

A Literature Review on the Study of Eugene Ionesco's Rhinoceros

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Abstract: Eugene Ionesco, recognized as one of the originators of absurdist theatre and known as the “king of absurdist theatre”, is the author of *The Chair*, *The Bald Songstress*, *The King is Dying* and other works. *Rhinoceros* is one of Ionesco's rare works with political overtones, his most distinctive masterpiece, and a classic of absurdist theater. Taking the original text of *Rhinoceros* as the starting point, this paper selects relevant core publications in recent years and utilizes the literature research method and logical analysis method to study the significance and value of *Rhinoceros*, the imagery of “rhinoceros”, the study of *Rhinoceros* and similar works, and the study of the social acceptance of *Rhinoceros* since the 1990s. Since then, domestic scholars have summarized the research results of Ionesco and pointed out the shortcomings of the current research, with a view to laying a foundation and providing a direction for the further study of this work.

Keywords: theatre of the absurd, Eugene Ionesco, Rhinoceros

1. Introduction

Eugene Ionesco (1909.11.26-1994.3.28) was one of the most important dramatists of the 20th century, recognized as one of the originators of absurdist theatre, and known as “the king of absurdist theatre”. He explored the meaning and value of human existence through the form of “anti-drama”. By skillfully combining reality and non-reality, rationality and irrationality, nature and anti-nature, subjective feelings and objective existence, as well as the seriousness of content and the theatricality of form, the work depicts the absurdity of Western society in the post-war period. Moreover, the work portrays variations in the survival situation and distortions in the psychological state of modern human beings. It encourages people to reflect on the seriousness and truthfulness of the nature of social life, which has far-reaching influences on the theatre and literature of the 20th century. He wrote such works as *The Bald Songstress* (1949), *The Chair* (1951), and *The King is Dying* (1962), and many of his plays have been listed as the reserved programs of the French Theatre, which has attracted attention from the rest of the world. *Rhinoceros*, one of Ionesco's most famous plays, is regarded as a classic of absurdist theater. By telling the story of an unknown town a rhinoceros appears, but the citizens are numb and one by one they lose their human form and all turn into rhinoceroses. In the end, only the main character, Belanger, is left alone, trying his best to keep his form intact, frantically and desperately crying out, “I am the last man, I will persevere to the end, I will never surrender.” The seemingly absurd plot actually exposes the blind faith of people under the iron heel of fascism in the last century, the absurdity of people becoming inhuman, the absurdity of

the whole world. The fusion of absurd themes and absurd forms explores the social and human aspects of society, leading the superficial comedic effects to deeper tragic reflections, and the strong impact and shock that it still brings to the audience in today's society.

This paper mainly adopts the methods of literature research and logical analysis to systematically and comprehensively explore the issues related to *Rhinoceros* by collecting, screening and organizing the related research literature, as well as integrating, analyzing and summarizing the views and conclusions in the related literature. At the same time, this literature review will also discuss and look forward to the current status and future development direction of the current research, so as to provide reference and reference for the research in related fields.

2. Literature Review

2.1. On the Significance and Value of *Rhinoceros*

Author Ionesco has noted about *Rhinoceros* that the main thrust of the play is to depict the process of Nazification of a country and the chaos of that country under the perverse reaction of a contagious disease and a collective psychic mutation... Nazism was largely an invention promoted by intellectuals, theorists, and semi-intellectuals during the two wars an invention, and these people were the Rhinoceros [1]. It can be seen that the significance of *Rhinoceros* is not only limited to fascist Nazism, but also involves various forms of authoritarianism, totalitarianism, irrational consciousness, and anti-humanism, as well as the Ionesco's thoughts and ridicule of the inhuman nature of human beings in a special period of history, so the theme and significance of this play are very complex, and its significance and value can be explored from different theoretical perspectives, which have been researched by a large number of scholars. Scholars have already conducted relevant studies.

