living and fear of death, at the constant desire for meaning in the meaningless universe and finally to finding himself into the abyss. It dramatizes the absurdities and uncertainties of Berenger- an everyman who is caught between the two false worlds, namely, the world of petit bourgeoisie and that of the thoughtless dynamism of the rhinoceroses.

The play is a diatribe against the oppression and terror of Nazi state. Multiple interpretations have been offered for the title word "rhinoceros". Literally written as a "universal parable" on the subject of "conformism", the play is a satire, not on any ideologies to which man may feel the urge to conform, but specifically on the Nazi ideology. He thought it to be his duty to reveal the insanity of this terrible system that reduced the individual to slavery. Ionesco was sadly familiarized with the situation of friends suddenly transformed into filthy beasts, brainless and governed by slogans. Human values were declining and animal instincts became dominant in that threatening period. With this approach in mind, the Rhinoceros was presented to describe the "process of collective transformation". Ionesco said:

People allow themselves suddenly to be invaded by a new religion, a doctrine, a fanaticism... At such moments we witness a veritable mental mutation. I don't know if you have stood by them, one has the impression of being confronted with monsters-rhinos for example. They have that mixture of candour and ferocity. They would kill you with the best of consciences. And history has shown us during the last quarter of the century that the people thus transformed not only resemble rhinos, but really became rhinoceros (qtd in Singh 79).

In the metaphorical sense, one can identify the political systems and the party-members from the fell-disease of rhinoceritis. Even the green skin of the beasts could be considered an allusion to the Nazi uniforms. Animal instinct teaches the rhinoceros that strength

is obtained by those who coalesce in numbers. And this symbolizes the transformation of Ionesco's characters in *Rhinoceros*, who are fascinated by the political influences. Ionesco's through his characters surrounded by nightmares, dream atmosphere and subconscious mind, is totally committed to reality and responsibility in his plays. Ionesco uses the character of Berenger who is the very symbol of loneliness and isolation and who bears the totally responsibility of man.

In *Rhinoceros*, Berenger is not an intellectual, talent and over civilized man like his friend Jean, but he senses the inherent absurdity of existence. He becomes conscious against complete despair which is an anguished sign of protest against surrender. He does not want to be a part of the herd like others simply by conforming and adhering. He shows his moral sensibility, individuality and humanity by resisting till the end, whereas all the other inhabitants of the city are gradually converting into rhinoceroses. Individuality, which is the most important theme of the play, derives the central anti- rhinoceros metaphor. Ionesco depicts how the bourgeois mind has come to rely on rationality and "logical necessity" to give a justification for whatever phenomenon may happen to arise.

The conversation between the Logician and the Old Gentleman revolves around logic in the first act which Logician presents the pseudo-intellectual approach to every problem which is one of the great dangers of modern society because it tends to lose sight of reality and the spontaneity of emotional expression. He illustrates the incoherence of rationality when he proves that Socrates was a cat.

Logician: Another syllogism. All cats die. Socrates is dead. Therefore Socrates is a cat (R 19).

With the appearance of the rhinoceros, the town was initially shocked but soon involved in debating irrelevancies of whether they have one horn or two. Rhinoceroses stampede and trumpet; their numbers increase exponentially; they destroy public property and eat everything in sight; and they bring increasing chaos to the world of human citizens. Instead of taking responsible action against chaos, disorder and violence, the citizens exploit logic and reason to disguise the non-logical essence of reality. The main

theme of the play is the betrayal of man by his own intellect. He is betrayed by the illusion of logic whenever he tries to exploit this illusion to justify the unjustifiable. The modern has lost his sense of individuality and personal thinking. He has become totally dependent on all wisdom of authority. The bourgeois has given up his responsibilities and has conceived the forces of social order as the only hope that they “will accept the burden in his stead, and in return for surrounded liberty, give justice, order and a comfortable quietude” (Coe 95). Berenger, the only character in the play, who is willing to exploit the possibilities of total freedom because of his positive acceptance of the irrational, is saved from the fate which over takes the others. Ionesco projects the existential theme of the betrayal of logic and reason in favor of individuality. The first scene of second act begins in Berenger’s office which provides an atmosphere for “bureaucratic bickering” among Mr. Papillon, the head of this particular office, Mr. Dudard, his assistant and Botard, a former school master, about the reaction to the rhinoceros incidents. Botard presented as the “Brechtian”, the “committed propagandist” is obsessed with his own tendency to explain things.

Botard: I know my own mind. I’m not content to simply that a phenomenon exists. I make it my business to understand it and explain it (R 54).

