Rhinoceros

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EUGENE IONESCO

Ionesco was born in Romania, though he spent most of his childhood in France. As a child, Ionesco had an out of body experience of sorts in which he felt as though he was floating and illuminated—and, after returning to the ground, he felt that the world looked corrupt, decayed, and meaningless. This experience influenced many of his later works, including *Rhinoceros*. He returned to Romania as a teenager following his parents' divorce and studied French literature at the University of Bucharest. Ionesco married in 1936, had a daughter, and returned to Paris to study in 1938. When World War II broke out in 1939, Ionesco briefly tried to return to Romania but ended up waiting out the war in Marseilles, France, before returning to Paris soon after the war ended. Throughout his career, Ionesco wrote criticism, poetry, one novel, and theoretical works. He wrote primarily in French.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Rhinoceros was inspired primarily by Ionesco's experience of World War II and specifically, the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany and the Iron Guard in Romania. Ionesco was studying at a university in Romania when the Iron Guard was coming to power, and unlike some fascist movements, the Iron Guard's main hold was in universities. Scholars have noted that the rhinos turning green can be read as a symbolic representation of the green Nazi uniforms, while the argument over whether the rhinoceroses are Asian or not reflects Nazi propaganda claiming that Jewish people were interlopers from Asia—while the rhinoceroses themselves function as commentary on the idea of an Aryan "master race" that, Ionesco suggests, is violent but powerfully appealing to people unwilling to interrogate what joining in actually means on a moral level. In the same vein, Ionesco also took major issue with Jean-Paul Sartre, whom he accused of supporting Communism and actively ignoring the atrocities committed by Communist governments, just as characters like Dudard support the rhinoceroses while ignoring the damage and the violence they carry out.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In 1961, the British critic and drama professor Martin Esslin published a book titled *The Theatre of the Absurd*, a name that quickly evolved to describe the movement as a whole. In it, he linked Ionesco with three other playwrights—Arthur Adamov (*La Professeur Taranne*), Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*), and Jean Genet (*The Balcony*)—as defining the movement, which explored the philosophy that life is inherently meaningless. Other notable Absurdist plays from the 1960s include *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard and Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. In more recent years, Absurdist qualities have made their way to Urdu literature in Mujtaba Haider Zaidi's 2008 drama *Mazaron Ke Phool*. Ionesco used the Berenger character often in his plays. Berenger appears in various forms in *The Killer* and *Exit the King*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Rhinoceros* (Originally published in French as *Rhinocéros*)
- **When Written:** 1959
- **Where Written:** Paris, France
- **When Published:** Published and first performed in 1960
- **Literary Period:** Avant-Garde, Theatre of the Absurd
- **Genre:** Dramatic Stage Play
- **Setting:** A provincial town in France, 1960
- **Climax:** Berenger realizes he's the final human—everyone else has transformed into **rhinoceroses**—and declares that he's not going to give in.
- **Antagonist:** Conformity and fascism, as represented by the rhinoceroses
- **Point of View:** N/A

EXTRA CREDIT

Birthday Wishes. Some sources cite Ionesco's birth year as 1912 rather than 1909. This is partially because Ionesco promoted this fiction—he wanted to have been born in the same year that his literary idol, the Romanian playwright Ion Luca Caragiale, passed away.

Prizes of All Sorts. Ionesco has won a number of awards and prizes for his work in theater, literature, and film, but his play *La Cantatrice Chauve* (*The Bald Soprano*) holds a slightly more unconventional distinction: it holds the world record for the play that's been continually staged in one theater. It's been playing at the *Théâtre de la Huchette* in Paris since 1952.

PLOT SUMMARY

One sunny Sunday, Berenger and Jean meet at a café. Berenger is unkempt, while Jean wears a neat suit and chastises Berenger for being late. He makes fun of Berenger for wanting to drink so early in the day, especially when Berenger is hung

over. Taking issue with Berenger's clothes, Jean gives him an extra tie, a comb, and a mirror. Jean lists all the ways that Berenger needs to work on his appearance and declares that he's ashamed to be Berenger's friend. Desperately, Berenger says that he can't stand working a normal schedule and needs to drink to relax. Jean insists that everyone has to get used to it. The two discuss where Berenger was last night as a **rhinoceros** races down the street. Berenger seems to not see it, but the Waitress, the Grocer, the Housewife, the Grocer's Wife, and Jean all stand and point at it.

A Logician, the Old Gentleman, and the Housewife arrive and remark on the rhinoceros. The rhinoceros sent the Housewife's basket of groceries flying, so she asks the Logician to hold her **cat** while she repacks her basket. She leaves. Meanwhile, Jean insists on talking about the rhinoceros, but Berenger isn't interested. Berenger suggests that it might have come from a zoo or a circus, even though Jean points out that their town has neither. In his anger, Jean accuses Berenger again of being an alcoholic who doesn't think—and then accuses Berenger of insulting him when Berenger tries to defend himself. Jean stops Berenger from drinking as Daisy arrives at the grocery store next door. Noticing that Berenger likes Daisy, Jean takes the opportunity to tell Berenger to stop drinking. Berenger explains that if he doesn't drink, he feels terrified.

The Old Gentleman and the Logician return. The Logician introduces the Old Gentleman to syllogisms by giving him the syllogism that if a cat has four paws, and if Isidore and Fricot both have four paws, then Isidore and Fricot are both cats. The Old Gentleman notes that his dog has four paws, so it's a cat too. The Logician agrees with this but cautions him against abusing logic. As Jean lists changes for Berenger to make, the Logician asks the Old Gentleman to deduce what happens when they subtract two paws from the cats. The Old Gentleman deduces that they could have cats with as many as six or as few as zero paws, but the Logician says that having no paws wouldn't be just—and logic, he insists, is justice. Another rhinoceros stampedes through town. It kills the Housewife's cat. The Housewife cries and returns to the café with her cat's body. The crowd cares for the Housewife while the Old Gentleman and the Logician insist that cats are mortal and the Housewife should've expected this.

People wonder if the second rhinoceros was the same as the first, but Jean declares that there were two different rhinoceroses: the first was an Asian rhinoceros with two horns, while the second was an African rhinoceros with one horn. Berenger insists that this is ridiculous since the rhinoceroses were moving too fast to count their horns. Jean insults Berenger by calling him an "Asiatic Mongoloid," which sparks a discussion of the fact that Asian people are people just like any other. Jean angrily leaves and everyone blames Berenger. Others argue over how many horns the rhinoceros had as Berenger regrets his actions out loud. The Logician leads the group in posing what he says is the correct question—how many rhinoceroses and horns—but agrees that this doesn't answer for the rhinoceros's violence. He leaves and the Grocer asks if they're going to allow rhinoceroses to run down cats. Berenger drinks and decides to better himself later.

The next day, Botard, Dudard, Mr. Papillon, and Daisy arrive at work. Botard loudly insists that the rhinoceros is made up—journalists lie, and the article in the paper doesn't properly define either "pachyderm" or "cat." He denounces segregation and church by insulting those who saw the rhinoceros for not working on Sundays. Daisy insists that she saw the rhinoceros, but Botard remains derisive. Berenger sneaks into the office just in time to sign in. He joins the conversation and insists that he saw the rhinoceros, but Botard insinuates that Berenger isn't a reliable witness since he loves Daisy and is an alcoholic. They debate how many horns the rhinoceros or rhinoceroses have, but Mr. Papillon puts everyone to work. Everyone works until Botard accuses Dudard of being part of a nefarious group behind the rhinoceroses. Mr. Papillon returns from his office to confirm that Mr. Bœuf is out. He threatens to fire Mr. Bœuf. Mrs. Bœuf arrives, flustered and out of breath. She explains that her husband is sick and that a rhinoceros chased her and is waiting at the bottom of the stairs. The rhinoceros promptly demolishes the staircase. Botard admits that he can see it and they note that the rhinoceros has one horn, though they don't know if it's Asian or African. Mrs. Bœuf realizes that the rhinoceros is her husband, so Mr. Papillon discusses firing him. Botard threatens to get the union involved. Daisy calls the fire department to get them all out as Mrs. Bœuf leaps down the stairwell and onto her husband's back. Daisy returns with the news that the fire department is busy with other rhinoceros calls as Botard cryptically insists that he never denied that there were rhinoceroses and threatens to expose the plot. Firemen help everyone out through the window.

Berenger goes to visit Jean, but Jean is sick and doesn't recognize Berenger's voice when he knocks. Berenger apologizes for getting upset about the rhinoceroses and being obstinate. Jean coughs and says he feels ill, but he doesn't know what's wrong. He says he's full of energy and begins to perform exercises. Berenger tries to come up with explanations for Jean's illness and increasingly gravelly voice, but Jean insists that Berenger's voice is changing. They discover a bump on Jean's forehead and Jean begins to run back and forth to the bathroom, returning to the bedroom with increasingly green skin. Jean is offended when Berenger notes this and refuses to see a doctor. He leaps away when Berenger notes that his skin is hardening. Jean starts eating a magazine and insists that people disgust him and he'll run them down. Jean insists that Berenger is drunk and begins to trumpet. They discuss Mr. Bœuf's transformation and as Jean fans himself with his pajama shirt, he insists that Mr. Bœuf transformed on purpose and that he's better now. Berenger is shocked and argues that while

rhinoceroses may have the right to live their lives, they shouldn't destroy other people's lives or things. Jean shouts that he wants to replace morality with the law of the jungle and insists that humanism is dead. He suggests that Berenger is prejudiced because Berenger thinks poorly of the rhinoceroses. Jean charges Berenger and then runs back to the bathroom and turns into a rhinoceros. Outside, Berenger can see other rhinoceroses destroying park benches and though he tries to stand by Jean, he runs screaming.

A few days later, Berenger experiences nightmares as rhinoceroses stampede outside. He wakes when he falls out of bed, checks his bandaged forehead for a bump, and drinks. Dudard visits, though Berenger doesn't recognize Dudard's voice. Dudard is concerned for Berenger and confirms that he doesn't have a bump on his head, but they agree that if a person doesn't want to knock their head, they won't. He tries to comfort Berenger as they discuss Jean's transformation. Dudard encourages Berenger to not think about it and reminds him that people aren't transforming to spite him. Dudard suggests that Jean may have wanted fresh air, and that rhinoceritis is a disease like any other—and for that matter, Jean was an eccentric, not a normal person. Anxiously, Berenger pours himself a drink and reasons that alcohol helps with epidemics, and that Jean's sobriety possibly opened him up to rhinoceritis. Dudard points out that when Berenger is well enough to go outside, he'll see that the rhinoceroses are peaceful and funny, but Berenger insists he can't see it that way. If this happened somewhere else, he suggests, they'd be able to think about it rationally, but seeing it happen to their neighbors makes it personal. He declares he can't get used to it, but Dudard insists that Berenger can't judge people for making choices like this. Dudard admits that Mr. Papillon became a rhinoceros, which Berenger doesn't find funny at all—he believed that Mr. Papillon had a moral responsibility to not transform. Dudard eats a flower off of Berenger's houseplant.

Dudard accuses Berenger of being intolerant, and they debate whether or not the rhinoceroses are evil or abnormal. Berenger attempts to use logic, but Dudard trips him up and Berenger ultimately declares that he knows intuitively that the rhinoceroses are bad. Berenger decides to call the Logician, but he looks outside and sees a rhinoceros wearing the Logician's hat. Dudard decides that since the Logician is a great thinker, he must have thought his transformation through fully. As Berenger shouts out the window, Dudard eats his cigarette and lets Daisy in. Daisy ignores Dudard's advances, worriedly checks Berenger, and says that Botard is now a rhinoceros—before he transformed, he insisted that they need to move with the times. Berenger is shaken. The three discuss whether or not anyone can do anything about the rhinoceroses as they prepare to eat, but they decide that it's impossible since everyone knows a rhinoceros and animal rights activists would get involved. Dudard begins to think that he'd like to try out being a rhinoceros as they see the firemen transform into rhinoceroses and demolish the fire station. Daisy invites Dudard to sit and eat, but Dudard becomes anxious, charges the door, and becomes a rhinoceros. Daisy and Berenger can't pick him out among the crowd of rhinoceroses.

Berenger accuses Daisy of not trying hard enough to stop Dudard, but they admit that they love each other. They kiss, and Daisy cautions Berenger that they can't control others' lives. Daisy asks Berenger if he's been sober today and when he lies that he has, she gives him a single glass. Berenger promises to improve now that they're together but laments that he can't stop thinking about Jean's transformation. He disagrees when Daisy suggests he escape into his own version of reality.

The phone rings. When Berenger picks it up, they hear rhinoceroses trumpeting. The news on the radio is also rhinoceroses. Daisy asks Berenger to unplug the phone, but Berenger refuses, which offends Daisy. They vow to keep each other safe, and Berenger shouts at their rhinoceros neighbors to be quiet. Daisy insists that there's nothing to do and refuses to have children to regenerate the human race. She says that the rhinoceroses look happy and energetic, while her love with Berenger feels weak. Berenger slaps her, and though they promise to love each other, Daisy hears the rhinoceroses' song and leaves. Berenger inspects himself, wishes he could grow horns and tough skin, and wonders if he's even speaking French. He's ashamed of not being able to transform but declares that he'll remain a man as he sits down with his brandy.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Berenger – The play's protagonist. Berenger is a morose and depressed alcoholic who can barely hold down his job and can't show up anywhere on time. While he understands on some level that these habits are bad—he wants to impress his friend Jean and his coworker Daisy, and knows that his conduct won't impress either—the play overwhelmingly positions Berenger's unwillingness or inability to fit in with the rest of polite society as a good thing. Though he wants to make Jean happy by cleaning himself up, Berenger tries desperately to explain that he's uncomfortable in his skin and drinks so that he can get through the day without experiencing major anxiety. His individuality, then, is exactly what allows him to stand up to the immense pressure to conform, whether that be by quitting drinking or, later, by joining the **rhinoceroses**. Berenger barely registers the first few rhinoceroses, unlike his companions, and isn't swayed by the Logician's insistence that the violence of the rhinoceroses is less important than how many horns the rhinoceroses have. Throughout the rest of the play, Berenger remains convinced that the rhinoceroses are dangerous. He refuses to sympathize with people's reasons for becoming

rhinoceroses and even declines to try to rationalize his thoughts, insisting that intuiting that they're bad is more than enough, especially given the evidence. Witnessing Jean's transformation firsthand is a uniquely horrifying experience for Berenger, primarily because Berenger thinks so highly of Jean and believed that someone of Jean's character should've been able to resist—though he also feels this way about his coworkers and boss, all of whom eventually become rhinoceroses, too. When he and Daisy are the only two humans left, Berenger begins to abandon his fears that he'll also become a rhinoceros and asks Daisy to have children with him so that they can regenerate the human race. Daisy's sympathy for the rhinoceroses, however, leads Berenger to slap her, further complicating his own morally superior position. As the only human left, Berenger continues to drink, but declares that he'll never give up his humanity or his individuality.

Jean – Berenger's best friend. Jean is the exact opposite of Berenger: he's well dressed, polished, cultured, and intellectual. He takes special issue with Berenger's alcoholism and so takes it upon himself to get Berenger to stop drinking, mostly by trying to impress upon Berenger that life is better when one is cultured and not hung over all the time. He also makes the point that Daisy won't find Berenger attractive if Berenger is always drunk or recovering from being drunk. Though this may at first seem like a fine goal, the way that Jean goes about trying to reform Berenger indicates that Jean cares far more about fitting in and making others fit in than he cares about Berenger as an individual. He consistently calls Berenger out for insulting him and will never accept that he's wrong or being rude himself—and, indeed, has made Berenger believe that everything wrong in their relationship is Berenger's fault, rather than something that Jean helped create by being so exacting and controlling. Despite this, Berenger wants desperately to please Jean and so promises to quit drinking and culture himself. Jean is one of the first people to become aware of the **rhinoceroses**, which awe him to the point that he can't talk about anything else. He's even more offended, then, when Berenger is disinterested in talking about the rhinoceroses. Jean demonstrates his selfishness, his need to be right, and his love of logic (but only when it suits him) by beginning a debate about how many horns the rhinoceroses had, insulting Berenger, and then leaving. When Berenger later goes to apologize to Jean, he finds Jean in the throes of early rhinoceritis. At this point, Jean believes that rhinoceroses are good and that Berenger is being silly by taking issue with them. This is, as much as anything, indicative of Jean's desire to fit in, which he does by transforming into a rhinoceros. His horrific transformation haunts Berenger for the rest of the play.

Daisy – The attractive young receptionist at Berenger's workplace and the object of his affection. Daisy first appears outside the café where Berenger and Jean meet. It's clear to Jean that Berenger admires Daisy, so he uses the idea of her to encourage Berenger to shape up and abandon alcohol. Later, Daisy takes up where Jean left off and encourages Berenger to drink less as well. Though Daisy initially seems kind and sensible—she saw the **rhinoceros** and refuses to let Botard insult her intelligence by insisting the rhinoceroses aren't real—she soon grows sympathetic to the rhinoceroses. She makes it clear to both Dudard and to Berenger that she doesn't think it's right to interfere in others' lives or choices; thus, she refuses to condemn those who are already rhinoceroses for their actions and also refuses to make an effort to stop Dudard from becoming a rhinoceros in the final scene. While Daisy assures Berenger that she never loved Dudard and actually does love Berenger, their romance is short-lived—primarily because Daisy continues to encourage Berenger to not get so worked up about or involved with the rhinoceroses. Though they kiss, Daisy is unwilling to be brave and have children with Berenger in an attempt to regenerate the human race and take control back from the rhinoceroses. She recognizes that the rhinoceroses are immensely powerful, which causes Berenger to hit her. This pushes her toward her final decision to join the rhinoceroses and, as she encourages Berenger to do, live in the version of reality that works best for her.

Botard – One of Berenger's coworkers. Botard is in his 60s and is a former schoolteacher. He's contrary and antagonistic; he seems to enjoy taking the opposite stance of his coworkers and insists that he does so because he's superior to them. He's also a vocal member of the union and berates Mr. Papillon when Mr. Papillon tries to fire Mr. Bœuf on account of being a **rhinoceros**. Botard insists that he needs to see and interpret things firsthand, the result of being both a former teacher and of having a "mechanical mind." He also insists that journalists lie and takes issue especially with the article in the local paper about the rhinoceros trampling the Housewife's **cat**, as the writer wasn't specific about the breed, color, or sex of the cat—or of the rhinoceros. He eventually accuses Dudard of being a part of a nefarious plot to install the rhinoceroses. After it comes out that Botard also became a rhinoceros, it looks more as though Botard's main goal was gaining power, whether through the union, antagonizing his boss and coworkers, or joining the mass movement. His last words as a human were about needing to keep up with the times, which suggests that he believed the rhinoceroses were inevitably going to overwhelm the remaining humans and become the dominating party.

Dudard – Berenger's friend and coworker. Dudard is a handsome and successful young man who, according to everyone, has a future ahead of him if he continues at the law publication office where he and Berenger work. Though Berenger likes Dudard, they aren't especially close since both men nurse crushes on Daisy and, next to Dudard, Berenger feels inferior. Berenger later insists that Dudard is shy, but his actions don't necessarily support this. At first, Dudard appears

to be on Berenger's side: he insists that the **rhinoceros** does exist and that it's a bad thing for it to run over cats. A few days later, when he visits Berenger, Dudard changes his tune. After a few days living amongst the rhinoceroses, Dudard begins to believe that they're actually admirable creatures and deserve respect, just like humans do. An educated person, Dudard feels that it's important to see both sides of the issue and debate the righteousness or evil of the rhinoceroses using logic and rationality. He insists that Berenger's gut reaction that the rhinoceroses are evil makes Berenger seem overly sensitive and is indicative of no sense of humor. Ultimately, Dudard becomes increasingly sympathetic to the rhinoceroses and finally joins them.