2.1.1. Interpretation from an Absurdist Perspective

The play shows the process of individual-to-group convergence in which people in the small town gradually become almost all rhinoceroses, emphasizes the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence in modern society, reveals the nature and limitations of human existence, and stresses the free will and the spirit of resistance of human beings. For example, He Zhijuan's "On the Absurd Theme of Ionesco's Plays" argues that Ionesco witnessed the ravages of "rhinoceros disease" in this country, and the world made him feel anxious and helpless, and as a playwright, he tried to reflect the social reality through his "anti-drama" creation. As a playwright, he tries to reflect the social reality through "anti-theater" creation, and dissolves the plot, characters, and language of the drama, which on the one hand impacts the artistic expression of the traditional drama, and on the other hand, he does not completely subvert the tradition, but points to the theme that the world is absurd, life is meaningless, and human beings are painful existences in a more novel and severe way [2]. Liu Changwei's "Study on Ionesco's "Tragic Comedy" Thought" also interpreted this work from the perspective of absurdism, which paved the way for further research [3].

2.1.2. Interpretation from a Socio-critical Perspective

The play reveals the limitations and effects of society and culture on human free will, as well as the dangers of assimilation and loss of individuality in a group. 1996 Yang Rong in "On Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*" argues that human beings' transformation into rhinoceroses, i.e., the process of alienation, is firstly due to the "alienation" of Western capitalist society, and secondly due to the herd mentality and herd behavior of modern human beings, and finally warns readers to look at herd behavior dialectically [4]. In 2010, Song Defa and Deng Jie concubine's "*Rhinoceros*: The Paradox of Institutionalization" linked the significance of "Rhinoceros" to institutionalization, showing the

contradictory mentality of human beings who hate these sick systems and subterranean rules but blindly obey them. The article also compares “*Rhinoceros*” with Kafka’s “*Metamorphosis*” [5].

2.1.3. Interpreted from the Perspective of Psychology and Human Nature Exploration

The play reveals the nature and absurdity of human beings, and explores the contradictions and conflicts between human beings’ consciousness and unconsciousness. Yang Rong’s “The Psychological Motivation of Human Beings Turning into Rhinoceroses - An Experimental Discussion on Ionesco’s Play *Rhinoceros*” argues that the main psychological reason for human beings turning into rhinoceroses lies in the herd mentality and homophobia of human beings, which is closely related to the special situation of Westerners in the 20th century. “is inextricably linked to the special “circumstances” of the 20th century Westerners: it is the modern capitalist society of the material environment and the spiritual condition of the profound contradiction, making the psychological mechanism of modern Westerners show loneliness, loss and other characteristics, especially loneliness, which led to the spread of the “rhinocerosization” [6]. In 2009, Huang Kewei’s “Others are Hell”-Talking about Interpersonal Relationships in Ionesco’s Drama” interpreted *Rhinoceros* from the perspective of interpersonal relationships, and the author believed that although *Rhinoceros* focuses on mutation, it is also permeated with the same psychological factors that make people turn into rhinoceros [7]. Kang Xiaoyun and Zhao Xiaohong wrote “*Rhinoceros: The Loss and Reconstruction of Human Subjectivity*”, which explores the process of the loss and reconstruction of human subjectivity in *Rhinoceros* from a Lacanian psychoanalytic point of view, and thus gives a more reasonable explanation of the psychological motivation for the transformation of people into rhinoceros [8]. Tang Ying in “On the Group Loss of Individuality Consciousness in *Rhinoceros*” reads the text from the perspective of herd mentality, from the domination of herd mentality to the unfolding of herd mentality and finally to the evil consequences of herd mentality, showing a kind of alienation process of group loss of individuality consciousness [9].

2.1.4. Interpretation from the Perspective of Philosophical Inquiry

The play deals with the essence of human existence and explores the relationship between human free will and destiny. Wang Wei’s “Interpretation of the Absurd Theme of *Rhinoceros* from the Existentialist Philosophical Perspective” analyzes the absurd theme of *Rhinoceros* from the existentialist philosophical point of view, interprets the crisis of faith in the West as well as the nature and root of the problem of alienation of human beings, and finally points out that human beings are hopeful in their perseverance [10]. In 2013, Li He’s “Ruminations on Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* in the Perspective of Existentialism” interpreted *Rhinoceros* from the basic theoretical viewpoints of existentialism, including the situation viewpoint, interpersonal viewpoint, and behavioral viewpoint respectively [11].