Ionesco shows the existential concern that the true meaning lies in responsible action rather than conformity. And resistance to taking action results in transformation of an individual into a rhinoceros. The first individual to capsulate is Mr. Boeuf who represents bourgeois mind. He loses his sense of true existence and deteriorates into a solitary non-entity which is obviously a primary target for rhinocerotitis. Mrs. Boeuf decides she will stay with her husband, joins him by jumping out of the window onto his back. Ionesco creates the absurd situation of individual mutation into rhinoceros and characters do not know what to make of this absurd event and indulge in strange details. By the end of the first scene of Act Two, many of citizens have already transformed into rhinoceroses but Berenger deals with the situation with calmness. In the second scene of Act Two Berenger witnesses the metamorphosis of Jean in front of his eyes. Jean is succumbed to the lure of animal instinct and remains complacent while the

whole process of transformation into a rhinoceros. He is fascinated by the value of nature despite Berenger's plea for humanity and moral standards. Although shocked by Jean's situation, Berenger remains persistent in his individuality and views humanity as superior that can't be metamorphosed by way of a monistic worldview that is beyond morality, humanism, and individual personality and rights.

The real danger lies not in the automatism of machines but in the automatism of passions, desires and of evil instincts which is reflected in the ideologies like Nazism. In the final act, the conversation between Berenger and Dudard about the issue of evil and the normal/abnormal illustrates that Dudard, like Jean, is next to forsake his humanity and individuality. Dudard declares that he is going to join the rhinoceroses only so as to understand how their minds work: "I shall keep my mind clear". In this way he rationalizes his decision to be one with animals. His departure leaves Berenger and his girl friend Daisy, the only left beings among the rhinoceroses. In analyzing mass conformism, Ionesco illustrates that man's fear of alienation is of secondary importance. All the characters except Berenger conform to mass movement for their own personal reasons and tendencies. By illustrating the human tendency to fit in by showing the draw to become a rhinoceros, Ionesco illustrates how absurd and dangerous can be. Through the relationship between Berenger and Daisy, Ionesco shows the failure in love-relationship in modern world. Love that belongs to the domain of the irrational has now become a product of bourgeois mind, the mind obsessed with logic and conformity. At first, they decide to share the isolation by feeling love for each other but soon Daisy weakens and lacks stamina and self-confidence which results in her unresisting attitude. The trumpeting of the rhinoceroses fascinates her.

Daisy: They're singing.

Berenger: they're roaring, I tell you.

Daisy: you're mad; they're singing (R 104).

Berenger is left alone with his image in the mirror and his closing soliloquy as Daisy leaves to become a rhinoceros by asserting that she does not want to have children and that there's no point in saving the world anyway. The attractive, the happy and carefree

world of the power-based monism of the rhinoceros movement is a lie for Ionesco. Berenger knows this and he clings in an inconsistent manner to his own individuality. Berenger exhibits an existentialist choice to not identify himself with a phenomenon of the town. Through the character of Berenger, Ionesco projects the existential theme that man, by resisting the temptations of conformism and by taking responsibility for his actions can give a meaning to his existence in this isolated and meaningless world. He alone resists the general infatuation. His originality lies in his positive acceptance of the irrational. He finds that there is no logical necessity for explanations of the things the way they are. Unable to control his subconscious fears and his inner forms of anguish, Berenger, emotionally pre-occupied and absent-minded, finds it difficult to adapt to the routine mechanization of life. His subconscious fears and anguishes underline the absurdity of his existence. His last despairing cry is significant when he helplessly sees his whole world being transformed and can do nothing to stop it. Berenger's state of consciousness comes to the exterior force of totalitarianism. It is his awareness of the conscious individual state that offers him of a concrete existential decision.

Berenger: Oh well, too bad! I'll take on the whole of them! I'll put up a fight against the lot of them, the whole lot of them! I'm the last man left, I and I'm staying that way until the end. I'm not capitulating! (R 116).

Berenger becomes determined to carry the total responsibility of humanity on his shoulders. His courage provides a ray of hope for the survival of mankind. In Hugh Dickinson's words, "something inside him- a sense of duty tells him he must try. Ionesco's dialectic of the absurd reduces itself to two propositions: his duty to humanity is the same as his duty to his own nature; for to betray to himself is somehow to betray the other and to betray the others is somehow to betray himself"(Dickinson 116).

Thus, Ionesco shows in the play that only through the search of independent thinking and free expression of individualism, society can expect to eliminate all ideological victimizations. He rejects the absurdity of collectivism and rhinocerities, and suggests a deeper alternative of individual's "thrownness" in terms of



existential philosophy which means paradoxical struggle against despair and death. He seems close to Camus in his advocacy of a persistently intellectual and passionate struggle to make his readers feel the unique existential dilemmas of being alive. The dramatist tried his best to reveal the reality that the way to authenticity was to face the absurdity of human existence and to assert individuality by acting responsibly.

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