The Logician – A man who makes his living as a logician. He visits the café with his friend the Old Gentleman at the same time as Berenger and Jean are there. The Logician wears a distinctive boater hat and is well dressed in general. He teaches the Old Gentleman about syllogisms and uses a syllogism to prove that the Old Gentleman's dog is actually a cat, simply because it has four paws. Through this, the Logician demonstrates how easy it is to warp logic, especially when one is an authority figure like he is. Later, he demonstrates how logic can be used to deflect attention away from the atrocities that the rhinoceroses (a metaphor for fascist movements) are committing by leading the other characters in a lesson to construct what he insists is the correct question: what kind of **rhinoceros**(es) they saw, and how many horns they had. He makes it clear that while this is supposedly the correct question, it purposefully misses the point—that is, if people will put up with rhinoceroses running over their pets. The Logician later succumbs and turns into a rhinoceros, though he maintains some semblance of his individuality by wearing his boater hat impaled on his horn.

Mr. Papillon – Berenger's boss at the law publication office. He's in his 40s, is well dressed, and is a very proper man. His offense when Botard insults religion as being an "opiate of the masses" suggests that he's a religious individual, while his badge from the French Legion of Honor indicates that he served in the military. Despite his interest in arguing about the **rhinoceroses** with his employees, he's far more interested in making sure that everyone gets their work done, to the point that after the rhinoceros Mr. Bœuf destroys their staircase, he focuses on figuring out how to continue working rather than how to get everyone out of the second floor office safely. Though his behavior and mannerisms otherwise suggest that he's a levelheaded and dutiful individual, he becomes a rhinoceros a few days after the office closes. This offends Berenger in particular, as Berenger believes that as an authority figure, Mr. Papillon had a duty to resist and set a good example for others.

The Old Gentleman – An elderly man and a friend of the Logician. He and the Logician are at the café at the same time as Berenger and Jean are when the play begins. The Old Gentleman functions as an "everyman" sort of character in that the way he follows the Logician's logic lesson mimics the way in which Ionesco suggests real people fall prey to fascist movements. He's fascinated by the logic arguments, especially when they can supposedly prove fantastical things, such as the idea that his dog is a cat because it has four paws. This then makes him more willing to go along with the Logician when the Logician defies his own logic and insists that a cat with five paws can still be a cat, which goes against the propositions that the Logician set out in his syllogism. The Old Gentleman also appears well dressed and like he's a member of polite and intellectual society.

The Grocer – A grocer whose grocery store is next to the café where Jean and Berenger meet. He's prickly because the Housewife is buying groceries elsewhere and gets very caught up in the arbitrary argument over whether or not the **rhinoceros** or rhinoceroses running through town are Asian or African and how many horns they have.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Housewife – A married woman who, when the play begins, is out shopping with her **cat**. For unknown reasons, she switches grocery stores, irritating the Grocer and the Grocer's Wife. Her groceries are the first casualty of the **rhinoceros** and her beloved cat is the second.

The Waitress – A kind waitress who works at the café. She gets caught up in the anxiety about the **rhinoceroses** and the ensuing argument about what kind of rhinoceroses they were and how many horns they had.

Mr. Bœuf – A coworker of Berenger's who only appears as a **rhinoceros**. Despite being a rhinoceros, he's still very in love with Mrs. Bœuf and encourages her to join him after destroying his workplace's staircase.

Mrs. Bœuf – Mr. Bœuf's wife. Though she's initially afraid when a **rhinoceros** chases her to Mr. Bœuf's workplace, she discovers that the rhinoceros is her husband and leaps down to join him.

The Grocer's Wife – The Grocer's Wife helps her husband in their grocery store.

The Proprietor – The man who owns the café in the town square.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

ABSURDITY, LOGIC, AND INTELLECTUALISM

Rhinoceros takes place in a provincial French town where, over the course of the play's three acts, the entire population—save the play's protagonist, Berenger—turns into **rhinoceroses**. The play is absurd in a variety of ways, not least because of its premise: in addition to the absurd "rhinoceritis" illness that grips the town, characters also make ridiculously illogical arguments that, to anyone watching or reading, don't hold up to scrutiny at all. Through these strange events that take place and the characters' attempts to make sense of them, the play makes the case that life in general is absurd and inexplicable rather than something that can be clearly analyzed. Additionally, the features of human thought that are supposed to make sense of the world's mysteries, such as logic, intellectualism, and language, are just as nonsensical as what they attempt to illuminate.

Long before a rhinoceros even arrives on the scene, the play makes it clear that its characters, though they make a show of being rational, educated, and logical, are actually anything but. In the first act, a Logician gives a lesson in logic to an Old Gentleman on syllogisms, a type of logical argument that sets two propositions against each other in order to reach a conclusion. The Logician declares that if all cats have four paws, and if the beings Fricot and Isidore both have four paws, then Fricot and Isidore are both cats. There's no way for the play's audience to confirm whether or not this is true—there's no indication of who or what Fricot or Isidore are, or if they exist at all. The Logician thus shows how easy it is to warp and abuse logic by replying, when the Old Gentleman points out that his dog also has four paws, that the gentleman's dog is actually a cat. To the audience, this is patently absurd—dogs are clearly a separate species from cats.

The math problem that follows, in which the Logician asks the Old Gentleman to deduce what happens if they take away two legs from Isidore and Fricot, is similarly nonsensical. Per the Logician's own proposition, an animal with any more or any fewer than four paws and the corresponding four legs *isn't* a cat, but this doesn't stop the Old Gentleman from deducing that they could have cats with as many as six and as few as zero legs—showing clearly that these attempts to rationalize and make sense of the world aren't just ineffective and ridiculous, but that logic can also be used to come to all manner of incorrect conclusions. Tellingly, the Logician warns the Old Gentleman that logic is only good and useful until people abuse it, which he and the Old Gentleman are clearly doing with their thought exercises. This indicates not just that the world of *Rhinoceros* is fundamentally absurd—as is, more broadly, the audience's—but that any attempts to try to make sense of that absurdity are, by default, illogical, inconclusive, and easily manipulated.

While all of this is humorous at first, the absurdity of this logic begins to take on a more sinister connotation when the second rhinoceros that rampages through the square tramples and kills a beloved **cat**. Everyone at the café—including Jean, the Logician, the Old Gentleman, and surrounding storeowners—are less concerned with the dead cat and the grieving Housewife than they are with arguing about whether the rhinoceroses had one or two horns, and how many horns Asian versus African rhinoceroses have. This continues throughout the play, as several characters argue about whether or not there are actually rhinoceroses running wild through the town, and others attempt to rationalize why people might be turning into rhinoceroses in the first place. In all cases, these attempts at logic or rationality ignore the fact that there are indeed rhinoceroses running around, and none of these attempts to explain away anything actually lead to new information. All of this suggests that trying to make sense of the world in this way is ultimately futile—no matter how absurd an event might be, attempts to quantify, qualify, or otherwise rationalize the absurdity is equally as ridiculous as the event in question.

Alongside the ridiculousness of logic, the play also pokes fun at intellectualism more broadly through the character of Jean, Berenger's best friend. Jean is affluent, well dressed, and cultured—and he sees Berenger's sloppiness as offensive. However, even though Jean insists that he's better than Berenger because he's so intellectual and cultured, Jean still ultimately succumbs to rhinoceritis and even tries to run down his friend on his way to the streets to join the stampeding rhinoceroses. Not even Jean's intellectualism could save him, while Berenger's attempts to think critically about his situation and make sense of it are similarly fruitless. As the final human left in the play, Berenger comes to the conclusion that language itself is meaningless. He's unsure if he's even speaking French, and what the purpose of speaking even is if there's no one to communicate with—communicating with the rhinoceroses would mean learning their language, something that he suggests entails seeing them as beings capable of rational thought and open communication. Berenger's final failure to make sense of anything, even his own ability to join the rhinoceroses, suggests that while it may be natural to try to use logic or rationality to make sense of the world, this is ultimately futile since the world itself is fundamentally illogical and nonsensical.

FASCISM

Rhinoceros is widely considered to be a critique of Nazi Germany, as well as of the fascist party and movement known as the Iron Guard, which simultaneously arose in Ionesco's native Romania. As "rhinoceritis" functions as a metaphor for fascist regimes in general, *Rhinoceros* pays close attention to the way in which fascist and totalitarian beliefs—and eventually, regimes—are

akin to a disease that gradually infects a population by introducing its ideas in a way that, at first glance, don't seem to be so horrible. Ultimately though, much like the rhinoceritis illness that befalls the characters in the play, fascism lulls people into sympathizing with or buying into a belief system that is fundamentally dangerous and dehumanizing.

One of the points that *Rhinoceros* repeatedly makes is that while people may like to think that they wouldn't be swayed by something like fascism, in reality it's shockingly easy for normal, sensible, and respected people to be taken in by such an ideology. The play does this in part by offering characters who are relatively generic and devoid of any backstory or distinguishing characteristics—the little backstory that the play gives for Jean, for example, in no way offers any insight into who he is why he ultimately succumbs. By doing this, Ionesco makes it clear that it's not just identifiably evil villains who discover and promote harmful ideologies like fascism. Instead, the play suggests, anyone—from the office secretary to one's coworkers and even best friends—is susceptible to such things, no matter a person's sex, educational level, marital status, or anything else.

Through the characters' blind acceptance of the **rhinoceroses**' presence, Ionesco also suggests that fascism, as rhinoceritis's real-world parallel, is able to spread in part by preying on people's sense of humanity and a desire to understand the other side of the argument in a rational, logical way. Although this desire may seem noble, within the world of the play this leads, without fail, to making excuses in the name of rationality or fairness while ignoring the pain and suffering that the rhinoceroses cause. When Berenger's coworker Dudard visits him a few days into the rhinoceroses' takeover, he and Berenger discuss that all of their coworkers and friends have since become rhinoceroses. Rather than express outrage at the damage that the rhinoceroses cause or fear for his own safety as he talks about navigating the overrun town, Dudard encourages Berenger to keep an open mind and consider the possibility that, for example, their boss Mr. Papillon may have become a rhinoceros because he was bored and tired of office life—a distinct possibility, but one that still ignores the fact that Mr. Papillion is now committing violent and destructive acts as a rhinoceros. Berenger refuses to play into Dudard's line of thinking, suggests that Mr. Papillion had a moral imperative to resist such an urge, and essentially makes the case that people's reasons for becoming a rhinoceros don't matter in light of the inexcusable things they do in their new forms. It's impossible, he insists, to ignore the fact that rhinoceritis—or fascism—is harmful, just because someone's reasons for believing in the ideology make sense. Instead, the attempts to make sense of a person's reasons only provide more legitimacy for the ideology or movement itself and, for this reason, should be avoided or treated with intense caution.

Especially once Berenger and Daisy discover that the rhinoceroses have taken over the radio, the phone lines, and that even the firefighters have become rhinoceroses, the play makes it clear that fascism and other extreme and harmful ideologies aren't to be trifled with. If allowed to flourish, all aspects of infrastructure will inevitably be compromised, and society will thus break down into an unintelligible violence. With this, Ionesco simultaneously condemns the actions of the thousands of people in Germany and Romania who allowed fascist movements to gain traction and carry out unspeakable violence, while also encouraging readers or audiences to look critically at their own world. Fascism, he suggests, can crop up anywhere—but if enough people can be like Berenger and refuse to rationalize it in its early stages and refuse to accept the violence that follows, it may be possible to stop it before it's too late.

INDIVIDUALITY VS. CONFORMITY

In *Rhinoceros*, Berenger is not particularly smart or ambitious, and he harbors obvious weaknesses such as alcoholism and chronic lateness. It's telling, then, that Berenger is the only person in his small French town who is able to escape the rhinoceritis illness, especially when his well-connected and esteemed peers and colleagues ultimately succumb and turn into **rhinoceroses**. With this, *Rhinoceros* suggests that while people's distinguishing characteristics may at first look like major flaws, embracing one's individuality—for better or worse—is often what allows people to hold onto their humanity and resist the draw of conforming to harmful ideologies.

At first, Berenger's individuality is presented as an undesirable quality. He's unkempt, unshaven, and according to Jean, reeks of alcohol—whereas everyone around him is put-together and polite. Because of this, Jean takes much of the first act to berate Berenger for his failures, trying to clean him up and convince him to join the rest of the upper-class world that Jean inhabits. Importantly, Berenger initially vows to follow through and put Jean's suggestions into practice. Per Jean's encouragement, he buys theater tickets and agrees to stop drinking (albeit only briefly; he picks up again minutes later after he and Jean argue). This suggests that even for someone as individualistic as Berenger, there's a lot of pressure to conform and fit in—and that it's a natural inclination to *want* to fit in. However, the play does suggest, even at this early point, that there's something to be said for Berenger's individualism, as he's the only one who, until it becomes a battle of wills with Jean, doesn't much care about the first rhinoceros's appearance. Berenger's unwillingness to acknowledge the first rhinoceros suggests that his individualism allows him to ignore and reject conformity, as becoming a rhinoceros (or, at this early stage, getting worked up over the rhinoceros) is, first and foremost, a way in which individuals reject all aspects of individuality and become indistinguishable from their peers.

As the play progresses, Berenger watches everyone from his coworkers to Jean transform into rhinoceroses. Given that the rhinoceritis illness sweeping the town is representative of conformity (and, especially once the rhinoceroses start destroying property in earnest, mob mentality), Berenger's unwillingness to play along or think kindly about the rhinoceroses makes it clear that even in the face of intense pressure to conform and go along with the crowd, Berenger's individuality makes it much easier for him to stand his ground. Berenger pleads with both Jean and Dudard to understand that rejecting rhinoceritis is a moral position—people, in his understanding, should have the moral fiber to resist the crowd and hold onto their humanity. When all of Berenger's peers succumb anyway, the play makes it clear that the things that Jean suggests make a person better, such as enjoying one's job or attending the theater or other cultural events, actually have no bearing on what kind of a person someone is. Rather, it's one's capacity to retain who they truly are in the face of encroaching ideological influences that defines a person's character.

Through this, the play gives Berenger's way of life and way of thinking more heft and sympathy. While he may be struggling in a variety of ways since he can barely make it out of bed, get through the day without drinking, or even show up to work on time, he still somehow manages to hang onto his humanity. With this, the play makes the case that individuality in general is something to be celebrated, no matter what form it takes. The play critiques ideological movements like fascism through the fictional illness rhinoceritis, which require people to conform. Individualism, by contrast, gives people the tools to recognize morally questionable movements when they arise—and in doing so, cautions readers and audiences to think carefully about the costs of following the crowd.

ESCAPISM, VIOLENCE, AND MORALITY

While the play as a whole is a grand metaphor for fascism in all its horrors, Berenger takes issue primarily with what he sees as the immorality of rhinoceritis. The **rhinoceroses** start out as innocuous as a hoard of animals running rampant through a town can be—while they do drown out all attempts at conversation, they cause no real harm at first. This quickly changes, however, as the rhinoceroses move on to destroying pets and property. By comparing the morality of the rhinoceroses with the way that Berenger's friends, lovers, and peers assign moral value to Berenger and his actions, Ionesco insists that all of these vices are ultimately forms of escapism. Thus, it's silly and fruitless to compare individual failings like Berenger's alcoholism, which only affects one person, to something like fascism and violence, which affect entire communities and bring dire consequences.

It's important to keep in mind that throughout the play, Ionesco never directly condemns Berenger for his alcoholism—it's a topic on which the author remains fairly neutral, despite the fact that many in Berenger's life take issue with it. Berenger manages to be a reasonably attentive friend and employee despite his love of brandy, and even Daisy insists that it's untrue that she's in love with the successful Dudard—she has feelings for the flawed Berenger rather than the stereotypically ideal young professional. All of this begins to suggest that people's personal problems, such as alcoholism, are perhaps not worth critiquing or moralizing. This is especially true once Berenger and Jean begin to find that Berenger's reasons for drinking are very similar to Jean and Dudard's reasons for becoming rhinoceroses. Both alcohol and rhinoceritis, the characters suggest, are a means of escape.

Berenger fears that his life is pointless and means nothing. Alcohol helps him feel less afraid and, though Jean refuses to accept it, helps Berenger get through the day and be a reasonably successful and functional participant in society. As rhinoceritis grips the town, both Jean and Dudard suggest that becoming a rhinoceros is a way to relax and throw off the shackles of having a professional life—which is, in many respects, the exact same thing that Berenger tries to achieve by drinking. Escaping as espoused by the rhinoceroses, however, quickly begins to look sinister. While the first rhinoceros does nothing but make it impossible for people to hear each other, subsequent rhinoceroses kill a pet **cat** and then begin destroying property with impunity. This impresses upon Berenger that the rhinoceroses are immoral—they're actively hurting others, something that Berenger's reliance on alcohol doesn't do.

When Berenger and Daisy discover that they're the last two humans in their town, Berenger is, notably, still an alcoholic—he just makes more of an effort to hide this from Daisy and Dudard. Despite this possible moral failing, however, Berenger also begins to see that it's his and Daisy's moral responsibility to try to fix what happened by having children and repopulating the world with responsible, rational, and moral people. When Daisy refuses to go along with this, Berenger experiences a brief moment in which he descends into rhinoceros-like violence by slapping her—which, while maybe not the defining factor in Daisy's decision to join the rhinoceroses, certainly helps her decide to leave Berenger. Berenger is then left as the last man standing: a morally complex individual who drinks and occasionally becomes violent, but who nevertheless refuses to ignore the rampant violence of the rhinoceroses. Through this characterization, Ionesco makes the case that while morality may exist on a spectrum in some cases or be arguable in others, it's still absolutely necessary to carefully interrogate the morality of something when it includes violence.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.

RHINOCEROSES

As the play progresses, Berenger watches everyone he knows, loves, and admires transform into loud and destructive rhinoceroses, which symbolize the dangers of conformity. Important is the fact that Berenger characterizes turning into a rhinoceros as a choice that a person makes; it's not something that's forced on anyone, nor is it contagious in the sense that happens to people regardless of how they feel about it. Given Ionesco's history and his stated reasons for writing *Rhinoceros*, the rhinoceroses themselves come to represent not just fascism itself, but the way in which ordinary people are overwhelmingly willing to go along with violent regimes that ultimately turn them into monsters devoid of all humanity or individuality.

