

Berenger as a self-effacing neurotic: A Horneyan reading of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*

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Abstract: This is a study of the play *Rhinoceros* by Eugène Ionesco using the theoretical frameworks of Karen Horney. The object of analysis will be the character of Berenger from Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, with particular focus on his neurotic trend through the theoretical framework of Karen Horney. The purpose of this study is to explore how Horneyan theory can be used as a lens to interpret Berenger's neurosis and its impact on his personality, his relationship with others, and his final stance of remaining human, thereby providing a critical interpretation of the play. The analysis of the study brings to light how Berenger tries to satiate his need for love, follows his 'shoulds' and 'taboos', fights with contradictory drives, experiences inner turmoil when his need for love remains unfulfilled and when his vindictive nature, hitherto suppressed, takes control.

Keywords: neurotic trends, self-effacing, compliant, moving towards people, need for love

Introduction

Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994) was a Romanian-French playwright who belonged to the postmodern era of the 20th century. He is a writer who belongs to the Theatre of the Absurd. His works, originally written in French, have been translated into several languages. Karen Horney (1885-1952), a psychoanalyst of the twentieth century, was born in Germany. Her mother encouraged her to get a good academic environment. Her later works contain her mature theories, and they have been presented in five books.

Using the theories of Karen Horney, this paper analyses the character of Berenger in Ionesco's play *The Rhinoceros* (1959). In the play, the people in a town, one after the other, transform into rhinoceroses except for Berenger. This paper occupies a

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multidisciplinary space, as literature and psychoanalysis weave in together. It uses the theories of Karen Horney to understand the character of Berenger. The same concepts can be interpreted differently by literature and psychoanalysis. The play *Rhinoceros* becomes a ground where Horney's concepts of neurotic trends and conflict resolutions can be examined. Therefore, given the psychological nature of the play, this study seeks to be a reflection on how theories adapt and evolve in the world of literature.

Theoretical framework

Horney says that neurotic trends are formed at a tender age through the combination of the temperaments one is born with and the environment one is born into. These traits combine and develop as coping mechanisms in tough environments. When basic needs for love, security, and belonging result in frustration during childhood, neurosis develops. Neurosis is formed due to underlying conflicts, and it is difficult to identify the conflict because neurotics possess numerous strategies to keep the conflicts hidden from the unconscious. A child grows into an adult with deep-seated anxiety and resorts to coping strategies to handle life.

According to Horney, 'basic anxiety' is the isolation and helplessness a child growing up in a hostile environment feels. To diminish his basic anxiety, the child resorts to unconscious strategies shaped by his own nature and external factors. This forces the child to develop coping mechanisms to deal with the hostile environment. This feeling of insecurity plays an important role in the development of their personality, as it leads to the formation of what Horney calls neurotic trends. Neurotic trends are all compulsive in nature, arising from feelings of isolation, helplessness, fear, and hostility. These trends are developed to cope with the world despite these emotions. Their primary aim is safety. The compulsive nature is due to the anxiety that hides underneath. They are adopted to manage fear, insecurity, and loneliness. Over time, the child feels forced to stick to these patterns as they believe that abandoning them could bring back past dangers. Horney identifies three broad neurotic trends (strategies developed to deal with anxiety): Self-Effacing (moving towards people), Expansive (moving against people), and Resigned (moving away from people). This paper uses the terms compliant and self-effacing interchangeably to refer to people who deal with conflict by moving towards people.

The paper applies the mature theories of Horney to examine the character of Berenger as a self-effacing neurotic. According to Horney, compliant personality types deal with conflict by moving towards people. They aim at love and safety and strive to fulfil their need to be loved. This need must be fulfilled at all costs. The self-effacing types vie for people's approval, want to be liked, desired, accepted, be of importance to others, helped, protected, and taken care of. So, to please and appease is how they go about it to arrive at their solutions to conflict. Also, Horney says that in a compliant personality, the opposite forces (expansive or aggressive) are also alive and kicking. But one of them is heavily suppressed (in this case, the aggressive drives).