In conclusion, the play “*Rhinoceros*” has profound ideological connotations and symbolic significance, which can be analyzed and interpreted from many angles. The play shows the audience and readers the absurdity and powerlessness of human existence, and at the same time inspires people to explore and think about human free will and the spirit of resistance. After half a century, the play still brings the audience and readers the shock after waking up from the nightmare, which makes the people shudder and sit on pins and needles.

2.2. Research on “*Rhinoceros*” Imagery

The imagery of “rhinoceros” in the text has been deeply analyzed and studied by many scholars in recent years, causing a “rhinoceros wind”.

In 2012, Wang Wei analyzed the symbolism of the rhinoceros in “Interpreting the Dystopian Theme of *Rhinoceros* from the Perspective of Existentialism Philosophy”, arguing that the ugly and vulgar rhinoceros symbolizes the cruelty and loss of humanity of Nazism. Man becomes a rhinoceros to symbolize that human beings have lost their own character and nature and succumbed to bestiality, which is also the deeply hidden and extremely dark side of human nature. In the face of a powerful social machine, man eventually becomes alienated. By depicting this absurd evolution, Ionesco unravels the process by which the whole of Germany was engulfed by Nazism. Huang Xueying and He Jiefang, in “The Light of the Dark Night - On the Destruction and Recovery of Human Nature in *Rhinoceros*,” argued that Ionesco’s choice of the rhinoceros as the object of bestiality expression is not arbitrary, because the rhinoceros is a fat, clumsy, ugly and ferocious primitive and barbaric animal, which can best reflect the hidden darkness and sins of human beings [12]. Liang Jinwen, in “Analysis of “Rhinoceros” Imagery in *Rhinoceros*”, pointed out that the ‘rhinoceros’ imagery in *Rhinoceros* has extraordinary implications, and as a kind of animal imagery, it embodies its unique symbolic level, and is a kind of animal imagery, which is a kind of animal imagery. In the sense of general imagery, the collective loss of individuality under the alienation of human nature is its key kernel, which radiates various symbolic forms of spiritual degradation. In the sense of archetypal imagery, “rhinoceros” hides more fear, inferiority, aggressiveness, etc. [13]. In 2019, Wang Junxian and Qin Zixian wrote “A Comparison of Rhinoceros Imagery in Chinese and French Literature--Taking *Rhinoceros* and *Rhinoceros in Love* as an Example”, which are two works on “rhinoceros”. The interpretations of “rhinoceros” in these two works are very different from each other. Ms. Liao Yimei is trying to explore the beautiful quality of rhinoceros despite the ugly appearance, in her writing, the rhinoceros is synonymous with perseverance; while Ionesco seizes the ugly appearance of rhinoceros and portrays it from the opposite side [14].

In short, the rich imagery of “rhinoceros” has been analyzed from many research perspectives, and the research results are endless. “Rhinoceros” imagery of the deep heritage, its aesthetic value is also always blossoming with artistic charm, has been many times by contemporary film and television works and other reference.

2.3. Research on *Rhinoceros* and Similar Works

Comparing *Rhinoceros*, a classic absurdist play, with domestic and foreign works has also been the direction of many scholars’ research.

In 2001, Bearer from Giant’s “The King of Theater and Theater of the King – Ionesco’ and *Rhinoceros*” argued that the root of the play, is similar to the theme of Kafka’s masterpiece “*Metamorphosis*” which was written one year ago, which expresses the problem of human alienation, that is, the mutation of human nature under the great oppression by the force of dissenting forces. The theme of *Rhinoceros* is similar to that of Kafka’s masterpiece, *The Metamorphosis*, a year earlier. But *Rhinoceros* is a step forward or a layer deeper than *Metamorphosis*. If Kafka’s basic emotion in *Metamorphosis* is “sympathy” for human beings, Ionesco adds “condemnation” to “sympathy” [15]. In 2005, Huang Jinkai’s “Mutant Comedy and Tragedy--Analysis of Ionesco’ *Rhinoceros*” compared *Rhinoceros* and *Metamorphosis*, and showed that these two modernist masterpieces have an obvious lineage, both of them reflecting the deformed situation of human beings and deformed mentality in the modern society, but the difference of the times and the personal experience of the writers and the difference of their creative personalities make the works have different characteristics. However, the different times, personal experiences and personalities of the writers make the works have different characteristics [16]. In 2006, Chen Yihai, in “Extremely “Absurd” and Extremely “Real”-Re-reading Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*,” compared *Rhinoceros* with Pu Songling’s *Promoting Weaving* and Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, but thinks that all of them are not as good as “*Rhinoceros*”, only Ionesco’s interpretation of the process of “metamorphosis” is so tragic and horrible [17]. In the twelfth issue of