THE CAT

The Housewife's cat is the first casualty once rhinoceritis takes hold of Berenger's provincial French town, and its death highlights how easy it is to rationalize violence when the victim is somehow less than human. While Berenger and the café-goers are certainly sad for the Housewife's loss, they ignore her cries that her cat was kind, gentle, and almost like a real person—and the Grocer's Wife even offers to give her one of her cats to replace the dead one, as if the cat were expendable. Their unwillingness to truly empathize and see the cat as a victim worthy of respect and concern represents, more broadly, the way that fascism and other totalitarian systems begin by targeting the most vulnerable of a population, especially those that can't advocate for themselves.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Samuel French edition of *Rhinoceros* published in 1960.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

Berenger: Listen, Jean. There are so few distractions in this town—I get so bored. I'm not made for the work I'm doing—every day at the office, eight hours a day—and only three weeks' holiday a year. When Saturday night comes round I feel exhausted and so—you know how it is—just to relax…

Related Characters: Berenger (speaker), Jean

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This interaction comes at the beginning of the play, as Berenger tries futilely to explain to Jean why he drinks so much. Here, Berenger presents a fairly reasonable argument against the hustle and bustle of modern capitalist society, which leaves him equal parts "bored," "exhausted," and unfulfilled. Especially when he notes that he's "not made for the work [he's] doing," Berenger points to the fact that he doesn't fit into this vision of society. While most people don't have much of a problem with working eight-hour days and taking three weeks of vacation, these things are incredibly grating for Berenger. This begins to make the case that Berenger's alcoholism is a symptom of (or perhaps an antidote for) his individuality—for whatever reason, he cannot just accept what life is supposed to be like and turns to alcohol to help him cope. As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that the people around Berenger, especially his buttoned-up friend Jean, disapprove of Berenger's drinking habits, further aligning Berenger's drinking with his sense that he doesn't fit in.

However, it's also telling that Berenger is at least *trying* to fit in and conform by holding down a standard job, even if he's struggling to do so. This speaks to the immense pressure to fit in—it's not something that even an individual like Berenger can ignore.

Jean: I just can't get over it!

Berenger: Yes, I can see you can't. Well, it was a rhinoceros—all right, so it was a rhinoceros. It's miles away by now—miles away.

Jean: But you must see it's fantastic! A rhinoceros loose in the town, and you don't bat an eyelid. It shouldn't be allowed. (*Berenger yawns.*) Put your hand in front of your mouth.

Related Characters: Berenger, Jean (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Following the first rhinoceros's jaunt through town, Jean remains fascinated and excited by the strange event, while Berenger grudgingly plays along. The rhinoceros aside,

Berenger's unwillingness to engage in Jean's expressions of disbelief points again to unwillingness to go along with the crowd—after all, everyone else in the town square is also remarking on the rhinoceros at this point. In echoing the same disbelief that everyone else is exhibiting, Jean demonstrates here that he values conformity and fitting in, and this is his main issue with Berenger—Berenger doesn't fit in. Jean makes this even clearer when he scolds Berenger for not covering his mouth when he yawns. In this case, Berenger isn't adhering to the rules of polite society, which Jean prides himself on being a part of.

Berenger: I don't like the taste of alcohol much. […] And yet if I don't drink, I'm done for; it's as if I'm frightened, and so I drink not to be frightened any longer.

Jean: Frightened of what?

Berenger: […] I don't know exactly. It's a sort of anguish difficult to describe. I feel out of place in life, among people, and so I take to drink. That calms me down and relaxes me so I can forget.

Jean: You try to escape from yourself.

Related Characters: Berenger, Jean (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Berenger again attempts to explain to Jean why he drinks. Berenger carefully articulates his feelings of being adrift in society and not fitting in, something that continues to establish him as an outlier and someone who goes against the societal grain. The way that Jean frames his assessment of Berenger's alcoholism—that Berenger drinks to escape himself—suggests that Jean thinks of being human as a state of fitting in with everyone else. Framing Berenger's alcoholism as escapism also takes on increased importance as the play progresses. Others later propose that becoming a rhinoceros is its own form of escapism, as it allows people to get away from the nine to five grind of working life and live a life that's uncomplicated and free—if also violent and problematic. Berenger achieves much the same thing through alcohol: by drinking, he can forget that he dislikes his job and is scared of living in the world, even if his overindulgence in alcohol comes with a slew of downsides.

Logician: Here is an example of a syllogism. A cat has four paws. Isidore and Fricot both have four paws. Therefore Isidore and Fricot are both cats.

Old Gentleman: My dog has got four paws.

Logician: Then it's a cat.

[…]

Old Gentleman: […] Logic is a very beautiful thing.

Logician: As long as it is not abused.

Related Characters: The Old Gentleman, The Logician (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23-24

Explanation and Analysis

While Berenger and Jean continue their discussion of Berenger's faults, the Logician introduces the Old Gentleman to syllogisms and how to use them. While syllogisms themselves are a real form of logical argument that can be used to prove things (human morality is a common example), the Logician shows here that even though he speaks against abusing logic, that's exactly what he's doing. There's no way for the audience or reader to know whether Isidore and Fricot are cats, for one thing, so it's impossible to tell whether that's true or not. The Old Gentleman's dog, on the other hand, is definitely not a cat, no matter how many paws it has.

As the play is a metaphor for the dangers of fascism, the Logician's exercises illustrate in part how fascist or totalitarian governments often insist that they're logical, but, in reality, twist logic to fit their own needs and desires. In this small-scale example, the Logician stands in for a leader or authority figure of some sort in that he's the one who has power, prestige, and can convince people of his correctness. The Old Gentleman, meanwhile, stands in for people who want to believe their leaders and therefore fall into their leaders' line of thinking. Further, while deducing that a dog is a cat may be humorous and seem relatively innocuous in the grand scheme of things, it's easy to then expand this kind of thinking (of proving one thing is something else) to encompass very sinister ideas. In Ionesco's experience during World War II and in the lead-up to it, leaps in logic like this were used to prove that Jewish people were subhuman and therefore needed to be eliminated.

Logician: That would be unjust, and therefore not logical.

[…]

Old Gentleman: […] Not logical?

[…]

Logician: […] Because Logic means Justice.

Related Characters: The Old Gentleman, The Logician (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

As Jean and Berenger continue to discuss Berenger's faults, the Logician leads the Old Gentleman in thought exercises in which they deduce how many paws Isidore and Fricot have if they subtract two paws from the cats. Here, the Logician is responding to the Old Gentleman's answer that they could have a cat with no paws, thereby keeping it from catching mice. The Logician's logic is flawed and contradictory throughout this scene, highlighting how logic can be twisted easily twisted to prove a certain claim.

It's also interesting that the Logician links logic to justice here, as this directly contradicts the actions of the rhinoceroses later. Later in the play, individuals like Jean and Dudard eventually go on to suggest that it's perfectly reasonable and logical for people to become rhinoceroses. However, the rhinoceroses' actions are clearly unjust, as they kill the Housewife's cat and destroy public property all over down. So, by the Logician's standards, becoming a rhinoceros is actually an illogical, unjust thing to do—something only Berenger seems to grasp.

Old Gentleman: What can you do, dear lady—cats are only mortal.

Logician: What do you expect, madam? All cats are mortal. One must accept that.

Housewife: (*Lamenting.*) My little cat, my poor little cat.

Related Characters: The Housewife, The Logician, The Old Gentleman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

After the second rhinoceros runs down and kills the Housewife's cat, the Old Gentleman and the Logician encourage the woman to accept her cat's fate as normal and expected, though this does nothing to alleviate the Housewife's grief or the fact that her cat was just fatally, gruesomely trampled. This moment illustrates the play's insistence that it's normal for people to rationalize violence in order to cope with it, and that rationalizing violence is far easier when the victim is someone or something that seems less than human—in this case a beloved house pet, and in Ionesco's lived experience that inspired the play, the dehumanized Jewish people and other targets of the Nazis.

The actions of the Old Gentleman and the Logician also lay the groundwork for teaching people (except for Berenger) to not think that what the rhinoceroses are doing is a crime. If they teach themselves and encourage others to look the other way in moments of violence like this, it becomes far more likely that they'll continue to look the other way later—thereby making them susceptible to rhinoceritis themselves in a few days, or in the interim, making them more likely to make excuses and justify why people become rhinoceroses and what they do in their rhinoceros forms.

Berenger: (*To Jean.*) I'm not Asiatic, either, And in any case, Asiatics are people the same as everyone else.

Waitress: Yes, Asiatics are people the same as we are.

Old Gentleman: (*To the Proprietor.*) That's true!

Related Characters: The Old Gentleman, The Waitress, Berenger (speaker), Jean

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

After Jean insults Berenger with a racist slur, Berenger fights back by arguing that "Asiatics" (that is, people of Asian descent, though the term itself has a history of being used in a derogatory manner and is considered outdated and offensive today) are people, too. By making this argument,

Berenger makes the case that using an ethnicity as a dehumanizing slur is ridiculous and ineffective—people of other ethnicities, he suggests, are just as human as any of his French peers are. This is both an argument for individuality (in that being from a different part of the world is a good thing, not something to be ashamed of or to weaponize) and for a degree of morality and kindness from Jean. Jean, notably, is prim and polite to people who are like him, such as the Old Gentleman and the Logician, but he's very rude to Berenger, who doesn't fit in—and through his choice of insult, Jean expresses clear distaste for people who are different.

More specifically, bringing in this particular insult is a jab at one line of Nazi propaganda, which promoted the idea that Jewish people were interlopers from Asia. With this insight, this exchange reads as an affirmation that Jewish people are people the same as anyone else and shouldn't be dehumanized and violently targeted.

Grocer: —it may be logical, but are we going to stand for our cats being run down under our very eyes by one-horned rhinoceroses *or* two, whether they're Asiatic *or* African?

Related Characters: The Grocer (speaker), The Logician, The Housewife

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Following the Logician leading the assembled people in formulating the correct question about what kinds of rhinoceroses are running through town, the Grocer brings things back to the real question: does the rhinoceroses' species or number of horns matter when they're being violent? Overwhelmingly, the play suggests that it doesn't; logic, it suggests, can easily be deployed as a front to distract from the violent or dehumanizing things that the rhinoceroses—or, for that matter, the real-life Nazis or the Iron Guard that inspired the play—are doing. That the Grocer is able to bring this up so succinctly at this point indicates that the population of *Rhinoceros* hasn't yet bought entirely into the idea that the rhinoceroses are benign or even a good thing. However, the fact that everyone but Berenger eventually sympathizes with the rhinoceroses before becoming one themselves suggests that this isn't something that can only be said once. Instead, people need to continue to loudly state that what's happening is immoral and not acceptable, no matter how logical something might seem on the surface.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

Botard: You call that precise? And what, pray, does it mean by "pachyderm"? What does the editor of a dead cats column understand by a pachyderm? He doesn't say. And what does he mean by a cat?

Dudard: Everybody knows what a cat is.

Botard: Does it concern a male cat or a female? What breed is it? And what color? The color bar is something I feel strongly about. I hate it.

Papillon: What has the color bar has to do with it, Mr. Botard? It's quite beside the point.

Related Characters: Mr. Papillon, Dudard, Botard (speaker), Daisy, Berenger

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

When Botard reads the article in the paper about the rhinoceros running down a woman's cat, Botard insists that the article isn't precise enough to take seriously. By doing this, Botard makes the case that if something doesn't answer every possible question in a careful and logical way, it's invalid and shouldn't be taken into consideration. The play overwhelmingly makes the case that everyone should be outraged by the fact that a rhinoceros ran over a beloved cat, no matter what color, sex, or breed it was. Not answering those questions (which the play never answers, though the Housewife does use male pronouns to talk about her cat) shouldn't make it less tragic that the cat died.

Bringing in the color bar (segregation) and speaking out against it then allows Botard to feel superior and as though he's in the right, even as he insists that the cat's death shouldn't be taken seriously. He deflects, just as Mr. Papillon accuses him of doing.

Act 2 Quotes

Jean: You always see the black side of everything. It obviously gave him great pleasure to turn into a rhinoceros. There's nothing extraordinary in that.

Berenger: [...] There's nothing extraordinary in it, but I doubt if it gave him much pleasure.

Jean: And why not, pray?

Berenger: It's hard to say exactly why; it's just something you feel.

Related Characters: Jean, Berenger (speaker), Mr. Bœuf

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

When Berenger goes to visit Jean, the two discuss Mr. Bœuf's transformation into a rhinoceros and argue about whether Mr. Bœuf enjoyed his transformation or not. Berenger's insistence that Mr. Bœuf surely didn't like turning into a rhinoceros speaks to Berenger's ability to see rhinoceritis and the rhinoceroses as immoral and dangerous. As he sees it, any kind, moral, and good person—which he knew Mr. Bœuf to be—wouldn't enjoy falling sick with rhinoceritis. Jean's belief that turning into a rhinoceros is a good thing, meanwhile, speaks to his penchant for conformity. He sees everyone around him turning into rhinoceroses and reasons that it must be a good thing if everyone's doing it. By showing Jean's line of thinking, the play shows how the pressure to conform ultimately makes perfectly reasonable people sympathetic to totalitarian or fascist regimes that clearly and actively hurt others.

Berenger's explanation that he just *knows* it's not a good thing begins to suggest that morality isn't something that, in all cases, can be subject to logic in the same way as other things. It's not something that Berenger feels he has to justify in a logical way to effectively prove his point.

Jean: I tell you it's not as bad as all that. [...] After all, rhinoceroses are living creatures the same as us; they've got as much right to life as we have.

Berenger: As long as they don't destroy ours in the process. You must admit the difference in mentality.

Jean: [...] Are you under the impression— [...] that our way of life is superior?

Berenger: Well, at any rate, we have our own moral standards which I consider incompatible with the standards of these animals.

Related Characters: Jean, Berenger (speaker), The Logician

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

During Jean and Berenger's discussion of the righteousness or morality of the rhinoceroses, Jean takes issue with Berenger's implication that humans live superior moral lives to the rhinoceroses. With this, Berenger hearkens back to the Logician's insistence earlier that logic is justice—if there's no justice, something isn't logical, and vice versa. Despite the Logician's other questionable claims, Berenger seems to back up this particular idea that "Logic means Justice" when he says that the rhinoceroses may have the right to conduct their lives just like humans do, but their existence becomes immoral once they start destroying things. As far as Berenger is concerned, the humans of the play are superior to the rhinoceroses because they aren't trampling cats or destroying property.

Act 3 Quotes

Dudard: Perhaps he felt an urge for some fresh air, the country, the wide-open spaces—perhaps he felt a need to relax. I'm not saying that's any excuse...

Berenger: I understand what you mean, at least I'm trying to. [...]

Dudard: Why get upset over a few cases of rhinoceritis? Perhaps it's just another disease.

Related Characters: Berenger, Dudard (speaker), Jean

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

In Dudard and Berenger's discussion of why Jean may have chosen to become a rhinoceros, Dudard suggests that turning into a rhinoceros is a form of escapism and isn't anything to worry about. This harkens back to earlier in the play, when Jean declared that Berenger's overreliance on alcohol is also a form of escapism. Importantly, though, Jean framed Berenger's escapism as a bad thing and the very reason why Berenger couldn't relax and enjoy all that the world has to offer. Because of this, depicting rhinoceritis as a kind of welcome escapism speaks to the fact that within the space of a few days, becoming a rhinoceros has shifted from being a fringe thing to being the mainstream way of being. Likewise within a fascist regime, certain ideas begin as fringe ideas and theories but, as people rationalize them and become desensitized to the violence and the implications, they can quickly become normalized and not raise alarm bells like they once did. Suggesting that rhinoceritis is "just another disease" further downplays the seriousness of the movement. Diseases kill people every day; suggesting that something is "just" a disease ignores the fact that diseases can be dangerous and deadly—just like the rhinoceroses.

Dudard: What if you do? They don't attack you. If you leave them alone, they just ignore you. You can't say they're spiteful. They've even got a certain natural innocence, a sort of frankness. Besides, I walked right along the avenue to get here, and I arrived safe and sound, didn't I? No trouble at all.

Related Characters: Dudard (speaker), Berenger

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

When it occurs to Berenger that he'll have to go out among the rhinoceroses at some point, Dudard assures him that it's not so bad. When Dudard speaks highly of the rhinoceroses, it shows that he's gradually becoming more sympathetic to them and all they stand for as he's become desensitized to the violence and chaos they create. While a few days ago he was insistent that they were bad, he now doesn't think they're much to worry about and indeed, are worthy of respect and awe.

The play suggests that Dudard's initial understanding that the rhinoceroses won't hurt him is not actually a good thing. Because he "arrived safe and sound" to Berenger's place without any altercations with rhinoceroses, Dudard becomes more sympathetic to them and, ultimately, willing to look the other way when they do destroy things or hurt people. Plus, Dudard *does* transform and join the rhinoceroses not long after this, suggesting that the rhinoceroses are not the benign creatures he tries to depict them as.

Berenger: If only it had happened somewhere else, in some other country, and we'd just read about it in the papers, one could discuss it quietly, examine the question from all points of view, and come to an objective conclusion. We could organize debates with professors and writers and lawyers, and bluestockings and artists and people. And the ordinary man in the street as well—it would be very interesting and instructive. But when you're involved yourself, when you suddenly find yourself up against the brutal facts, you can't help feeling directly concerned—

Related Characters: Berenger (speaker), Dudard

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Berenger makes the case that the rhinoceritis epidemic would be easier to deal with emotionally had it taken place somewhere else, as it would allow him and his community to engage with it in a rational way. Through this, Berenger suggests that it's a natural and normal inclination to want to deal with something like rhinoceritis—or, the rise of fascist governments—in a rational, logical way, especially when someone is looking in from the outside. It's easy, Berenger suggests, to see the epidemic as more of a theoretical concept and not something that will affect him and those he loves. When it takes place right in front of his eyes, however, it's impossible to rationalize it. He has, at this point, watched a coworker and his best friend transform into rhinoceroses and, in Jean's case, behave violently

toward him. Because of this, it's impossible to look at it objectively, because Berenger sees firsthand the problems that come with people transforming into rhinoceroses.

Dudard: I consider it's silly to get worked up because a few people decide to change their skins. They just didn't feel happy in the ones they had. They're free to do as they like.

Berenger: We must attack the evil at the roots.

Dudard: The evil! That's just a phrase. Who knows what is evil and what is good? It's just a question of personal preferences. […]

Berenger: There you are, you see. If our leaders and fellow citizens all think like you, they'll never take any action.

Related Characters: Berenger, Dudard (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Dudard continues to try to tell Berenger that it's silly to get so worked up about rhinoceritis, while Berenger insists that Dudard's way of thinking is exactly why they'll never recover from this epidemic. First of all, Dudard tries to support the idea that rhinoceritis represents individualism—though the play largely suggests that rhinoceritis actually represents conformity to the highest degree. Throughout the play, turning into a rhinoceros represents conforming in the absolute worst way, while remaining human is the most noble and individual thing a person can do. This begins to show how hypocritical Jean and Dudard have been to Berenger, as they both tried to tell him that his alcoholism—a marker of his individuality—was a bad thing, and that he needed to conform better to the rest of the world.

Then, the argument over whether or not the rhinoceroses are evil shows again that Dudard is trying to rationalize what they're doing and how their actions play out in society. By insisting that it's impossible to know what's truly evil, Dudard effectively throws up his hands and gives up any responsibility he may have had to do something about the rhinoceroses—which Berenger then takes issue with directly. Berenger sees this inclination towards rationalizing violence as something that leads directly to inaction, suggesting that when it comes to clearly violent things like rhinoceroses (or the totalitarian regimes they represent), rationalization has no place. Indeed, rationalization is what ultimately leads these systems to power.

Berenger: A rhinoceros! […] Mr. Papillon a rhinoceros! I can't believe it. I don't think it's funny at all. […] Why did't you tell me before?

Dudard: Well, you know you've no sense of humor. I didn't want to tell you. […] I didn't want to tell you because I knew very well you wouldn't see the funny side, and it would upset you. You know how impressionable you are.