In short, the compliant personality types heavily suppress their expansive drives, and rightly so, as allowing the expansive drives to take control would mean rubbing people the wrong way and standing up for themselves, all of which would go against their need to be loved, to please and to appease.

They want to be loved, especially by a partner with whom they want unity by completely merging with their partner. They want a partner whom they can be heavily dependent on, like a crutch. And they also want to live through their partner. They fear being rejected and exaggerate feelings of helplessness and suffering. They also do not like being recognized by others; rather, what they want from others is help, protection, and an all-surrendering love and sympathy. They feel like a tiny being in a big, cruel world- feeling small, lost, and helpless, in need of protection and safety. They heavily suppress their pride so that they do not appear presumptuous, and there comes a groveling sense of self-abasement. They have two 'shoulds': one is that they 'should' be able to develop any love relationship into a state of absolute harmony, and the other is that they 'should' be able to make their partner love them. Horney says that the neurotics have a realistic image, which is the real image, and an idealized self-image, which is the one they strive to be. In the case of a self-effacing neurotic, they despise their real image, and they focus on the gap between their real self and the idealized version of themselves that they strive to be, thus viewing themselves as the despised self-image. This entails a lot of self-criticism and plummeting self-esteem. The character of Berenger has "an extraordinary capacity for experiencing the emotions of love and friendship" (Lamont 1993, 124), a trait that aligns seamlessly with the framework of Horney employed in this paper. Exploring the

selected play through the theories of Karen Horney offers a rich character study. Delving into the character of Berenger, the impact his neurosis has on his personality, how it shapes his attitude, and his resulting neurotic needs are brought to the forefront. To explore the study of these forces, the following methodology will be utilized for the analysis of the selected play.

Methodology

The paper uses qualitative research methodology, employing the theories of Karen Horney to analyse Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. The paper uses interpretive research as it applies the theoretical framework of psychoanalyst Karen Horney to interpret and analyze the play. The analysis will focus on the character of Berenger and how he is a self-effacing neurotic. This approach will therefore involve a close reading of the mature theories of Horney and the selected play and thereby examine how the character of Berenger is a self-effacing neurotic. The paper aims to contribute to the broader understanding of personality and dealing with conflicts by answering these research questions: What are the characteristics of Berenger that make him a self-effacing neurotic? How does Berenger's neurotic trait (self-effacing) affect his stance at the end of the play?

Analysis

Berenger from the play *Rhinoceros* can be categorized as a self-effacing neurotic. Inside Berenger are contradictory forces: his self-effacing drives and his expansive drives. Berenger heavily suppresses his expansive drives, and he gets a 'tight feeling' in his heart when he gets angry. This tight feeling is his discomfort when his aggressive drives come into control, which results in rubbing people the wrong way. In the first act, Berenger is sloppily dressed, hatless, with unkempt hair, and appears not to take care of himself (Ionesco 1960, 4).

The characteristic of Berenger's dependency is revealed in the way he dresses. In essence, it is an unconscious way of hoping for external rescue and summoning magical help. Berenger is a people pleaser; reflected in his rationale for attending Auguste's birthday party. He said he could not refuse, as it would not have been nice (Ionesco 1960, 7). He tries to please his friend Jean, his colleagues, and his love interest Daisy. He readily agrees with whatever they tell him and easily accepts accusations from Jean. "You must love me, protect me, forgive

me, not desert me, because I am so weak and helpless” (Horney 1992, 53) reflects the weakness and helplessness in Berenger.

Berenger, the compliant neurotic, focuses on the gap between the realistic despised self and the idealized self and tries to work himself towards the creation of the perfect man. This is evident when the shabbily dressed Berenger ‘hides’ himself on noticing his love interest, Daisy. He feels inferior when he compares himself to Dudard, described as a “young employee with a future” (Ionesco 1960, 39). Dudard, therefore, becomes the idealized version Berenger aspires to be. Berenger also uses a lot of ‘shoulds’: I ‘should’ not have fought with Jean, I ‘should’ make up with Jean, and I ‘should’ make my relationship with Daisy work even when people all around me are turning into rhinoceroses. Horney says that the standard of ‘should’ cultivates an ever-looming failure to meet up to their ‘shoulds’.