Dramatic Literature in 2008, Huang Kewei argued in “The Tragedy of Human Nature - On Ionesco’s Play *Rhinoceros*” that the man-turned-cow in *Rhinoceros* has a fundamentally different nature from the man-turned-worm in Kafka’s writing [18]. In 2010, Song Defa and Deng Jiezhi’s “*Rhinoceros*: Paradoxes of Institutionalization”, argued that, if the target of critique in *Metamorphosis* is the “alienator” -- modern society, then the target of critique in *Rhinoceros* is the “alienated” -- human beings themselves. In 2014, Liang Ruwen entered the article “Analysing the Imagery of “Rhinoceros” in “*Rhinoceros*” and also compared “*Rhinoceros*” with works such as *Animal Manor*, *Metamorphosis*, and *Rhinoceros in Love*.

2.4. A Study on the Current Contemporary Social Reception of *Rhinoceros*

Rhinoceros, which ran for several performances since its 1959 run at the Dusseldorf and France Theatre in West Germany, is a miracle in theater history. At its premiere, the play caused a sensation and controversy, with mixed reactions from audiences and critics. Some critics saw the play as an absurd and humorous comedy that could bring joy and entertainment to the audience, while others saw it as a profound social and human critique that revealed the dilemmas and crises of human existence in modern society. The audience’s reaction was also complex, with some audience members loving the play’s humor and absurd style, while others found it too pessimistic and negative, lacking hope and revelation. In the fall of 1988, the Frog Experimental Theatre Troupe of the Haidian District Cultural Center in Beijing brought Ionesco’s masterpiece *Rhinoceros* to the stage, which may have been the first time that the play had been rehearsed in China. Mr. Zuhai watched the performance and thought that “playing absurdity with absurdity-this is the general feeling of the performance”, and thought that it could not perfectly convey the essence of the original work, and suggested that the stage design and performance of the play with a style close to the reality might strengthen the effect of absurdity even more [19].

3. Conclusions

Through a comprehensive analysis and summary of relevant literature, the following conclusions can be drawn: *Rhinoceros*, as a classic absurdist play, has elements of absurdity and humor, as well as profound social and human nature criticism: the play explores the nature and absurdity of human beings, as well as the limitations and effects of society and culture on human free will, and jolts people out of their numb and mediocre existence full of falsehood and hypocrisy. It is of universal significance across generations and borders. Through this paper’s review of the literature of domestic scholars’ research on Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* in the past two decades, people can see some characteristics: the current domestic research on *Rhinoceros* still presents the situation of limited research perspectives and insufficient novelty in the research, and the research results are still relatively small, and there are still infinite possibilities for the future research.

Looking forward to the future direction and possibilities of the study of *Rhinoceros* and Ionesco, people can think about the following aspects. Firstly, people can further explore the dilemma and crisis of human existence revealed by *Rhinoceros*, as well as the exploration and reflection on the free will and spirit of resistance of human beings; secondly, people can explore Ionesco’s other works from the angle of cultural and social critique, to reveal his critique and reflection on the times and society; thirdly, people can further explore the influence of translation and performance on the meaning and effect of theatrical works, and find a more suitable way of translation and performance for contemporary audiences and cultural backgrounds; in addition, people can also explore the influence of translation and performance on the meaning and effect of theatrical works from a cross-cultural point of view.

In summary, Ionesco's classic theater work *Rhinoceros* has far-reaching ideological connotation and artistic value, and its research and exploration have important theoretical and practical significance. In the future, scholars can explore and study the play in depth from multiple perspectives, contributing to the development of contemporary theater and culture.

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