Related Characters: Berenger, Dudard (speaker), Mr. Papillon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Berenger is shocked to learn that his boss, Mr. Papillon, turned into a rhinoceros, and Dudard explains that he didn't share earlier because Berenger can't take a joke. Importantly, Berenger can't take a joke here because, within the world of the play, turning into a rhinoceros *isn't* a joke—it's symbolic of conformity and an acceptance of violence and brute strength. Dudard's insistence that Berenger needs to see the humor in all of this is another aspect of his attempts to rationalize the rhinoceroses. By seeing them as funny, he teaches himself to see rhinoceroses as less dangerous than they actually are—and given that rhinoceroses have destroyed pets and property at this point, it's clear that they are extremely dangerous and not to be trifled with or made light of.

Berenger: I'm not very well up in philosophy. I've never studied; you've got all sorts of diplomas. That's why you're so at ease in discussion, whereas I never know what to answer—I'm so clumsy. […] But I do feel you're in the wrong—I feel it instinctively—no, that's not what I mean, it's the rhinoceros which has instinct—I feel it intuitively, yes, that's the word—intuitively.

Related Characters: Berenger (speaker), Dudard

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

When Berenger tries and fails to make a logical case for why the rhinoceroses are bad, he ultimately gives up and insists that he doesn't have to make a logical case—instead, he can know "intuitively" that the rhinoceroses are dangerous. This starts to show that a person doesn't have to make a logically sound case for why something violent or dangerous is bad, simply feeling it "intuitively" is enough. Taking this view is harder, however, when one's friends—like Dudard—believe that it's important to have a formal, logically backed argument about the pros and cons of both sides. With this, the play illustrates how insisting on using logic makes people like Dudard complicit in what the rhinoceroses (or other fascist, totalitarian, or otherwise violent movement or government) are doing.

Dudard: If he was a genuine thinker, as you say, he couldn't have got carried away. He must have weighed all the pros and cons before deciding.

Related Characters: Dudard (speaker), Berenger, The Logician

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

When Berenger sees that the Logician has become a rhinoceros, Dudard reasons that the Logician must have made a carefully thought-out choice to become a rhinoceros. This shows again how authority figures, like the Logician, have the power to normalize awful and violent movements by joining them. Because Dudard thinks so highly of logic and of those who make understanding logic their jobs, he's far more likely to think kindly about whatever the Logician does. While in this instance this shows how authority figures can bring people into questionable or violent movements, the idea also works in reverse. Had more people with authority or influence in society, like Jean or the Logician, spoken poorly of the rhinoceroses, others may have also denounced the rhinoceroses and in doing so, refused to join the epidemic. Instead, because Berenger is really the only one who ever takes a stand (and because Berenger is a known alcoholic and nobody takes him seriously because of this), he has no real way to convince people that they should stand with him.

Daisy: What he said was, "We must move with the times." Those were his last human words.

Related Characters: Daisy (speaker), Botard, Dudard, Berenger

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Daisy tells Berenger and Dudard that their coworker Botard became a rhinoceros in order to keep up with the times. Prior to his transformation, Botard was contrary and individualistic to a fault—he refused to accept the rhinoceroses' existence when he read about it in the paper, and he alone insisted that the office couldn't fire Mr. Bœuf for being a rhinoceros. In light of what he told Daisy, however, these things begin to look less individualistic and instead, more like Botard just wants to have power, no matter where it comes from or how he gets it. He clearly enjoyed pestering Mr. Papillon about accepting the union; it was one way he was able to feel powerful as a mere employee, just as refusing to accept the rhinoceroses' existence was a way to be contrary and feel superior to his supposedly gullible colleagues. Now that the rhinoceroses outnumber humans, however, it makes sense for Botard to join their ranks, as it allows him to feel powerful and in control in a way that remaining human would not. In this case, the play suggests that there's a dangerous power in conforming and very little power in maintaining one's individuality.

Berenger: They should be all rounded up in a big enclosure, and kept under strict supervision.

Dudard: That's easier said than done. The animal's protection league would never allow it.

Daisy: And besides, everyone has a close relative or a friend among them, and that would make it even more difficult.

Berenger: So everybody's mixed up in it.

Related Characters: Daisy, Dudard, Berenger (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

In this excerpt, Berenger, Dudard, and Daisy discuss the difficulties of attempting to control the rhinoceroses. In the particular, fantastical case of people becoming rhinoceroses, Daisy and Dudard note that the fact that the individuals in question are both animals protected under the law, as well as humans that their friends and family members love. Together, this means that there's effectively nothing that anyone can do about the rhinoceroses, as their existence is protected at every level. In practice in the real world, this speaks to the fact that once a fascist movement begins to take hold, it's hard to shake it off by making it illegal or otherwise difficult to follow. At a certain point, everyone knows someone who's a part of the movement—and having a loved one be a part of such a system makes individuals much more likely to sympathize and less likely to criticize that belief system. In this way, movements can continue to gain power and bring even more people in.

Berenger: He's joined up with them. Where is he now?

Daisy: (Looking out of the window.) With them.

Berenger: Which one is he?

Daisy: You can't tell. You can't recognize him any more.

Berenger: They all look alike, all alike.

Related Characters: Daisy, Berenger (speaker), Dudard

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

As Dudard transforms into a rhinoceros and joins up with the other rhinoceroses flooding the streets, Daisy and Berenger struggle to pick him out of the crowd. This moment makes it abundantly clear that becoming a rhinoceros is indeed symbolic of conformity and giving up everything that made a person an individual. While knowing how many horns Dudard had may narrow down the possibilities of which rhinoceros he is by half, it still doesn't really get Berenger and Daisy any closer to finding their friend. This moment also illustrates how fascist movements rely on getting people to buy in and then conform. As they disappear into the herd, people lose all sense of individuality—which at one point, may have given them the wherewithal to stand up to the movement and reject it.

Daisy: I never knew you were such a realist—I thought you were more poetic. Where's your imagination? There are many sides to reality. Choose the one that's best for you. Escape into the world of the imagination.

Related Characters: Daisy (speaker), Jean, Berenger

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

When Berenger laments to Daisy that he can't forget what happened to Jean and his other friends, she encourages him to come up with a better narrative of what happened and choose one that comforts him. With this, Daisy starts to show that she's growing sympathetic to the rhinoceroses and doesn't think they're bad enough for Berenger to need to dwell on how horrible they are. Instead, she thinks that they're something that, if a person chooses, they should be able to ignore and coexist in peace. While in the real world, this may work for a while—it took years, for instance, for the Nazi party in Germany to come fully into power, during which time plenty of people chose to ignore them—it ultimately fails, as shown in the next few minutes as Daisy succumbs and becomes a rhinoceros herself, leaving Berenger as the last man standing. Because Berenger isn't willing or able to exist in an imagined world in which the rhinoceroses aren't so bad, he's the only person left able to

see the truth: that the rhinoceroses' violence is overwhelming.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

It's a sunny Sunday afternoon. A Waitress adjusts tables outside a café while the Grocer's Wife sweeps the steps of the shop next door. A Housewife walks past with a basket of groceries and her **cat**, but she turns away when she sees the Grocer's Wife. The Grocer's Wife complains about this as Berenger arrives at the café. He's unkempt; his clothes are wrinkled and he has no hat or tie. A moment later Jean arrives, neatly dressed in a brown suit with all the proper accouterments. Jean briskly notes that Berenger is late, but when Berenger apologizes and asks if Jean has been waiting long, Jean says that he arrives late for their meetings on purpose so he doesn't waste any time. He flicks dust off a table and sits.

From the outset, Berenger appears to be somewhat of an outlier. While Jean is dressed neatly and everyone else appears to have their act together, prepared to be out working or shopping, Berenger is disheveled and late. Jean's insistence that Berenger is never on time shows that Berenger either can't or won't adhere to other people's schedules.

Berenger joins Jean at the table and agrees that he's never on time. He asks Jean what he plans to drink, but Jean berates Berenger for wanting to drink so early in the day. He jokes that Berenger's dry throat can't get enough and laughs loudly. When Berenger pushes back on this, Jean says that Berenger isn't doing well—he's tired and hung over, and this is the case no matter what day of the week it is. Berenger insists that he's better on weekdays because he works. Jean points out that Berenger lost his tie and offers Berenger an extra to wear. He then gives Berenger a comb and a mirror.

Although this interaction makes it clear that Berenger has a drinking problem, Jean doesn't seem exactly faultless, as his behavior paints him as a bit of a controlling jerk. His jokes are insensitive, and even if Berenger is *an alcoholic, he still seems reasonably functional—and as though he's a much nicer person than Jean is. Giving Berenger a tie and a comb suggests that Jean puts a lot of stock into fitting in with the crowd.*

Absentmindedly, Berenger fiddles with the tie, combs his hair, and inspects his tongue, which he says is fuzzy. Jean declares that Berenger will have liver disease before too long. Berenger tries to give the tie back, but Jean refuses to take it and admires himself in his mirror before putting it away. Berenger again fails to tie the tie before admiringly telling Jean that he looks immaculate. Jean ignores this and goes on to list all the ways in which Berenger's appearance is subpar, in particular that Berenger has been leaning against a wall and is covered in dust. When Berenger holds out a hand for a brush, Jean snaps that he doesn't carry one—it would make his pockets bulge.

Ignoring Berenger's compliment again shows that Jean isn't a very nice person. Rather than accept a sincere compliment from his friend, it's more important to him to point out all the ways that Berenger is failing at being a proper adult according to Jean. Again, Berenger doesn't seem as though he's actively sabotaging himself or is an unpleasant individual, his relationship to alcohol aside. Instead, he seems simply absentminded and as though he's struggling with everyday life.

Jean says that he's ashamed to be Berenger's friend, but Berenger says that he's bored and not cut out for an eight-hour workday, especially with only three weeks of vacation every year. By Saturday night, he just wants to drink and relax. Jean retorts that *everyone* has to work and has a similar number of vacation days but points out that he doesn't descend into alcoholism because of it. He insists that Berenger needs more willpower, but Berenger sighs that he doesn't have much and can't get used to life. Again, Jean says that everyone has to get used to it and asks if Berenger thinks he's superior to everyone else. Berenger says he's not trying to be, but Jean cuts him off and says that he thinks he's actually better than Berenger because he fulfills his duty as an employee.

Here, Berenger insists that the issue is that fitting in is extremely difficult and exhausting for him—and the only reason that he's as functional as he is because he drinks. This starts to impress upon the audience that Berenger's alcoholism might not be such a bad thing, assuming that Berenger isn't doing anything else terrible. Further, remember that Berenger already said that he works, implying that he can hold down a job just fine. By those metrics, Berenger isn't doing too bad—Jean is just trying to be controlling.

Berenger burps and agrees as he plays with the tie. Jean asks where Berenger was drinking last night. Berenger says that he was celebrating their friend's birthday. Jean is put out that he wasn't invited. The sounds of a running and trumpeting beast begins in the distance and gradually gets louder as the Waitress arrives to take drink orders. Jean has to shout to be heard and continues to lament that he wasn't invited to the previous night's festivities, but both he and the waitress shout questions about the noise. Berenger doesn't seem to hear it and responds to Jean, but his response is too quiet to hear. Jean knocks his chair over as he stands up and points, shouting that it's a **rhinoceros**. The Waitress, the Grocer's Wife, the Grocer, and the Housewife all shout and point out the rhinoceros.

Berenger's lack of reaction to the rhinoceros now makes him seem even more of an outlier, given that he's the only person on stage who doesn't visibly react to the shocking—and loud—display. Jean and the other characters' intense interest in the rhinoceros, meanwhile, reads as more of a herd reaction—they're pointing as much because the rhinoceros is odd as they are because everyone else is doing the exact same thing.

The Logician rushes to the café and remarks that there's a **rhinoceros** across the street, running at full speed. The Housewife and the Old Gentleman arrive at the café and bump into each other and then the Grocer. The Proprietor asks what's going on and at first tells the Waitress that she's seeing things but agrees finally that there is a rhinoceros in the street. Berenger remains seated and disinterested, while the Housewife sits down and sooths her scared **cat**. Everyone but Berenger says, "Well, of all things!" Berenger blows his nose and agrees that the creature looked like a rhinoceros.

When everyone but Berenger says "Well, of all things," it starts to show the role language plays in signaling conformity. In this case, Berenger's language differs from everyone else's, reinforcing that he's more individualistic, while the others' inability to formulate anything new suggests that they've all cleaved to one particular view of the situation. Repeating the same phrase also begins to make the words mean less—there's only so many times that they can repeat the phrase "Well, of all things" before it's meaningless.

The Housewife admits that she was scared as the Grocer gives the woman her basket. The Old Gentleman asks if he can help pick up the Housewife's items, but he leers at her. She accepts his help as the Logician declares that fear is irrational. The Old Gentleman introduces the Housewife to the Logician, and the Logician accepts the **cat** while the Housewife purchases wine from the Grocer and then begins to repack her basket. The Grocer snidely notes that he carries the same vegetables that she bought elsewhere and suggests that if she bought from him, she wouldn't have to cross the street and put herself in danger. The Housewife takes her cat back, refuses the Old Gentleman's offer to walk her home, and leaves. The Logician decides to tell the Old Gentleman what a syllogism is and the two leave.

When the Logician insists that fear isn't logical, it situates him as an individual who believes that logic rules everything, even human emotions. This is something that Berenger will push back on more succinctly later, but at this point, it begins to show that a person like the Logician, who acts like an authority figure, can begin to shape how others think of something—in this case, for the worst. Insisting that someone can reason their way out of fear may not sound too bad, but the play overwhelmingly shows that this is an effective way to subdue people's very valid emotions.

At the same time, Jean remarks to Berenger and the Proprietor that the **rhinoceros** was amazing. He asks Berenger what he thought, but Berenger doesn't know what Jean is talking about. Berenger orders two cognacs as Jean incredulously asks again what Berenger thought. Berenger doesn't know what he's supposed to say. Jean insists that the rhinoceros was extraordinary and then sneers at Berenger when the cognacs arrive. Berenger mutters that he ordered water. Jean resumes his exclamations about the rhinoceros, but Berenger says it's miles away by now and agrees with Jean that it shouldn't be allowed as he yawns. Jean snaps at Berenger to cover his mouth.

Jean's incredulity that Berenger doesn't want to discuss the rhinoceros again shows that Berenger is, for him, uncomfortably and irredeemably different—even the Proprietor is willing to talk about the rhinoceros, as are the Old Gentleman and the Logician. When combined with the admonition for Berenger to cover his mouth when he yawns, this reads entirely as Jean taking issue with Berenger's unwillingness to conform to what Jean believes is correct.

Berenger points out that the **rhinoceros** won't get them where they are, but Jean insists that they protest to their town council. Berenger yawns, hurriedly covers his mouth, and suggests that the rhinoceros escaped from the zoo. Jean accuses Berenger of daydreaming, and when Berenger insists that he's awake, Jean says it doesn't matter—dreaming awake and dreaming asleep are the same thing. Regardless, it's silly to suggest that a rhinoceros escaped from the zoo since there isn't one in the town. Indifferently, Berenger suggests that the rhinoceros escaped from a circus and enters a public toilet. Jean spits that the council banned traveling performers years ago. Berenger, yawning, says that maybe it's been hiding in the nearby swamps. This incenses Jean—their town is dry and arid.

While Berenger's suggestions don't seem that far fetched, Jean's explanations suggest that in reality, they are—showing that trying to make sense of where the rhinoceros came from may be futile, while the rhinoceros itself might be as absurd as the idea that the rhinoceros has been hiding in a nonexistent swamp for years. Jean, in essence, wants to be logical, but Berenger's attempts at logic fall flat in Jean's eyes, and Jean offers no better explanations. This begins to set up the idea that there's a limit to how much logic can do or prove, especially when something—like a renegade rhinoceros—simply defies logic.

Jean tells Berenger that he lives in a haze of alcohol, which Berenger morosely agrees with. With a sigh, Berenger says that the **rhinoceros** could've hidden under a stone or nested on a branch. Jean isn't amused and accuses Berenger of being unserious, but Berenger motions to his head and says that it's just because of how he feels today. Jean insists that Berenger is like this every day, but when Berenger tries to defend himself, Jean says that he hates it when Berenger makes fun of him. Berenger emotionally insists that he isn't making fun of Jean, but Jean maintains that he is. Berenger calls Jean obstinate, which offends Jean even more—he believes that Berenger is calling him a mule. He says that Berenger has no mind but insists that even people without minds can think and say insulting things.

In this case, telling Berenger that he's an alcoholic is an effective way for Jean to discredit his friend and make himself feel better about his argument—even though Jean isn't even making an argument at all, except that Berenger is a failure at life. When Jean turns this back on Berenger and accuses Berenger of insulting him, it makes it clear that Jean cares more about being right and in charge than he does about having an actual conversation. All of this shows that Jean isn't a particularly nice or moral person—or for that matter, truly interested in having intellectual conversations between equals.

Jean asks again why Berenger is being so insulting and why he's being contrary—it's dangerous for a renegade **rhinoceros** to run around on a Sunday when the streets are full of people. Berenger begins to point out that people are in church and therefore safe, but Jean points out petulantly that it's also market time. With a sigh, Berenger admits that it didn't occur to him how dangerous it could be. He agrees that the rhinoceros shouldn't be allowed, but suggests that this is a silly reason to fight—especially since the rhinoceros is gone. He picks up his drink and asks to talk about anything else, but Jean uses his cane to stop Berenger from drinking. Jean takes a large drink from his own glass and Berenger timidly tries to drink.

Again, Jean just wants to be right. His argument runs right past the fact that a rhinoceros running rampant in a provincial French town should raise immediate questions about how it got there and what they're going to do about it, rather than an argument over whether or not it's dangerous. Skipping the question of how the rhinoceros got there in the first place situates the play in the absurd, especially since the characters themselves don't find the rhinoceros especially absurd.

As Daisy arrives at the grocery store and begins to speak to the Grocer, Berenger sighs and agrees to not drink. He recognizes Daisy's laugh and spills his drink on Jean's pants. Jean scolds Berenger for being clumsy, but Berenger hides in the restroom and says that he doesn't want Daisy to see him like this. Daisy heads away down the street and Berenger mops at Jean's pants. Jean says that Daisy looks nice and that this is proof that Berenger is digging his own grave by drinking like this.

In Jean's eyes, Berenger's interest in Daisy means that Berenger does want to quit drinking and join him in being a part of polite society, as she represents the possibility of having a normal, stable, family life. More broadly, this speaks to the fact that conforming is, for a lot of people, something that's attractive—even Berenger seems to want to have a normal romantic relationship.

Berenger admits that he doesn't like the taste of alcohol, but that he drinks so he's not scared. He can't articulate what he's scared of, but he feels out of place in the world and alcohol helps him calm down and relax. Jean accuses Berenger of trying to escape, and Berenger doesn't refute it—he says that he's tired of dragging his body around. He's constantly conscious of his body and says it feels like lead. Berenger says that he's not even sure if he is himself, but when he drinks, he recognizes who he is. Jean lifts his cane and declares that he weighs more than Berenger does, but he feels light as a feather.

Thinking of Berenger's alcoholism as escapism reinforces how oppressive and difficult Berenger finds the world, but it also shows that he's come up with a way to get through it and function relatively normally, the health risks of alcoholism aside. Jean demonstrates a shocking lack of empathy or understanding here, but it's worth keeping in mind that because Jean fits in and doesn't seem to struggle to do so, he likely has no idea how hard it is for someone like Berenger to follow suit.