The role Jean plays in Berenger’s life serves two purposes: it keeps him humble and in awe of Jean. The expansive nature in Jean keeps pride away from Berenger, thus making him feel humble, and this is why Berenger feels drawn to Jean. Horney says self-effacing people are drawn to people who insult them, as it opens the door for surrender and self-riddance, thus helping them break down their pride. They don’t like feeling proud; they see themselves as humble creatures; they can only love when they feel degraded. And this is how Berenger surrenders himself to a greater surrender under Jean’s criticism. He feels surer of Jean than himself (Ibid, 74).

Jean fulfills the ‘take care of me’ expectations of Berenger when he helps him adjust his hair and appearance. Which is why when Berenger holds his hands out to him, it signifies surrender and submission. Berenger externalizes his own expansive drives and admires them in Jean. Berenger admires Jean for being “immaculate” in his dressing (Ibid, 6) and for being strong (Ibid, 18). In admiring him, Berenger promotes him to a godlike role. Berenger accepts whatever Jean says of him, which shows his need for affirmation and his seeing himself only through the eyes of Jean: “Jean: [interrupting him] You’re in a bad way, my friend. Berenger: In a bad way? You think so?” (Ibid, 5).

Horney says that the self-effacing types are unable to assess whether one is a genuine friend or not, and this is aptly portrayed in Berenger’s relationship with Jean. Jean’s remark that he feels ashamed to be Berenger’s friend (Ibid, 6) and his other critical remarks about Berenger’s habits and appearances fall on deaf ears. Berenger,

however, refers to him as his “best friend” and as being “warm-hearted” (Ibid, 74). Perhaps what blinds Berenger is that Jean’s negative criticism is always followed by an abundant supply of magic help for Berenger, which fulfills his ‘take care of me’ attitude.

There is a dwindling hope for fulfillment, and this hope gets crushed with every interaction Berenger has with Jean. In the first scene, compliant forces are in full throttle in Berenger. With Jean being overly critical, Berenger tries to justify himself in a tiny way in which his aggressive forces (expansive drives) try to creep up into the foreground, but only for his compliant forces to steer the wheel back in control. From being interrupted, to timidly voicing out, to loudly voicing out, we get a suddenly unnerved Berenger who expresses his irritation and has a flash of his expansive drives, which gives him the courage to oppose Jean for saying they were two different rhinoceroses, as the first rhinoceros had two horns and the next had just one. And this time Berenger sticks to his convictions that it is ‘utter nonsense’ (Ibid, 29). Although Berenger was right, this is where Berenger’s self-effacing drives fail to suppress his expansive drives. After the fight, Berenger struggles with insurmountable self-condemnation, as he does not measure up to his ‘should’ have agreed with Jean; he ‘should’ be agreeable; he ‘should’ be likeable. Therefore, we see the redoubled efforts of being clingy and deeper submission when he goes to Jean’s apartment to apologize, hoping to win Jean’s love back and be restored to his good graces; his self-effacing traits come to the forefront as he agrees to whatever Jean says. But this appeal for love turns to naught when Jean turns into a rhinoceros. This rejection from Jean causes Berenger’s self-esteem to plummet, as Berenger’s self-esteem depends on how others treat him; it rises and falls based on others’ approval or disapproval of him. And Jean turning into a rhinoceros is interpreted as Jean’s disapproval of Berenger and hence the fall in self-esteem. Berenger’s love-me-protect-me attitude was not fulfilled in his relationship with Jean. This lack of love and neglect further reinforces clinging behavior in Berenger, and then he turns his focus on Daisy.

In Daisy, Berenger seeks fulfillment for his ‘need for a partner’; and clings to an illusion that a partner will solve all his problems. Daisy fulfills Berenger’s ‘take care of me’ attitude by allowing him to sign time sheets at work even though he walked in late and brought food supplies when the town was being destroyed by rhinoceroses.