The Logician and the Old Gentleman return to the café. Jean stands and turns, accidentally bumping into the Old Gentleman and then falling into the Logician's arms. They all apologize, and then the Logician gives his companion an example of a syllogism: if a cat has four paws, and if Isidore and Fricot both have four paws, then Isidore and Fricot are both cats. The Old Gentleman notes that his dog also has four paws, which the Logician says indicates that the dog is a cat. The Old Gentleman says that logic is beautiful, but the Logician warns that he can't abuse it. At the same time, Jean tells Berenger that he's strong because he has moral strength and isn't an alcoholic. He says that alcohol is Berenger's problem.

The Logician's syllogism (a type of logical proof) shows how easy it is to warp logic and turn it into something entirely absurd—clearly, cats and dogs are entirely different species. However, because the Logician is an authority figure, at least to the Old Gentleman, the Old Gentleman is willing to go along with this and believe what the Logician says. This has real-world parallels with the rise of the Nazis, as the party came to power in part because people trusted their leaders and, in doing so, bought the ideas the Nazis espoused.

Berenger morosely says that he's not sure he has the strength to keep living; he feels oppressed by solitude *and* by people. Jean insists that this isn't logical. Berenger declares that life is abnormal, which Jean refutes, but Berenger points out that there are increasingly more dead people than living people. With a huge laugh, Jean says that the dead don't exist and asks Berenger how he can feel oppressed by individuals that don't exist. Berenger wonders if *he* exists, and Jean says he doesn't—he doesn't think. The Logician gives another syllogism: all cats die, and Socrates is dead; therefore, Socrates is a cat. The Old Gentleman is delighted—he has a cat named Socrates. They revel in the fact that logic showed them that the historical Socrates was a cat.

Jean's retort that Berenger doesn't exist because he doesn't think is a nod to Descartes's "I think, therefore I am." By bringing in references to historical philosophers and intellectuals, including to Socrates, Ionesco seeks to make the case that while these thinkers may have done great things, there's really only so far a person can take logical arguments before they become absurd and cease to make sense. This is the case with the Logician's (incorrect) conclusion that Socrates was a cat.

Jean insists that Berenger is being silly: he's clearly interested in Daisy and is clearly ashamed for her to see him drunk. He asks if Berenger expects Daisy to be attracted to him in his state. Berenger admits that he believes that Daisy has a crush on their coworker Dudard, who is qualified and has a future ahead of him. Berenger says that he has no future. Jean declares that Berenger needs to put up a fight for his life, using the weapons of patience, culture, and the mind. Berenger yawns. Jean suggests that Berenger turn himself into an intellectual, which Berenger says isn't so easy for him. Jean tells him to concentrate and lists that Berenger must dress, shave, and wear clean shirts. He points to his own clothes and tells Berenger to wear a tie, a coat, and well-polished shoes.

Here, Berenger shows that he recognizes that conformity is attractive to plenty of people, including to Daisy. In other words, this suggests that there's really no valid reason for Jean to be so harsh on Berenger—Berenger is well aware of where he's failing, especially since he has both Jean and Dudard to look up to as examples of successful conformity. By insisting that Berenger can improve himself by becoming cultured, Jean insists that Berenger can rely on logic to improve—which, of course, ignores that Berenger is struggling emotionally and mentally and can't just think himself out of it.

While Jean and Berenger speak, the Logician and the Old Gentleman continue with their logic exercises. The Logician asks how many paws the cats have if the cat Isidore has four paws and if the cat Fricot has four paws. The Old Gentleman puzzles out that the cats have eight paws, and the Logician says that there are no limits to logic. Then, the Logician asks how many paws each cat has if he takes two paws away. The Old Gentleman is stumped, but the Logician says that it's simple, tells the Old Gentleman to concentrate, and grouses that he has to tell his companion everything. He gives the Old Gentleman paper to do the math.

The Logician said mere moments ago that there are *limits to logic, since it shouldn't be abused. By contradicting himself here, the Logician trains the Old Gentleman to take him seriously no matter how absurd or wrong what he says is. The play suggests that this is one of the ways that fascist leaders begin to manipulate people and gain solid footholds, even if what they promote is, to others, undeniably wrong.*

Berenger listens attentively as Jean tells him that he has talent, he just needs to involve himself in cultural and literary events. Berenger complains that he doesn't have much spare time, but Jean points out that they have the exact same amount of time—they both work eight hours per day, but not on Sundays and not for three weeks during the summer. Instead of drinking to excess, he should be fresh and eager, and in his free time, he should visit museums, read, and go to lectures. If he does this, Berenger will be cultured in no time. Meanwhile, the Logician and the Old Gentleman have much the same conversation about logic: the Old Gentleman insists that he doesn't have time to think, but the Logician points out that they have the same amount of free time.

By having Berenger and Jean, and the Logician and the Old Gentleman all have essentially the same conversation, the play illustrates both how malleable language is and that it's not especially out of the ordinary for someone to act and speak like the Logician and Jean do. Telling Berenger to essentially become an involved intellectual shows that Jean places a great deal of importance on being smart and logical, while the fact that his language mirrors that of the Logician implies that underneath, they're both very similar.

The Old Gentleman deduces that he could have one cat with four paws and the other with two, and one cat with five paws and another with one paw. He asks if they'd still be cats. The Logician isn't concerned, so the Old Gentleman continues that one cat could have six paws and the other zero. Jean suggests that Berenger spend his money on seeing avant-garde plays, such as those by Ionesco. Berenger says that Jean is right, and he promises to do better and be better. The Logician notes that if one cat has six paws, it'd be "specially privileged," while the other cat with no paws would be underprivileged. The Logician says this "would be unjust and, therefore not logical"—"Logic means Justice."

Importantly, the Old Gentleman has a point—per the Logician's propositions, a creature with more or less than five paws isn't a cat; it's something else. His willingness to go along with the Logician's lack of concern again illustrates how authority figures can use their power to manipulate others into believing things that aren't actually true—all while making their arguments seem logical and reasonable.

Berenger invites Jean to go to the theater with him later, but Jean insists that he can't come—he's already promised to have a drink with friends, and he always keeps his promises. Berenger accuses Jean of setting a bad example as the Logician praises the Old Gentleman for "making progress in logic." The sound of a galloping and trumpeting **rhinoceros** gets increasingly louder as Jean insists that his drinking isn't a habit, while the Old Gentleman says that a cat with no paws wouldn't be able to catch mice. The Logician shouts that a pawless cat should be able to catch mice, since catching mice is in the cat's nature.

Now that Jean needs to introduce some moral ambiguity into his argument in order to justify drinking, he won't let Berenger take the space he formerly occupied as single-minded and righteous—which reads only as controlling. That people don't immediately hear the rhinoceros speaks to the fact that the rhinoceros and the fascism it represents isn't on people's radar yet; it's still just a blip and people don't know yet to look carefully for it.

Jean shouts that he's a moderate person, and suddenly everyone becomes aware of the noise of the **rhinoceros**. Everyone but Berenger stands and shouts "Oh, a rhinoceros!" in quick succession. Berenger remarks on it and the Waitress drops glasses. The Proprietor grouses that the rhinoceros is no reason to break glasses as Daisy notices the rhinoceros. Berenger hides as everyone runs and cries out "Well, of all things!" People hear pitiful meowing, and the Housewife cries. She runs to the café cradling her dead and bloody **cat**. The rhinoceros ran it over. The Grocer, the Old Gentleman, Daisy, and the Logician comfort the Housewife as the Waitress cleans up.

Again, when everyone shouts the exact same thing in quick succession, it dilutes the meaning of what they're saying—and what they're saying isn't particularly meaningful or insightful to begin with, which again shows that language has limits.

The Grocer's Wife and Jean declare that this is taking things too far. Meanwhile, Daisy notices Berenger, causing him to hide in the restroom. The Old Gentleman and the Logician remind the Housewife that **cats** are mortal and she should've expected this, while the Proprietor demands that the Waitress pay for the glasses she broke. Several people ask "Well, what do you think of that?" and the Proprietor calls for water and brandy for the Housewife. The Housewife refuses the brandy. People wonder if the same **rhinoceros** went past twice, but Jean insists it was two different rhinoceroses: the first one was an Asian rhinoceros and had two horns; the second one was an African rhinoceros and had one horn. Berenger insists that this is silly since the rhinoceroses went past so quickly.

The Old Gentleman and the Logician's insistence that the Housewife should've expected this tries to minimize the tragedy of the cat's death. In this way, the play begins to show how dangerous movements begin small—in this case, by killing pets—and then gradually grow in scale and in violence. These initial strikes function to desensitize people to the violence and to the movement itself. The argument about the species and number of horns on the rhinoceroses further obscures the issue of the fact that this rhinoceros was violent, showing again that logic can be a distraction.

The Old Gentleman, Daisy, and the Proprietor force the Housewife to drink the brandy and speak to her as though the brandy will cure her grief, but the Housewife continues to grieve for her **cat**. Berenger insists that the **rhinoceros** wasn't running in a position conducive to seeing its horns, but Jean insists that his mind is clear and he could see and calculate. He asks if Berenger is accusing him of spouting nonsense and Berenger agrees that he is. The Grocer's Wife offers the Housewife one of her cats, but the Housewife cries harder. Jean spits that he never speaks nonsense, and Berenger accuses him of being a "pedant"—and of being wrong, since Asiatic rhinoceroses have one horn and African rhinoceroses have two. Everyone turns their attention to Jean and Berenger.

For the Housewife, her cat was clearly a beloved member of her family and not a companion that's easily replaced—rejecting the Grocer's Wife's cat makes this clear that not all cats are the same. Offering up another cat to replace the first suggests that there are others who don't see cats necessarily as the close companions like the Housewife does. If the cat symbolizes marginalized individuals who are the first to get hurt in the face of dangerous regimes, the Grocer's Wife's offer shows that those people are in danger because others don't think that they're especially worthy of protection or care and are instead expendable.

The Housewife continues to cry over her **cat** as Jean accuses Berenger of having two horns and calls him an "Asiatic Mongoloid." As the Proprietor warns Berenger against making a scene, the Old Gentleman points out that the Grocer is a tradesman and should be able to settle the dispute over the **rhinoceros** horns. Berenger belligerently says that he has no horns and that "Asiatics" are people too, just like they are. The Old Gentleman, the Waitress, and Daisy all agree as the Housewife says that her cat was gentle, just like a person. Jean angrily screams that they're yellow and makes to leave, deliberately excluding Berenger from his farewell. The Old Gentleman and the Waitress discuss that they both have or have had Asian friends, but they wonder if their friends weren't actually Asian.

To contemporary readers, "Asiatic" sounds outdated and is extremely offensive, in part because the word itself obscures the fact that it refers to people (unlike saying "Asian people," for example). This all actually supports Berenger's argument that Jean's slur is ineffective and rude on a number of levels—while he means it to be dehumanizing (and it is), the people he disparagingly likens Berenger to are people like any other. This situates Berenger as someone willing to stand up for everyone, even if it makes him the odd man out.

Jean turns back and again shouts that Asian people are yellow. Berenger insists that in any case, Jean's face is bright red. The Housewife continues to sob over her **cat** and Jean quickly leaves. The Old Gentleman tells the Grocer that Asian people have skin of all colors as Jean returns briefly to call Berenger a drunkard. Daisy tells Berenger that he shouldn't have made Jean so angry as the Proprietor tells the Waitress to fetch a coffin for the cat. Berenger insists that it wasn't his fault, while the Old Gentleman and the Grocer continue to discuss whether Asian or African **rhinoceroses** have one horn.

Especially when Daisy tells Berenger that it's his fault for making Jean mad, the play shows how the trappings of conformity and of polite society make it difficult to stand up to dangerous movements like fascism—calling it out isn't considered polite. Again, the pointless argument over the species of rhinoceros detracts attention away from the violence of the rhinoceros, making it more likely that people will accept the violence as normal.

The Waitress and Daisy gently help the Housewife into the café to put her **cat** in a box. The Grocer, the Grocer's Wife, and the Proprietor all agree that the Asian **rhinoceros** has one horn and the African rhinoceros has two. Berenger mutters to himself that he never should've contradicted Jean, but he also notes that Jean can't stand being wrong. The other group, meanwhile, wonders if it's possible that all the rhinoceroses are actually the same one. Berenger thinks that Jean has been good to him, but he wonders why Jean is so obstinate and asks the group why Jean tries to impress people with his knowledge and never admits that he's wrong. At this, the Old Gentleman menacingly asks if Berenger has proof that one rhinoceros had one horn and the other had two.

When the Old Gentleman turns on Berenger asking for proof, it shows that he's taken the Logician's lessons to heart. Knowing something is true—in this case, that Jean was being rude, and that the question about rhinoceros horns is silly and pointless—doesn't mean a thing when a person like the Old Gentleman demands that someone justify their beliefs with logic that makes sense to them. The Old Gentleman also has been learning from the Logician, so his grasp of logic is fluid and can likely prove whatever he'd like.

Berenger backs away, taken aback, but then says that he thinks there was only one **rhinoceros**. The Proprietor brings the conversation back to the question of whether or not the African or Asian rhinoceros has one horn, and the Old Gentleman declares that they must figure this out. The Logician stands, introduces himself, and offers Berenger his card, and then says that he's going to help. He points out that the real question is whether or not there was only one rhinoceros. He notes that they may have seen one rhinoceros with a single horn, two rhinoceroses with a single horn, one rhinoceros with two horns, two rhinoceroses with two horns, or one of each. Except for Berenger, the crowd follows this closely.

The Logician's card signals clearly that he's an authority figure that everyone here should listen to. As this powerful and presumably knowledgeable person, the Logician can continue to shift people's attention away from the stampeding rhinoceros and the implications of the creature's presence to a pointless and absurd argument about horns. Everyone's fascination with the Logician and their willingness to follow his words shows that everyone else is willing to conform and fall into line, no matter how silly that line is in an objective sense.

The Logician says that it's possible that a **rhinoceros** with two horns may have lost one between its two runs through town and stops Berenger from interrupting. According to the Logician, if they could establish that they saw a rhinoceros with one horn first and then a rhinoceros with two horns, they could prove that there were two rhinoceroses—a horn doesn't grow in only a few minutes. This would mean that there's one Asian and one African rhinoceros. Berenger agrees that this is clear but says it doesn't answer the question. The Logician knowingly says that it obviously doesn't answer the question, but they're now asking the *right* question. He leaves.

The "right" question, per the Logician, is one that distracts people from the fact that at some point, they're going to have to contend with a couple of renegade and violent rhinoceroses in their town—the number of horns don't matter in this case. Logic, then, is something that the Logician uses to get people interested in something that doesn't really matter, thereby giving the rhinoceroses time and space to spread and, within the world of the play, infect others.

The Grocer says that it may be logical, but the real question is if they're all going to allow **rhinoceroses** to run down their **cats**, whether they're Asian or African. The Housewife, Daisy, and the Waitress come out of the café with the box and then head down the street. The Proprietor says that they won't stand for *anything* running down their cats, and the Grocer agrees. Berenger says to himself that he shouldn't have fought with Jean. He orders a brandy and thinks that he's too upset to go to the museum—he'll "cultivate his mind" another time.

While the Grocer does bring things around to a more appropriate and useful question, it's still telling that everyone goes along with him—it suggests that this is still herd or mob mentality at work and therefore, isn't as genuine. Berenger's return to brandy, meanwhile, reinforces that he's the odd man out and is willing to think for himself, even if that means using alcohol to do so.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Botard, Daisy, Dudard, and Mr. Papillon enter their office from a trapdoor in the floor. Botard is elderly and looks knowledgeable, Dudard is young and looks like he has a promising future, while Mr. Papillon is properly dressed and wears a dark suit with a rosette from the Legion of Honor. Botard insists that the **rhinoceroses** are nonsense, even when Daisy says that she saw it and Dudard points out that it was in the paper. He offers the paper to Mr. Papillon, who reads the one-line article. It says that in the church square, a pachyderm trampled a **cat** to death. Botard says he doesn't believe journalists because they lie. As a former teacher, he likes to see things with his own eyes, since he has a methodical mind.

It's important to note that in the stage notes, Ionesco notes that Botard looks knowledgeable. This recognizes that in some cases, it's enough for a person to look *like they know what they're talking about or appear trustworthy to be able to gain followers. At this point, Botard looks more like Berenger in that he's an outlier (since he doesn't take the article seriously and asks for proof of the rhinoceros), but his arguments are so out of line that it suggests that he's susceptible to the dangerous rhinoceros movement.*

Dudard asks what anyone's methodical mind has to do with this and Daisy insists that the article is correct and precise. Botard says the article isn't precise—"pachyderm" can refer to many things, and the author doesn't say what they mean by "**cat**." The cat could be male or female, and it doesn't say what breed or color it is. Botard declares that he strongly hates the color bar (segregation). Mr. Papillon points out that the color bar is beside the point, but Botard insists that it's one of the biggest issues of the age. Dudard argues that they all know this, but Botard refuses to drop it. He says that nobody should ignore an opportunity to denounce it. Impatiently, Daisy says that none of them support the color bar; this is an issue of a cat being run down by a **rhinoceros**.

Bringing up segregation gives Botard the opportunity to make himself look trustworthy, since he supports getting rid of racist systems—but bringing it up now deflects from his unwillingness to believe the newspaper article. In this sense, Botard's deflection functions in much the same way the argument about rhinoceros species and how many horns they have did in the last scene. It gives people something to latch onto that seems right, just, and logical, when in reality, it just distracts from the truth.

Botard says that as a northerner, he thinks that the southerners have too much imagination and suggests that people are making too much of this. To settle the matter, Mr. Papillon asks Dudard if he saw a **rhinoceros** firsthand. Daisy says that she did, and Dudard says that many reliable people did. Botard snorts that they made it up. He insists that journalists will invent anything to sell papers and please their bosses. Daisy insists that she saw the rhinoceros, but Botard insults her intelligence. Daisy retorts that plenty of others saw it, but Botard calls those who saw it "work-shy loafers." Dudard points out that this happened on a Sunday, but Botard says that this is no excuse—*he* works on Sundays and has no time for priests who prevent people from earning their keep on Sundays.

Everything that Botard says here makes it clear that he's not as open minded as he'd like his coworkers to think—while the north/south divide doesn't have the same connotation in France as it might in the U.S., Botard still makes it clear that he holds prejudiced views against all sorts of people who are different than he is. The play later suggests that since he already holds views like this, he'll be more susceptible to turning into a rhinoceros, as the rhinoceroses represent power and control.

This offends Mr. Papillon, but Botard assures him that despising religion doesn't mean that he doesn't think highly of it. He then asks Daisy if she even knows what a **rhinoceros** looks like. Daisy says they're big and ugly, and Botard snorts derisively. Mr. Papillon stops the debate and asks Daisy to put the timesheet away. He laughs and turns back to the men as Berenger sneaks up the stairs. Berenger quietly greets Daisy, who allows him to sign the timesheet. She whispers that Mr. Papillon is already in and accepts Berenger's proffered flower.

Again, Botard tries to use language and logic to cover up the fact that he thinks religion is horrible. When Mr. Papillon drops that particular argument, it suggests that Botard was successful in deflecting and is learning that in this group, he can lean on incorrect arguments to get his way.

At the same time, Botard declares that he fights against ignorance everywhere he finds it, even in printing offices. Mr. Papillon says that this is going too far—neither he nor Dudard are ignorant. Daisy puts her flower in her mouth as she hangs up Berenger's things, and Botard says that what they're teaching in universities these days isn't as high quality as what a person learns at the "ordinary schools." Mr. Papillon asks for the timesheet and Daisy rushes to give it to him, taking the flower out of her mouth when he looks at her oddly.