Berenger 'docilely' allows himself to be led by Daisy, signifying surrender. Berenger is morbidly dependent on her; he expects love from her and wants to totally surrender himself and love her back wholeheartedly. But Daisy doesn't return the love the way Berenger wants. In Berenger's quest for love in his relationship with Daisy, there is a dwindling hope for fulfillment. His 'shoulds' are that he 'should' make this relationship work, failure of which fills him with guilt, inferiority, and self-hate. There is a redoubled effort as he becomes clingier with his pleas of love to convince Daisy to stay with him. But when Daisy turns into a rhinoceros, rejection and betrayal set in, and Berenger's self-esteem plummets to zero. Berenger's 'love me', 'protect me', 'let me live through you', and 'be my crutch' attitudes were also not fulfilled by Daisy.

Swanson says the balance between good and bad is revealed in the play through the tension between conformity and non-conformity. However, Richard Danner argues that a good versus bad reading lacks clarity within the play (without empirical implications) as it not a good thing that Berenger chooses to remain human as humanity (within the text) is flawed (there is nothing much to fight for) nor is it a bad thing to embrace becoming rhino against the loss of humanity, as the play does not justify why it is evil (without empirical applications).

Following the trajectory of Danner, this study does not comment on the dichotomy of good or bad but rather extends by situating it within the Horneyan framework to break down Berenger's mindset, highlighting his inner turmoil when faced with the conflict of his need for love being unmet, thus affecting his stance. Building on Danner's argument that Berenger is not a good debater because he is unable to clearly justify why he resists his metamorphosis, as his defence for humanity is weak, this study elaborates on Berenger's stance at the end of the play. His stance at the end of the play fits seamlessly into Horney's remarks about her patient, where she says:

On the other hand, she starts to hate him. At first this is repressed altogether because it would annihilate her hopes. Then it may become conscious in flashes. She now starts to resent his offensive treatment, again hesitating to admit it to herself. With this turn vindictive trends come to the fore. There are blowups in which her true resentment appears, but still without her knowing how true it is. She becomes more critical, is less willing to let herself be exploited. Characteristically most of this vindictiveness appears in indirect ways, in complaints, suffering, martyrdom, increased clinging. The vindictive elements also creep into her goal. They were always there in a latent form but now they spread like a cancerous growth. Though the longing to make him

love her persists, it becomes more strongly a matter of a vindictive triumph.
(Horney 1970, 253-254).

Like Horney's patient, Berenger also undergoes a journey of emotions in his relationship with Jean. With being cut short and dominated by Jean, Berenger has a lot of hate, which is kept in check to gain love. But it surfaces briefly, and in these moments of outburst, there are moments of awareness.

Berenger: [aside] I'm sorry I wasn't more accommodating. But why is he so obstinate? I didn't want to exasperate him. [To the others:] He's always making fantastic statements! Always trying to dazzle people with his knowledge. He will never admit he's wrong. (Ionesco 1960, 33)

Berenger can understand the truth of the matter in flashes. This is what Horney says is repressed hatred erupting in conscious flashes. This emotional progression is also seen in Berenger's relationship with Daisy when he 'slaps' her, and says he doesn't know why he did that. The emergence of resentment brings in vindictive elements. Berenger slowly becomes increasingly obstinate about his hatred for rhinoceroses. He becomes self-aware of what he wants, and he says he does not want to become like Jean (Ionesco 1960, 85).

Soon, Berenger starts shouting, saying that he will never join the herd; all this time, his aggressive tendencies are coming to the surface. But all until Daisy shows up at his house, on seeing that she came to him, he seeks to hold on to hope, the hope of love, the hope that love can conquer all. And the moment Daisy comes, Berenger slips back into his compliant nature. With the arrival of Daisy, Berenger wants to live through Daisy. Berenger expresses his love for Daisy and begs her not to leave him. His expression of love shows his need for dependency. Berenger's 'I need you' attitude is expressed here: "Berenger: I want so much to be a comfort to you. I love you, Daisy; don't ever leave me" (Ibid, 95). Berenger, suddenly slapping Daisy, is a tiny flickering of awareness of his hate, awareness of her not being on the same page as him. This is noticed when he transitions from 'You can't do that to me.', "Don't leave me alone", to "Poor little thing left all alone in this world of monsters!", when Daisy leaves to become a rhinoceros (Ibid, 105-106).