Botard's jab against university professors is likely a jab against intellectuals as a whole—importantly, the fascist Iron Guard in Romania, which partially inspired the play, was made up of young people who were highly educated but couldn't find jobs. With this in mind, everyone save Berenger is an intellectual—and therefore, Ionesco implies, susceptible to fascism as he saw it.

Berenger greets his coworkers and Mr. Papillon asks if he saw the **rhinoceros**. Botard digs at Dudard's ribs and says that the universities just churn out intellectuals with no practical knowledge, as Berenger answers that he did see the rhinoceros. Daisy says that she's clearly not mad then, but Botard insists that Berenger is just being chivalrous to make Daisy feel better. Mr. Papillon cautions Botard to not twist facts, but Berenger again affirms that they saw the rhinoceros. Behind Berenger, Botard says that Berenger must've thought he saw one and mimes drinking.

Because Berenger is both not *an intellectual and* is *an alcoholic, Botard sees no reason to take him seriously. Ironically, Botard just criticized university-educated intellectuals and praised those who go through "ordinary schools" and learn practical knowledge that way, which perhaps should apply to the non-intellectual Berenger.*

Berenger says that others saw the **rhinoceroses** and there might have been two. Daisy insists that it had one horn, and Botard scoffs. Dudard says that he heard it had two horns, but Mr. Papillon tells them to get to work. Berenger can't say if he saw one or two rhinoceroses or how many horns they had. Botard insists that he's not being offensive, but there have never been rhinoceroses in France except for in schoolbook illustrations. He declares that the rhinoceros is a "flower of some journalist's imagination," and Berenger jokes that calling a rhinoceros a flower seems out of place. Daisy laughs.

At this point, it's possible for both Berenger and Botard to make jokes about the rhinoceroses—while the audience likely knows that they're serious, there's no real reason for anyone in the play to think that the one or two rhinoceroses sighted yesterday are going to multiply and take over. These jokes then flag that nobody is taking the rhinoceroses seriously and that people can still make light of the situation.

Botard stubbornly declares that the **rhinoceros** is a myth, just like flying saucers, and ignores Mr. Papillon. Dudard insists that a **cat** was trampled in front of witnesses and motions to Berenger, but Botard says that Berenger is a poor witness. Botard continues that this is just like religion: "collective psychosis" and the "opiate of the people." Daisy says that she believes in flying saucers, and Mr. Papillon threatens to cut their wages if they don't stop arguing. He tells Dudard to get to work on his report on an alcoholic repression law and for Berenger and Botard to finish correcting the proofs for the new wine trade control regulations. Mr. Papillon goes into his office.

Here, Botard quotes Karl Marx when he says that religion is the "opiate of the people." The fact that all of Mr. Papillon's employees are working on reports about controlling alcohol bring Berenger's alcoholism back to the forefront of the reader or audience's mind. Controlling alcohol like this is a reminder that as an alcoholic, Berenger is an outsider and that the mainstream will try to incorporate him in by controlling his alcohol consumption and therefore, his ability to escape.

Berenger and Botard begin going through their proof out loud, but they quiet down when Dudard asks. Out of the blue, Botard says the **rhinoceros** thing is all a hoax and is just propaganda. Daisy says again that she saw the rhinoceros, but the men ignore her. Dudard asks what this is supposed to be propaganda for, but Botard asks Dudard to tell him since he's involved. Dudard angrily says that he's not a part of an underground organization. Berenger and Daisy try to calm the angry men as Mr. Papillon rushes back in with the timesheet. Everyone takes a seat silently and Mr. Papillon confirms that Mr. Bœuf is out. Mr. Papillon grouses that if this continues, he'll have to fire Mr. Bœuf.

Botard's accusation comes entirely out of nowhere, which shows that Botard is a suspicious person who's susceptible to believing conspiracy theories—or inventing them himself and repeating them until they seem true enough.

Just then, Mrs. Bœuf comes through the trapdoor. She's teary and out of breath. Mr. Papillon asks where her husband is and Mrs. Bœuf says that he's out of town and has the flu. She hands Mr. Papillon a telegram and asks for a glass of water. Dudard and Berenger help her into a chair while Daisy fetches water. Mr. Papillon says that it's annoying that Mr. Bœuf is indisposed, but it's no reason for Mrs. Bœuf to work herself up. Mrs. Bœuf says that she's in this state because a **rhinoceros** chased her here and it's waiting at the bottom of the stairs. They hear a crash from below and the stairs collapse. The rhinoceros trumpets. Daisy and Mrs. Bœuf shriek and scream.

The presence of yet another rhinoceros shows the characters that this is truly something that they can't ignore—while the fact that this one chased Mrs. Bœuf and scared her so much, and that it destroyed the staircase, represents an escalation of violence. While the first rhinoceros made dust and the second killed a cat, this one is now taking things a step further by destroying property and chasing people.

Botard, Dudard, and Mr. Papillon look down as Berenger comforts Mrs. Bœuf. Botard insists it's an illusion and Dudard calls Berenger to look. The **rhinoceros** circles down below, bellowing. Dudard says it seems like it's looking for someone. Finally, Botard admits that he can see something, but Mr. Papillon confirms that it's definitely a rhinoceros. Berenger says that it has two horns, but he doesn't know whether it's Asian or African. Mr. Papillon remarks that it's a good thing it demolished the staircase, as he's been asking management to fix it for a while now. He says that he knew it was going to happen, but Daisy rolls her eyes.

When Mr. Papillon rationalizes that the rhinoceros destroying the staircase is a good thing, it mirrors how at first, dangerous movements, fascist or otherwise, can look as though they're going to shake things up and bring positive change—but that this outlook ignores the fact that the movement itself is still violent and troubling in a variety of ways. Refocusing the argument on rhinoceros species shows that this is something that distracts from the violence.

Berenger asks his coworkers if the Asian or the African **rhinoceros** has only one horn. Daisy wonders what the rhinoceros wants and speaks comfortingly to it, but Dudard grabs her and cautions her to not get any closer. The rhinoceros bellows horribly as Berenger asks Botard which species of rhinoceros has two horns. Botard asks incredulously how this is possible in a "civilized country," but Daisy asks him if it exists or not. Botard declares that it's a plot and accuses Dudard of responsibility. When Dudard asks why, Botard furiously says that "the little people" always take the blame.

Now that Botard is faced with the inarguable fact that the rhinoceros exists, he's left wondering how this happened—which, since World War II, has been a question asked by people the world over about how the Nazis came to power. Daisy's desire to comfort the rhinoceros and the attempts to rationalize it offer some clues: people sympathized and rationalized, which made it possible for harmful ideologies to take hold.

Mr. Papillon notes that they're in a horrible place without stairs and Daisy asks how they'll get down. Jokingly, Mr. Papillon strokes her face and says that he'll carry her down. Daisy moves away. Mrs. Bœuf stares down the trapdoor at the trumpeting rhinoceros and then cries out that the rhinoceros is Mr. Bœuf. The rhinoceros trumpets violently but tenderly, and Mr. Papillon declares that Mr. Bœuf is fired now. Dudard and Daisy wonder whether Mr. Bœuf is insured as Botard dramatically says that he's reporting this to his union and won't abandon a colleague. Mrs. Bœuf begins to perk up and says that her husband is calling her. Botard invites her to join the union committee and promises support.

Discovering that the rhinoceros is Mr. Bœuf reveals that the rhinoceroses aren't just wild animals—they're these people's friends, coworkers, and spouses. This starts to show that harmful ideologies don't just corrupt people who are obvious villains; they very easily draw in everyday citizens by appearing rational and superior, even if in reality, they're violent.

Mr. Papillon grouses that work will be delayed and asks if the post is delayed, too. Daisy snaps that she doesn't care; she wants to know how they'll get out of the office. Mr. Papillon points to the window, and Berenger suggests they call the fire department. Mr. Papillon sends Daisy to make the phone call as Mrs. Bœuf rises suddenly and declares that she can't desert Mr. Bœuf. Gently, Mr. Papillon says that she's justified in divorcing her husband, but Mrs. Bœuf refuses. She runs to the edge of the trapdoor and pulls out of Berenger's grasp as she jumps down. Botard points out that she did her duty. Dudard and Botard watch the Bœufs ride away.

The suggestion that Mrs. Bœuf is doing her duty by joining her rhinoceros husband represents a shift in Botard's thinking. He no longer laments over how all of this happened; he now believes that it's important to support rhinoceroses. This illustrates how quickly harmful movements and ideologies can take hold, especially once someone's loved ones get involved and make it seem less violent or troubling.

Daisy announces that she had a hard time getting ahold of the fire department as Berenger says he agrees that Mrs. Bœuf's choice was moving. Mr. Papillon laments that he has to replace an employee, and Daisy says that the firemen have been called out for other **rhinoceroses**—as many as 32 have been reported, but they're on their way. Botard insists that 32 is an exaggeration, but he seems unsure.

That there are at least 32 other rhinoceroses running around town makes it clear that this is an epidemic, not something unique or contained. The quick spread speaks to the effectiveness of the logic in the previous scene to normalize the rhinoceroses.

Dudard asks Botard if he still denies that there are **rhinoceroses** about. Botard berates Mr. Papillon about violating union contracts and tells Dudard that he never denied that there are rhinoceroses—he just wanted to figure out where it came from and be able to explain it. Dudard, Daisy, and Mr. Papillon ask him to explain, but Botard says that he'll explain it one day in the future. In a horrible whisper, Botard says he knows who's responsible and plans to expose the whole plot. This confuses everyone, but Botard continues and says that only hypocrites pretend to not understand what's happening—and "they" won't get away with it easily.

What Botard says makes no sense, but by continuing to insist that he's being sensible, logical, and just trying to explain things, Botard is able to convince himself that he's in the right, which becomes important later when he ultimately becomes a rhinoceros himself. Creating some nebulous and nefarious "they" also makes it easy for Botard to point fingers, since it's much harder to accuse someone's colleagues, like Mr. Bœuf, of doing something awful.

The firemen arrive. The men decide that they can't come back to work, since management will be responsible if someone gets hurt on the stairs. The firemen help Daisy down through the window and Mr. Papillon calls after her to come to his house to type tomorrow. He turns to Dudard and Botard and tells them that work will resume soon. Botard replies that they'll be exploited until they die. Firemen help Mr. Papillon down and then Botard. As Botard descends, he says that he's going to get to the bottom of this and will prove that Dudard is responsible. Dudard invites Berenger to have a drink, but Berenger says he's meeting Jean to apologize for their argument.

Botard's insistence that the company will continue to exploit him provides some reasoning for why he eventually becomes a rhinoceros—just as Berenger turns to alcohol, turning into a rhinoceros represents a form of escapism from the nine-to-five grind that, Botard suggests, oppresses everyone. The oppressiveness of this system is especially apparent when Mr. Papillon is so insistent on getting everyone back to work as soon as possible when there are much bigger concerns than work.

ACT 2

Jean lies in bed in his darkened bedroom, coughing. He doesn't answer when someone knocks. Berenger calls for Jean, but Jean doesn't recognize his voice until Berenger announces himself. Jean looks to be in a horrible temper as he gets up, unlocks the door, and then crawls back into bed before allowing Berenger inside. Both are surprised that the other isn't at work, and they remark that they didn't recognize the other's voice. At Jean's invitation, Berenger sits. Berenger apologizes for getting upset yesterday. Jean doesn't remember what Berenger is talking about until Berenger mentions the two "wretched" **rhinoceroses**. Jean asks how Berenger knows they're wretched, but Berenger mumbles that he just said that. They decide to not talk about it.

When Jean and Berenger don't recognize each other's voices, it indicates that people are beginning to turn against each other and not recognize each other as the rhinoceroses take hold. Jean's desire to know how Berenger decided that the rhinoceroses are wretched suggests that he's beginning to take his intellectualism too far—it's not important whether the rhinoceroses are truly wretched or not; they're wretched to Berenger because they incited a fight between him and Jean.

Berenger apologizes for being so obstinate, angry, and stupid. Jean says it's not surprising that Berenger acted that way. He coughs and says he doesn't feel well. Berenger plays with resistance bands and says that they were both right: people have proven that there are some **rhinoceroses** with one horn and some with two He apologizes for bringing them up again and accidentally breaks a band. Jean says that he told Berenger as much and suggests that it's too bad, and then that maybe it's good. Berenger insists that it doesn't really matter if the rhinoceroses are African or Asian, but Jean sits up before Berenger can finish and say what's actually important.

Presumably, what's important to Berenger is repairing his relationship with Jean—an indicator that Berenger is a kind person who cares about his friendships, while Jean's rudeness and insistence on being right even now suggests that he's nowhere near as kind. Notably, Berenger admits that the argument over the rhinoceros species isn't actually important, but his inability to say what is important shows that the argument is still getting in the way of what is important.

Jean faces Berenger and says he doesn't feel well, but he doesn't know what's wrong. Berenger asks if Jean feels weak. At this, Jean gets up, starts doing push-ups, and says that he feels full of energy. Berenger awkwardly says that everyone experiences moments of weakness and unsuccessfully tries to join Jean in doing push-ups. He suggests that Jean is too healthy and that too much energy can unsettle one's nervous system. Jean declares that his nervous system is working perfectly in a hoarse and gravelly voice.

This is an unsettling sequence for Berenger, as he sees his friend doing, for the most part, exactly what Jean encourages Berenger to do: work out, be healthy, and be energetic. Clearly, however, something is wrong with Jean since he went from coughing and ill in bed to performing push-ups with an oddly gravelly voice, but Jean's inability to see that he's still ill suggests that he's unaware of what's coming.

Berenger suggests that Jean has a cold and asks if he has a fever. Jean stops mid-push-up to check his forehead and says that his head hurts. Berenger suspects a migraine and offers to leave. Jean asks Berenger to stay, and Berenger notes that Jean's voice is hoarse. Jean begins to perform squats and says that he's not hoarse; *Berenger's* voice changed. Berenger plays along and says he didn't notice, but it's possible. Jean wonders if Berenger can notice anything. He holds his head for a moment and says that he must have hit it. He must've done so in his sleep since doesn't remember hitting it, but when Berenger suggests that Jean dreamed it, Jean declares that he's the master of his thoughts and always thinks straight. He lies on his back and performs cycling exercises.

Jean is beginning to transform into a rhinoceros, which the play begins to reveal is a consequence of conformity by showing that Jean, who conforms, isn't exempt from this transformation. Notably, Jean insists that he's fully in control, which opens up the possibility that transforming is something that people do on purpose—though again, it's unclear if Jean knows what's happening to him. This indicates that buying into an ideology like fascism requires a person to feel in control but in reality, to cede control to the ideology instead.

Berenger assures Jean that he knows that Jean always thinks straight, but Jean remains offended. He tells Berenger to make himself clear and stop making rude observations. Berenger approaches Jean and notes that it often feels like he's bumped his head when he has a headache, but if Jean has bumped himself, he'd have a lump. Berenger studies Jean's forehead and says that there *is* a bump above his nose. Jean, offended, says that his family never has bumps. Jean feels his head and then runs to the bathroom to look. Berenger tidies the bed and when Jean returns, he remarks that Jean looks unwell and green. This offends Jean even more.

Jean is clearly the one changing into a rhinoceros, but he's not actually speaking to Berenger in a way that's markedly different from how they spoke in the first act. This begins to suggest that someone like Jean is already at risk of being taken in by harmful ideologies and fascism—he already knows how to unbalance others to make himself look perfectly balanced, even when he's obviously not.

Berenger apologizes for upsetting Jean as Jean, panting, looks through a first aid box. Noticing that Jean is panting and very hoarse, Berenger asks if Jean's throat hurts and suggests he has quinsy (tonsillitis). This again incenses Jean. Berenger takes Jean's arm to feel his pulse and declares that it's normal, so there's no reason to worry. Jean says that he's not alarmed and Berenger encourages him to rest. At this, Jean says he doesn't have time and needs to buy food. Realizing that he's barefoot, he grabs his socks and shoes and begins to put them on. Berenger insists that if Jean is hungry he can't be too sick, but it'd be best to rest. He sits next to Jean on the bed and asks if Jean has seen a doctor.

While it's entirely understandable for Berenger to want to continue suggesting ailments to Jean, doing so ignores the clear fact that Jean is ill and turning into a rhinoceros. In other words, this allows Berenger to ignore the truth of what's in front of him by trying to make Jean's behavior and symptoms look like anything else. In doing this, Berenger shows how it can be easy to excuse a loved one when they get taken in by harmful ideologies, something that Ionesco surely saw in the years leading up to World War II.

Jean says he doesn't need a doctor; he can look after himself and doctors just invent diseases. Berenger points out that after doctors invent diseases they can cure them, but Jean spits that he has confidence in veterinarians. Berenger again takes Jean's arm and notes that his veins are popping. Jean insists that this is a sign of virility. Berenger soothingly plays along but tries to examine Jean's arm more closely. Jean yanks it away and, scandalized, says that Berenger is treating him like an animal. Berenger says that Jean's skin seems to be getting greener and is hardening. Jean gets up and says that Berenger is getting on his nerves. Berenger takes a moment and then moves to the phone to call the doctor, but Jean pushes him away, tells him to mind his own business, and laughs.

As Jean discredits doctors, it mirrors how, as fascist movements take over and become fascist regimes, they work hard to discredit authority figures that in theory should be impartial and not support the regime. Further, Jean's insistence that what's happening to him is a good thing shows how a person must assure themselves that fascism or other harmful ideologies are a good thing and are helping if they want to continue.

Berenger notes that Jean is breathing hard. Jean paces around the room, picks up a magazine, and eats a page as he spits that Berenger is breathing so quietly, he might die. Berenger tells Jean to stop and reminds him that they're friends, but Jean menacingly circles Berenger and says he doesn't believe in his friendship. Jean spits that Berenger shouldn't be offended by this and continues to pace. Berenger comments that Jean is quite "misanthropic" today, but Jean only agrees and says he likes it. He scratches his back and Berenger tries to help. Berenger again tries to apologize for their argument about the **rhinoceros**, but Jean ignores Berenger and says that he doesn't hate people—they just disgust him and if they don't stay out of his way, he'll run them down. Berenger has to step aside to stay out of Jean's way.

While Jean's earlier insistence that he's strong and is just feeling odd may have seemed relatively benign, at this point he shifts to behaving truly oddly (eating the magazine) and behaving violently, which makes it clear that what's happening to him isn't a good thing. This is especially true since he's behaving violently toward Berenger, who's supposedly one of his best friends. Berenger's reminders of their friendship is an attempt to get Jean to remember that friendship, loyalty, and kindness are good things, while violence and the rhinoceroses are bad.

Hoarsely, Jean says that he's running straight for his one aim in life. Berenger comforts him and says that this is just a brief moral crisis, but Jean ignores him, unbuttons his pajama shirt, and says that his clothes are irritating. Alarmed, Berenger asks what's wrong with Jean's skin, but this only makes Jean angrier. Berenger notes that Jean's skin is leathery and even greener. Jean insists that it's weatherproof and that Berenger is just seeing things since he's drunk. Berenger insists that he didn't drink today, since he promised to reform. Jean continues to pace and says "Brrr!" Berenger stares at him, perplexed, and Jean says he felt like saying that.

Here, Berenger pays again for not fitting in when Jean insists that he doesn't know what he's talking about on account of being an alcoholic. The attempt to convince Jean that this is a "brief moral crisis" allows Berenger to try to tell himself that this is a passing phase, rather than an irreversible shift in who Jean is—suggesting that those who ended up supporting fascist regimes don't necessarily flirt with such ideas "brief[ly]," either.

Berenger tells Jean that Mr. Bœuf turned into a **rhinoceros**. Jean fans himself with his open pajama shirt and again shouts "Brrr." Berenger tries to get Jean to stop, but Jean angrily insists that he can do what he wants in his own house. Berenger backs down and Jean races to the bathroom to cool off. Berenger can hear Jean puffing and saying "Brrr," so he decides to call the doctor. Jean laughs that Mr. Bœuf was just in disguise and pokes his head out the door. He now is entirely green and has a large bump on his nose. Berenger hurriedly hangs up the phone and says that Mr. Bœuf looked quite serious. Jean insists that it's Mr. Bœuf's business.

Jean begins to make the case here that it's up to every individual to choose how they act when it comes to accepting or embracing violent ideologies. In contrast, Berenger argues through his actions to help Jean that it's up to society at large to stop fascism and the like from spreading—in this case, by calling the doctor and getting help for those who fall into it, whatever form that help might take.

Berenger muses that Mr. Bœuf couldn't have changed on purpose, but from the bathroom, Jean says that Mr. Bœuf might've done it on purpose. Berenger notes that Mrs. Bœuf had no idea, but Jean laughs at Mrs. Bœuf's expense and marches back to the bedroom, shirtless and green. Jean crows that Mr. Bœuf didn't include his wife in his decision, but Berenger says that the Bœufs were a united family. Jean mocks this and runs back to the bathroom. He shouts that Mr. Bœuf had a secret private life. Berenger says that they don't have to talk since this seems upsetting, but Jean insists that talking relaxes him. Berenger asks to call the doctor, but Jean forbids it.

As Berenger sees it, normal, respected, and rational people don't choose to become rhinoceroses (or fascists)—they must be tricked or somehow talked into giving up their humanity. This, however, is a consequence of Berenger's individuality, something that the other characters don't share with him. Berenger would *need to be convinced to become a rhinoceros, while the play shows that his friends and coworkers are far more susceptible to becoming rhinoceroses because they already habitually conform.*

Jean returns from the bathroom. He throws his pajama shirt on the bed and with difficulty, says hoarsely that no matter if Mr. Bœuf changed on purpose or not, he's probably better for it. He begins opening drawers and throwing his clothes on the floor. Berenger is shocked and picks up the clothes. Jean accuses Berenger of seeing the dark side of everything and insists that there must've been something pleasurable about turning into a **rhinoceros**. Berenger puts the clothes on the bed and says that he's certain that Mr. Bœuf didn't enjoy turning into a rhinoceros. He knows this because it's something he feels.

Jean implies here that the violence and the darkness that the rhinoceroses represent are things that are present but hidden in all people, and becoming a rhinoceros represents embracing this dark side. This also paints turning into a rhinoceros as a form of escapism, given that it might be pleasurable. Berenger's shock indicates that he's still optimistic about the human race and sees that in general, people aren't horrible.

As he scratches his back on the corner of the dresser, Jean says it's not so bad—**rhinoceroses** have the same right to life as humans do. Berenger agrees but points out that rhinoceroses still shouldn't destroy people. Jean races to the window, forcing Berenger to jump out of the way, and asks if Berenger thinks that humans' way of life is superior. Berenger insists that humans have moral standards, which often don't line up with animals' standards. Jean sweeps books off a table and declares that he's sick of moral standards and humans need to move beyond them. When Berenger asks what Jean would have instead, Jean runs around and says that he'd have nature. Berenger is aghast that Jean wants to replace moral laws with "the law of the jungle," but Jean says he'd love it. He knocks a table over.

Berenger has a point here—the animal world can be violent and cruel in a way that humans' moral standards often don't allow for. When Jean says that he'd rather have the natural "law of the jungle" than the laws and morals that humans created, it shows that as he grows closer and closer to becoming a rhinoceros (and symbolically, closer to becoming a fascist), he gradually loses his humanity, his sense of right and wrong, and his belief that people deserve to live happy and safe lives—even from rhinoceroses.

Berenger starts to say something, but Jean leaps onto the bed, cuts him off, and says that they must build their lives on new foundations of "primeval integrity." Berenger disagrees. Jean continues to move around the room and says he can't breathe. As he fixes the table and the books, Berenger gently says that Jean has to admit that humans have spent centuries coming up with philosophy and values. Jean runs to the bathroom and declares that when those values are gone, they'll all be better off. Berenger declares that this is a joke, but Jean trumpets from the bathroom. Berenger insists that he knows that Jean believes in humankind, but Jean says he doesn't want to talk about humankind. Berenger implores him to think of humanism, but Jean shouts that humanism is washed up and that Berenger is being sentimental.

Especially when Jean accuses Berenger of being sentimental, it shows that Jean believes that becoming a rhinoceros (and symbolically becoming a fascist) is the way of the future—there's no escaping it and there's no reason to refuse or stand up against it. This is, again, because Jean prides himself so much on conformity, and standing up against this disease would represent a major shift to being individualistic—which, though something the play celebrates, is still something it suggests is very hard.

Berenger moves to stand outside the bathroom door as Jean continues to say in a barely intelligible voice that Berenger is talking nonsense. Berenger incredulously asks if Jean wants to be a **rhinoceros**, but from inside the bathroom, Jean says he wouldn't mind—he's not prejudiced like Berenger. Jean says that he's all for change. Berenger says that it's not like Jean to talk like that, but he stops short when Jean returns from the bathroom. Jean is entirely green and there's a rhinoceros horn on his forehead. Jean leaps onto the bed on all fours, musses the covers, and makes odd noises. He says that he's too hot and everything itches as he rips his socks off. Jean shouts for the swamps as Berenger asks if Jean can hear him. Jean says he can hear Berenger just fine and charges at him, head down.

Insisting that Berenger is the one who is prejudiced is the final shift for Jean before actually becoming a rhinoceros, as it shows that he now believes that he's in the right and Berenger, the individualist and the voice of reason, is just a squeaky wheel in his way. When Berenger asks if Jean can hear him, it reinforces how barely human Jean is at this point because of his acceptance of the violence that rhinoceroses (and, symbolically, fascism) represent—a point made even clearer when he charges violently at Berenger.

Berenger leaps aside and Jean apologizes, but then charges into the bathroom. Berenger starts to run away but decides that he can't leave his friend. He goes into the bathroom and says that he's going to call the doctor. Jean refuses, but Berenger's attempts to calm him down fail when Jean fully turns into a **rhinoceros**. Jean threatens to run Berenger down and Berenger staggers out of the bathroom and slams the door. He shouts that he never would've thought that Jean would turn into a rhinoceros and shouts for help. A rhinoceros horn pierces the door. Outside, Berenger can see a herd of rhinoceroses and says it must not be true that the creatures are solitary. He sees them smashing benches as a rhinoceros head bursts through the window and Jean smashes down the bathroom door. Berenger runs from the rhinoceroses, screaming.

Berenger's attempt to stay with Jean and calm him down because they're friends is one of the most heroic moments of the play—and importantly, it shows that Berenger is still an extremely moral and kind person who wants desperately to help those around him, no matter his personal faults or struggles. In other words, it doesn't matter if Berenger is an alcoholic, since he still shows that he's more human and has stronger morals than Jean does. His musings about the other rhinoceroses, however, shows that he'd still like to rationalize what's happening, but it won't be successful or, for that matter, useful.

ACT 3

Berenger sleeps in his bedroom, which looks much like Jean's, though he has a dining table barring the door. **Rhinoceroses** growl outside as Berenger writhes in his sleep, shouting to someone to watch out for the horns. As a stampede passes outside, he falls out of bed and wakes up. Berenger checks his bandaged forehead and studies himself in the mirror. He sighs with relief that there's no bump. He moves around anxiously and starts to pour himself a drink, but he stops and reminds himself of his vow to be more willful. Rhinoceroses run past and Berenger pours a drink and downs it. It makes him cough, which worries him. He checks outside and then falls asleep. After a while, he hears a knock at the door. He doesn't recognize Dudard's voice.

When Berenger doesn't recognize Dudard's voice, it essentially repeats what happened in the last act. This doesn't bode well for at least one of these men—and probably for Dudard, since he, like Jean, conforms and is conventionally successful. The hordes of rhinoceroses outside make it clear that this is a pressing problem that people can no longer ignore—as the Nazis eventually were for the Germans and later, the rest of the world.

Berenger unblocks the door and lets Dudard in. They move the table aside and exchange pleasantries. Berenger apologizes for not recognizing Dudard's voice, checks out the window again, and nervously says that he's feeling a bit better. They discuss whether their voices have changed, which confuses Dudard. Berenger puts his laundry away, nervously says that voices can change, and invites Dudard to sit. He fidgets and Dudard asks if his headache is still bad. Berenger says it is, but he doesn't think he has a bump. He lifts the bandage for Dudard to see, and Dudard confirms that there's no bump. Dudard asks why there'd be a bump if Berenger hasn't bumped his head, but Berenger replies that if a person doesn't *want* to knock their head, they don't. Dudard agrees but asks why Berenger is so agitated.

The discussion about whether people can prevent hitting their heads by vowing to not *hit their heads speaks to Berenger's belief that not succumbing to becoming a rhinoceros is a matter of wills. Thus, his anxiety over not becoming a rhinoceros suggests that even if he doesn't exhibit will in the way that Jean would like (that is, by not drinking), he's still willfully resisting becoming a rhinoceros. Dudard's lack of anxiety, meanwhile, suggests that he's desensitized to the rhinoceroses and is therefore more likely to see no issue with them and eventually join them.*

Dudard declares that it must just be Berenger's migraine, but Berenger forcefully tells Dudard to not talk about migraines. Dudard says that the migraine is understandable after all the emotional turmoil, and Berenger says he can't get over it. Berenger admits that he's afraid of becoming someone else and, with Dudard's encouragement, sits down. They discuss Jean, and Berenger says that he's shocked that everyone is turning into **rhinoceroses**, but Dudard cautions him to not dramatize the situation. Berenger cuts him off and says it was awful watching his best friend transform. Dudard encourages him to not think about it as Berenger gets up to dust.

Berenger's inability to forget Jean's traumatizing transformation again speaks to Berenger's sense of duty and morality—he took it upon himself to try to keep Jean from transforming but ultimately failed. The fact that many others are turning into rhinoceroses suggests both that many people are, like Jean, throwing aside their morals to become rhinoceroses, as well as plenty others like Berenger who haven't been able to keep their loved ones from changing. This is, in short, a societal problem.

Berenger says that he can't *not* think about it. Jean was warm and he never would've thought that he'd do this to him. Dudard reminds Berenger that Jean likely didn't do this to annoy him, but Berenger says that it seemed like he did. Dudard tries to make the case that Jean would've transformed no matter who was with him, but Berenger laments that he hoped that Jean would've controlled himself. At this, Dudard accuses Berenger of thinking that he's the center of the universe. Berenger sighs, agrees, and says that this whole thing is just disturbing as he moves a plant to the table. He wonders why this is happening.

Dudard's advice to not take this sort of thing personally may be sound advice in plenty of other situations; however, given that the play is a clear critique of Nazi Germany and the Romanian Iron Guard, Ionesco sees that joining either movement was actually a moral crime that people committed against those who refused to join.

Dudard says that he's not sure, but he's been observing and has some ideas. He wonders if Jean wanted some fresh air and to relax, though this isn't an excuse. Berenger continues to tidy his room and says that he's trying to understand, but Dudard says it's not worth getting upset over. Rhinoceritis is a disease like any other, but Berenger exclaims that he's afraid of catching it. Dudard gets up and scoffs. He says that Jean was wild and eccentric, and Berenger can't judge rhinoceritis based on exceptions like Jean. He needs to consider the average cases. Berenger sees the sense of this, but he says that Jean gave lots of reasons for why he transformed. He wonders if Mr. Bœuf was mad too, but Dudard says that Mr. Bœuf certainly didn't transform to annoy Berenger. Berenger finds this both reassuring and even worse.

Even if Dudard qualifies his musings to say that wanting to relax or get fresh air isn't an excuse, he's still working very hard to rationalize why people might choose to become rhinoceroses. While doing so may be positive to a certain extent, Dudard's rationalization throughout this act merely functions to discredit Berenger's strong sense of morality and that becoming a rhinoceros is wrong, no matter what a person's reasons are for the transformation. Insisting that Jean is eccentric, meanwhile, shows that Dudard still thinks that this is happening to individuals, rather than to everyone on a much larger scale.

Rhinoceroses stampede outside and Berenger rises, nervous. Dudard pushes him back down and tells him to stop acting so obsessed; he needs to concentrate on getting better. Berenger wonders if he is immune, but Dudard points out that rhinoceritis isn't fatal and he believes it's curable if people want to be cured. Berenger worries about aftereffects, but Dudard assures him it's temporary. Dudard takes his glasses off and rubs his forehead as Berenger says again that he doesn't want to catch it and if a person doesn't want to catch it, they won't. He offers Dudard brandy, but Dudard refuses. Berenger declares that alcohol is good for epidemics, ignores Dudard saying that they don't know if it helps rhinoceritis, and reasons that Jean never drank.

Though becoming a rhinoceros is, of course, absurd and impossible in the real world, Berenger's worries about aftereffects speak to the concern that supporting fascism impacts a person for life—something that the play implies strongly is the case, no matter what Dudard says here. When Dudard rubs his forehead, it implies that Dudard will contract rhinoceritis himself, as it recalls Jean's early bump and his headache.

When Berenger drinks, he coughs. Dudard points this out but insists that it sounds like a normal cough. Berenger asks if **rhinoceroses** cough, but Dudard says that Berenger is being ridiculous. The best protection against rhinoceritis is willpower, and Berenger needs to demonstrate he has some by not drinking. Berenger insists that he's drinking purposefully and will quit when the epidemic is over, but Dudard insists that this is an excuse. Berenger says that in any case, alcohol has nothing to do with the rhinoceritis. Dudard points out that they don't know this, which alarms Berenger. Berenger declares that he's not an alcoholic, checks his forehead, and ascertains that his drink didn't hurt him, so it must be either good or benign.

Berenger's thoughts about alcohol and whether or not it's harmful shows that he's still trying hard to engage with things rationally, as Jean wanted him to—but aside from being a loose parallel to symbolize escapism from everyday life, the play gives no evidence that a person's drinking habits influence whether or not they contract rhinoceritis. Berenger is, therefore, grasping at straws.

Dudard says that once Berenger is well enough to go out, he'll abandon all his silly ideas. Berenger is horrified that he'll have to go out and meet **rhinoceroses**, but Dudard says that they're peaceful and in a way, pleasantly innocent. Berenger paces and says that the sight of the rhinoceroses upsets him, but talks himself down from getting angry. Dudard insists that this is because Berenger has no sense of humor—he needs to be detached so he can see that this is funny. Morosely, Berenger says that he feels responsible and involved, so he can't be indifferent. To this, Dudard tells him to stop judging and warns that if gets too worried, he won't be able to live.

Though Dudard finds the rhinoceroses mostly peaceful, they've already killed a cat, chased an innocent woman, and destroyed buildings and other property. By insisting that the rhinoceroses are just misunderstood and that Berenger should think it's funny, Dudard downplays the seriousness of wild animals that are proven to be destructive and violent.

Berenger says that if this had happened somewhere else, they could've read about it in the newspapers, examined it from various points of view, and organize debates with all sorts of people. It would've been interesting and instructive. However, since they're in the thick of it, it's hard to not feel connected to it. Dudard says that he's surprised by this, too, but he's starting to get used to it—though this doesn't mean that he's on the **rhinoceroses**' side. Rhinoceroses stampede and Berenger watches them, declaring again that he can't get used to it. Dudard says he must, though Berenger says he doesn't want to. Dudard asks what Berenger plans to do, and Berenger says that he's going to think about it. He might apply to speak with the mayor.

In this speech, Ionesco uses Berenger as a mouthpiece to speak to the way in which the international community didn't necessarily take the Nazis seriously until it was too late exactly because they didn't see firsthand the kind of atrocities that the Nazis committed on a daily basis. Berenger's vow to not get used to the rhinoceroses is essentially a vow to hold onto his individualism and humanity, which allows him to recognize even as he speaks to someone that he admires that the rhinoceroses are fearsome beasts.

Dudard encourages Berenger to leave the authorities to act as they see fit and suggests that Berenger has no real right to involve himself, especially since this isn't serious. He sits down again and says that it's silly to get so upset because people made a choice to change their skins. Berenger says that they have to "attack the evil at the roots," which makes Dudard laugh. He insists that it's impossible to know what's evil and what's not, since everything is a matter of "personal preferences." Dudard declares that Berenger is just worried about himself, but Berenger will never become a **rhinoceros**. Berenger says that if everyone thinks like Dudard, nobody will act. This concerns Dudard; he asks if Berenger thinks they need to involve the international community and insists they don't. Berenger says they should ask for help.

Dudard's insistence that they can't know what's evil and what's not speaks to the idea that there are different systems of morality among different people and places. Berenger implies that though there may be some room to debate the merits of this, it still doesn't excuse the widespread violence and destruction that the rhinoceroses (symbolically the Nazis and Iron Guard) are causing. He also sees clearly that if people try too hard to rationalize violence, they will, like Dudard, continue to do nothing—thereby giving those regimes even more power.

Dudard laughs and tells Berenger to calm down. Berenger thinks for a moment and agrees to change. He apologizes for keeping Dudard and asks if Dudard got his application to take sick leave. Dudard assures him that it's fine but shares that nobody's working since they haven't repaired the staircase yet. They're working on it, but workmen only work for a few days before disappearing, and they're not getting a stone staircase. Berenger grumbles about how the company refuses to change and suggests that Mr. Papillon isn't happy about this. Dudard says that Mr. Papillon retired to the country and became a **rhinoceros**. Dudard thinks it's funny. Berenger can't believe it and doesn't find it funny. Dudard says he didn't share earlier because Berenger has no sense of humor.

For Dudard, rhinoceritis is funny because he cannot accept how serious it actually is. While the genre of tragicomedy, for example, proves that tragedy can be funny, Dudard takes this a step further by refusing to understand that it's also tragic and horrific—in other words, he's closing himself off to taking a wider and more nuanced view by focusing only on the humor and not on the implications of losing his boss to rhinoceritis. Accusing Berenger of having no humor, meanwhile, continues to discredit Berenger.

Berenger laments Mr. Papillon's transformation and that Mr. Papillon gave up such a good job. Dudard says that this means that Mr. Papillon's transformation was sincere, but Berenger reasons that someone talked Mr. Papillon into it. Dudard points out that it could happen to anyone, which disturbs Berenger. He confirms that it couldn't happen to him or Dudard. Berenger asks how Botard reacted. Botard was outraged, which makes Berenger feel better. Berenger announces that he thinks Mr. Papillon had a duty to hold firm and he thinks horribly of their boss. Dudard insists that this is intolerant and suggests that Mr. Papillon just wanted to relax. Dudard eats the flower off of Berenger's plant.

The fact that so many seemingly normal people eventually followed along with the Nazis—and that the normal Mr. Papillon willingly became a rhinoceros—drives home the play's underlying idea that fascism isn't something that draws in only those who look like villains or those who are hungry for power and indiscriminate about how they get it. By insisting that everyone is susceptible, the play asks the audience to question their own thoughts and how much they conform with the mainstream.

Berenger accuses Dudard of being too tolerant, but Dudard says that it's their duty to try to understand honestly how and why this is happening using logic and scientific inquiry. Berenger spits that Dudard will soon side with the **rhinoceroses**, but Dudard denies this and says he's trying to be realistic. He believes that anything that occurs naturally can't be truly evil. Berenger is incredulous, but Dudard says that rhinoceroses are natural and coughs. His voice becomes hoarse. Berenger points out that turning into a rhinoceros is abnormal, which Dudard says is a matter of opinion. Dudard tries to encourage Berenger to understand that they can't define normality or abnormality, but Berenger says it's simple. He says that people may prove that movement isn't real, but then when a person walks, they can say like Galileo: "*E pur si muove*" ("and yet, it moves").

Berenger is, of course, right—Dudard will soon join the rhinoceroses and is becoming noticeably more tolerant of them as this act continues. When he insists that they must consider the rhinoceroses in terms of logic and science, it again exposes the ways in which both science and logic cannot always explain everything, or, on the contrary, how it can be abused to explain or prove nearly anything.

Dudard argues that this is an incorrect analogy, since Galileo proved that science was superior to dogmatism. Berenger looks lost but says that he's not even sure what this means—his words are getting mixed up, but Dudard doesn't seem to have a head at all. He declares that he doesn't care about Galileo, but Dudard says that Berenger just said that practice always wins, but only when it comes from theory. Shouting angrily, Berenger says that this proves nothing and declares this all "lunacy." Dudard says they have to define "lunacy," but Berenger says they all know what it means. He asks if the **rhinoceroses** are practice or theory. Dudard says they're both, but it's debatable. Berenger refuses to think about it.

Even if Berenger is a bit lost in his philosophical argument here, his philosophical argument as a whole is beside the point. In playing Dudard's game and attempting to rationalize why the rhinoceroses are bad, Berenger simply opens himself up to criticism and Dudard's accusations that Berenger isn't being open enough. Asking Berenger to define "lunacy" in particular suggests that Dudard is trying hard to keep this an argument he can win by keeping it philosophical instead of about morality.

Dudard tells Berenger to calm down and says that they can still discuss this peacefully. Berenger bellows angrily, says in a terrified voice that he shouldn't be like Jean, but then says he doesn't have the education that Dudard does. Regardless, he feels "intuitively" that Dudard is wrong about the **rhinoceroses**. Dudard asks him to define "intuitively." Berenger accuses Dudard of dancing around him and suggests that they contact the Logician who explained the question of the African versus Asian rhinoceroses. The noise outside grows until Berenger and Dudard can't hear each other. Berenger shakes his fist at the rhinoceroses as Dudard pulls out a cigarette and tells Berenger to be polite. The rhinoceroses run past again and Berenger notices that one is wearing the Logician's hat—the Logician is a rhinoceros.

Because of Berenger's lack of education, he's not wrong that Dudard is dancing circles around him and making it increasingly difficult for Berenger to make his point that the rhinoceroses are wrong on a moral level. Berenger has seen firsthand the violence and destruction that the rhinoceroses have caused, so he "intuitively" knows that they're bad news and doesn't have to use logic to try to understand the rhinoceroses further.

Dudard joins Berenger at the window, tells him again to be polite, and remarks that the Logician still has some individuality. Berenger shouts that he'll never join the rhinoceroses as Dudard muses that the Logician, being a logician, must have the decision carefully and "couldn't have got carried away." Dudard tells Berenger to stop shouting, since the rhinoceroses are just playing. He eats his cigarette and tries to call Berenger's attention to knocking at the door. He lets Daisy in and takes a very familiar tone with her, but Daisy wants to know where Berenger is and insists that she's just a friend to Berenger.

For Dudard, seeing the Logician—an authority figure—join the rhinoceroses impresses upon him that the rhinoceroses can't be bad, since a person he trusts and admires joined them. This makes it even more important for Dudard to force Berenger to behave politely toward the rhinoceroses, as now he knows even more people who have joined and therefore has a reason to try to impress them.

Berenger enters and greets Daisy. He hides his brandy bottle and asks if she saw that the Logician is a **rhinoceros**. She did, but she's more concerned about Berenger's health. She and Berenger ignore Dudard suggesting he might be imposing and Daisy says that Botard's a rhinoceros. Daisy says that he protested, but he changed within 24 hours of Mr. Papillon. Berenger says anxiously that anything can happen and says that someone may have lied to Daisy. Daisy insists that she saw him change, and Dudard says that everyone has the right to change their minds. Daisy says that Botard's last words were that they "must move with the times."

Learning that Botard is a rhinoceros and believes that they have to follow the tide suggests that Botard was more interested in power than anything else. Antagonizing people and threating union action was a way for him to feel powerful, just as being a rhinoceros now allows him to do the same.

Dudard approaches Daisy, puts a hand on her shoulder, and notes that he hasn't seen her since the office closed. Daisy snaps that he can call her anytime as Berenger groans about Botard's transformation. Berenger suggests that Botard's firmness was a front *and* the reason he became a **rhinoceros**—good men make good rhinoceroses. Daisy puts her basket of food on the table and Dudard hurries to help her. Berenger continues to try to make sense of Botard, but Dudard insists that Botard wasn't as "anarchic" as Berenger suggests; he followed his boss, and his "community spirit" won out.

Berenger makes an important point here; people with organizing skills or other skills important to a group effort can put them to use in a harmful movement the same as they could in a more positive one. Botard, then, may experience even more success as a rhinoceros, since it will give him a platform. This mirrors how some individuals were able to rise through the Nazi ranks because of their skills and their willingness to buy into the ideology.

Daisy begins to set the table as Berenger states that the **rhinoceroses** are "anarchic" since they're the minority. Daisy notes that the minority is growing; several family members are rhinoceroses, as are some government officials. Dudard says that it's going to spread internationally and Berenger says they need to act now before the rhinoceroses overwhelm them. Daisy invites Dudard to eat with them, but he says he doesn't want to impose and makes up an appointment. Daisy says that she had a hard time finding food, since shops close when the owners transform and then rhinoceroses plunder them. Berenger thinks that they should round up the rhinoceroses, but Dudard and Daisy note that the animal protection league won't allow it and everyone has a relative who's a rhinoceros now.

The recognition that there's little that anyone can do to stop the spread of rhinoceritis at this point speaks to the idea that there are plenty of things to be done to stop harmful movements in their early stages, but it gets increasingly harder as the movements and ideologies gain traction. It's much harder to denounce a movement when a person knows people who are a part of it, and if the movement is successful, it's likely that there will be laws of some sort to protect them from opposition.

Berenger asks desperately how people can be **rhinoceroses**. As Daisy fetches plates, Dudard mutters that she's very familiar with Berenger's home. She starts to set the table for three and notes that she's getting used to the rhinoceroses, which stand aside for people on the street. Berenger says he can't get used to it, and Dudard muses that it might be good to try it. Suddenly, rhinoceroses and drums can be heard outside making lots of noise. Berenger and Dudard rush to the window and hear a wall crumbling, but dust obscures their view. Berenger sees that rhinoceroses demolished the fire station. Rhinoceros firemen march out, and other rhinoceroses swarm out of houses and windows to join the march.

At this point, the rhinoceroses reach a tipping point, and it becomes clear that the movement or illness is out of control—Daisy, Dudard, and Berenger are now in the minority. Even the firemen have become rhinoceroses, which speaks to the fact that, if left unchecked, troubling movements can infiltrate society's infrastructure.

Berenger asks how many have one horn and how many have two. Dudard says that the statisticians are surely working on it, but Berenger worries that this is happening too fast for them to know for sure. Daisy leads Berenger to the table and then tries to get Dudard to sit, but Dudard restlessly says he doesn't like tinned food and wants to eat on the grass. Berenger cautions against this and says that they can't let Dudard go, but Daisy says that they can't make him stay. Berenger reminds Dudard that men are superior to **rhinoceroses**, but Dudard says that he won't know for sure until he tries it. Dudard says that he must stand by his friends and employers and tells Berenger that he prefers the "universal family" to anything else.

The discussion about the statisticians shows again that this kind of intellectualism is futile and, in this case, impossible to do properly—especially since the statisticians are, at this point, probably rhinoceroses and aren't keeping track. Dudard shows that the desire to conform is especially strong as he insists that he needs to take the rhinoceroses seriously and begins to make the decision to join them.

Berenger tries to restrain Dudard, but Dudard says he must criticize things from the inside. He leaps onto Berenger's bed, messes the blankets, and when he turns back there's a horn on his head. Berenger tells Dudard that he's good and human, but Dudard charges the door. Daisy opens it and steps aside. Berenger calls after Dudard, and then he and Daisy watch at the window. They can't pick Dudard out from the crowd. Berenger reprimands Daisy for not trying harder to hold Dudard back, especially since he was in love with her. Daisy insists that he never said so, but Berenger insists that Dudard was shy and did this because Daisy wouldn't return his advances. He asks Daisy if she feels like chasing Dudard. Daisy insists she doesn't.

When Berenger and Daisy note that they can't identify Dudard among the rhinoceroses, it makes it clear that becoming a rhinoceros is symbolic of conformity to an extreme degree—it means giving up all of one's individuality in exchange for power and inclusion. Berenger's attempts to blame Dudard's transformation on Daisy show that he's trying to be logical still, but it's worth noting that romantic partners (or love interests) aren't responsible for their partners' bad behavior—the individual in question is.

Staring pensively out the window, Berenger notes that there's nothing but **rhinoceroses**—half with one horn, half with two—outside. He moves closer to Daisy and asks if she feels let down. Daisy says she doesn't, and Berenger puts a hand on her back. He says that he wants to comfort her and that he loves her. After a pause, Daisy asks him to shut the window. Daisy sits on the bed and Berenger says that he's afraid of nothing as long as they're together. Squatting in front of her, Berenger asks if they can be happy together. Daisy insists that they'll be fine and lets Berenger kiss her before pulling him onto the bed and putting his head in her lap. She cautions him that they can't interfere in other people's lives.

Even though this moment looks tentatively hopeful for Daisy and Berenger, Daisy still maintains that they can't control other people's choices. This suggests that even though Daisy is still on Berenger's side, she, like Dudard at the beginning of the act, is still sympathetic to the rhinoceroses and advocates for allowing people to choose to transform, no matter how violent or wrong it may be.

Berenger muses that if Dudard had stayed, he would've come between them. He says that he admires Daisy, but Daisy says that he might change his mind once they know each other better. They hear **rhinoceroses** running and Berenger says that they make Daisy seem even more beautiful. When Daisy asks if Berenger has had alcohol today, Berenger insists that he's been good. Sure that Berenger isn't lying, Daisy says that he can have a glass. She praises him for hiding his brandy so well, pours him a small glass, and refuses to give him more when he downs it in one gulp. Daisy insists that Berenger is making progress. He puts his head in her lap and says that he'll make more now that they're together.

Daisy's insistence that Berenger still watch his alcohol consumption confirms that she's still interested in conformity to some degree. This implies that she's more susceptible to falling in with the rhinoceroses, since the rhinoceroses are the ultimate form of conformity. Berenger's choice to lie to Daisy, meanwhile, shows that the draw of conformity is still strong for him.

Daisy insists that they take Berenger's bandage off and says he's being silly when he admits that he's afraid of what might be underneath. They agree to never leave each other and daydream about the walks they'll take and the things Berenger will do to "become clever." Berenger says he'll keep Daisy safe, but Daisy insists that nobody wishes them harm and they don't want to hurt anyone either. Berenger suggests that people sometimes cause harm without meaning to, like he did by not being nicer to Jean and proving that they were friends. Daisy encourages him to forget the bad memories, but Berenger insists he can't. Daisy tells him to choose the side of reality that's best for him and escape into imagination.

Again, Berenger's mention of what he's going to do to become more of an intellectual shows that at least when he has the draw of Daisy to motivate him, conforming still looks desirable and worthwhile—as long as it doesn't mean becoming a rhinoceros. Daisy's advice to forget his fight with Jean and choose a version of reality that lets him sleep at night indicates that Daisy just wants to get through this and is willing to tell herself anything so that she doesn't have to live with bad feelings.

Berenger says it's easy for Daisy to say that, which makes Daisy ask if she's enough for Berenger. She says that he'll ruin everything if he has such a bad conscience. She muses that they're good people and are better than most, but they can't feel guilty. Berenger motions out the window and notes that lots of the **rhinoceroses** started out feeling guilty. Berenger tells Daisy that she's right; they need to be happy.

Feeling guilty can be the first step toward either reforming or, in Daisy and Berenger's case, not succumbing at all. Because of this, it's telling that they're against feeling guilty, since it shows that in this one respect both of them are trying to not conform in order to feel superior and righteous.

The phone rings. Daisy fearfully tells Berenger not to answer, but Berenger suggests that it might be Mr. Papillon, Botard, Jean, or Dudard saying they've had second thoughts, or the authorities asking for help. Daisy insists that their friends will take longer to change their minds. Berenger picks up the phone and hears only trumpeting. Daisy hangs the phone up and Berenger says that the rhinoceroses are playing jokes on them now. Daisy asks what they've done to attract this as the phone rings again. She asks Berenger to pull the plug out, but he refuses and cites the telephone authorities' warning not to. Annoyed, Daisy says that Berenger will never be able to defend her if he won't do anything.

Daisy's annoyance with Berenger when he refuses to unplug the phone is understandable—in this respect, Berenger is oddly willing to do what he's told without question, even when all the evidence around him indicates that the telephone authority is no longer human. This begins to give Berenger some moral complexity, as it shows that he's definitely not infallible, especially when combined with his alcoholism and his coming treatment of Daisy.

Berenger runs to the radio and flips it on, hoping for news. He and Daisy hear trumpeting, but it doesn't stop when he turns the radio off. Terrified, Daisy asks what happening. They try to calm each other, but Daisy remarks that the **rhinoceroses** mean business. Berenger notes that the authorities joined the rhinoceroses. The noise stops, and Daisy and Berenger realize they're alone. They accuse the other of this being what they wanted as suddenly, rhinoceroses run and bellow loudly, but in a strangely musical way. The house shakes. Berenger yells out the door for the upstairs neighbors to be quiet, but Daisy insists they won't listen. Terrified, Berenger leads Daisy to the bed and promises to keep her safe. Daisy suggests that it's their fault, but Berenger says they can't think that way.

Here, fear turns Berenger and Daisy against each other. It's clear that neither of them intended to be the last humans in society, but accusing each other is easier than admitting and recognizing that all their friends and the authorities have turned against them and are now unrecognizable. Because of this shift, it makes it even less likely that Berenger and Daisy will be able to hold onto their individuality, as the rhinoceroses begin to look more and more powerful and joining them starts to look like the safer option.

Berenger offers Daisy brandy, but Daisy says she has a headache. Berenger wraps his bandage around Daisy's head and assures her that this is a phase, but Daisy says it isn't. Daisy takes off the bandage and says that they should let things proceed, since there's nothing they can do about it. They argue about whether they should adapt and try to live with the **rhinoceroses** or whether all hope is lost. Berenger tries to interest Daisy in lunch, but Daisy isn't hungry. She insists that she can't take it anymore. Berenger tries to tell her that she's courageous and says that he loves her. He says that they can have children and eventually regenerate the human race. If they have courage, they can do it. Daisy says that children are boring and there's no use in trying to save the world.

At this point, Daisy gives up and effectively joins the rhinoceroses, even if she's still in her human form. Her unwillingness to be brave and regenerate, even if the possibility of successfully doing so in these circumstances seems impossibly slim, shows that she's no longer on Berenger's side. Berenger's sense of heroism, meanwhile indicates that he's coming more fully into his individualism and now understands that it's truly his responsibility to do something.

Berenger grabs at Daisy as **rhinoceros** heads appear everywhere. Daisy suggests that they are the ones that need to be saved and are abnormal, since they're the only humans left. She studies the rhinoceroses, ignores Berenger's insistence that she's ill, and says that the rhinoceroses look content and happy with their choice. Berenger assures Daisy that they're the ones who are right, but Daisy refutes this. She says that the world is right, not her and Berenger. Berenger says that he's correct because Daisy understands his speech and because he loves her. Daisy insists that she's ashamed of their love, which feels weak compared to the energy she feels in the rhinoceroses.

Now, the rhinoceroses seem far more powerful than morality, love, or any of Daisy's ties to the human world. Berenger's insistence that he's right because Daisy still understands his words is another attempt to insist that logic and intellect can win out over the rhinoceroses, but Daisy's unwillingness to play along indicates that all logic is breaking down now. Brute strength is now more important than intellect or sense.

Berenger slaps Daisy's face. She turns away, shocked, but Berenger immediately apologizes for losing control and pulls her close. Daisy pulls away and says that Berenger has run out of arguments. Slowly, Berenger says they've gone through 25 years of marriage and declares that he'll never give in. They cling to each other and Daisy promises to help Berenger resist. The **rhinoceros** noises seem even more musical and Daisy notes this. She leads him to the window and says that they're also playing and dancing. Berenger says it's disgusting, but Daisy tells him to not say mean things about them. He apologizes and Daisy says that the rhinoceroses look like gods. Berenger accuses Daisy of going too far and shrugs off her touch. Quietly, she says they can't live together and leaves.

By slapping Daisy, Berenger momentarily channels the violence of the rhinoceroses and adds even more moral complexity to his character. Now, the reader or audience must contend with the fact that the hero of this play may be heroic in that he stands up to fascism and abusing logic, but he also experiences moments of violence that are inexcusable—and for that matter, make it so that Berenger can't regenerate the human race with Daisy and fulfill that vision of being a hero.

Berenger inspects himself in the mirror, unaware that Daisy is gone, and says that men don't look too bad. He turns and realizes that Daisy is gone and yells for her. Berenger decides that it was obvious that they weren't getting along, but he's upset that she left without leaving a message. He tosses everything off the table angrily, slams the window shut, and declares that the **rhinoceroses** won't get him; he'll stay a human. He wonders what happened to Daisy and tries to plug his ears. Berenger muses about whether or not he can convince the rhinoceroses to turn back, but he then realizes he'd have to learn their language and talk to them. He wonders what language he even speaks now that he's the only man left. He thinks it's French, but it doesn't matter anymore.

When Berenger muses about what language he's speaking and if it matters anymore, it signals that communication, logic, and intellectualism are no longer at work in Berenger's world—the only purpose of language at this point is to communicate Berenger's scattered thoughts to the reader or audience, as there's no one else in Berenger's world to talk to. This also suggests that if there's nobody to talk to, language itself doesn't matter—Berenger has lost the battle at this point because he can't convince anyone to come to his side.

Berenger thinks he looks funny and spills photos on the floor. He recognizes himself but none of his friends. He says that they're all good-looking and wishes he was like them. He wishes he had horns, rough skin, and that he could trumpet. He tries to trumpet, but it sounds feeble. Berenger says that he feels ashamed for not being able to change and sobs that people who hang onto their individuality always have sad endings. With a gulp, he sits down with his brandy, vows to fight all the **rhinoceroses**, and says that he's going to stay a man and not give up. He drinks.

Notably, Berenger doesn't get his happy ending—he's right in that the one individualistic character of the play gets a horrible ending, and he's unable to make sense of what it even means to be the last person on earth. This makes the play's overarching case that the world isn't just fundamentally absurd in its own right, but that all of those things that people use to try to make sense of the world are just as absurd and ineffective.

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