In the self-effacing types, any act of assertiveness is seen as a violation of deeply ingrained 'taboos'. Taboos like "I should not be assertive," "I should not counterargue," "I should not disagree," and all the other things that would mean not rubbing people the wrong way to

please and appease and make the love very forthcoming are religiously followed. To the self-effacing types, selfishness is doing anything that is just for himself; therefore, it is followed by self-hate and guilt. Horney says that the 'taboos' and 'shoulds' have a remarkable consistency, but sooner or later the contradictory trends (expansive traits) come to the surface, and the stronger a person becomes, the more his expansive drives start taking the driver's seat.

Therefore, after everyone turns into a rhinoceros, Berenger compares a picture of himself and the rhinoceroses and finds himself ugly and says that he should have joined them. There is a lot of shame from failure to fit in. There are a lot of negative emotions that dominate Berenger's narrative at the end of the play. He is a scorned lover and friend; he has been abandoned; he has failed to meet his standard of 'shoulds' by violating and trespassing on them. The dwindling hope for fulfillment is thwarted by Jean, only to have him redouble his efforts and love strongly by being clingier, only to be abandoned by Jean, and the repetition of this same vicious cycle in his relationship with Daisy leaves his 'need for unity' through merging and drive for 'total surrender' unfulfilled, making him unleash violence towards himself through self-hate. He is definitely damned if he joins the herd, and he is definitely damned if he chooses to remain human. There is an insurmountable feeling of self-hate and regret for not joining the herd, mixed with his 'suddenly snapping out of it' saying, 'I'll fight against them all' (expansive drives coming into focus). But he feels damned either way. If he turns into a rhinoceros, he will feel like a coward for not sticking to what he wanted. If he doesn't turn into a rhinoceros, he feels selfish. Diverging from Rigg's (1992, 543) observation of a "joyful acceptance of the potential of the human spirit," Berenger's stance at the end reflects his inner turmoil because the outlet for expansive drives has been uninhibited, causing vindictive elements to slowly spread; thus, he can say, "I'll fight against them all" (Ionesco 1960, 107). Berenger is unable to be happy that he has done the right thing, that he is right in doing what he did, and starts finding faults so that he does not bask in satisfaction.

Richard Schechner, in his work *The Inner and the Outer Reality*, suggests that the ontological success of Berenger stems from his having a self, seen in his resistance to social evils, portrayed by Jean, and the rhinoceros. But within the Horneyan framework, Berenger does not have a whole sense of self since he is a self-effacing neurotic trapped within the dictates of his neurotic tendencies. "In *Rhinoceros*,

underneath Bérenger's clichés, lies the deepest kind of humanism: he cannot choose not to be a man" (Schechner 1963, 209). He says Berenger is condemned to be a man, "...Realizing that he can't change, Bérenger decides he doesn't want to change" (Ibid, 210). His decision to remain human is his way of coping with problems in life rather than his finally facing the problem of 'life' (Ibid., 209). Diverging from Schechner's view of triumph, the present analysis uses the framework of Horney as a neurotic self's method of coping with life ruled by the tyranny of inner dictates. In the self-effacing drives, expansive drives are suppressed and when these expansive drives surface, they become vindictive. This is what happens to Berenger; his attempts to try harder to win love and approval are not met, which frustrates him. The self-hate is Berenger's way of turning his hostility on himself. His eyes are opened to exploitation and feelings of being abused by Jean and Daisy, and he becomes very critical when the suppressed resentment brings in a huge change in his attitude towards them.

"at the conclusion of *Rhinoceros*, it is Bérenger's awareness of his personal ignorance which prevents his becoming a rhinoceros, even though he could be disposed to become one." (Swanson, quoted in Bloom 2003, 116)

Danner says that Berenger exists only within the text and hence he cannot be used as an anti-fascist or hero of non-conformity. He says we must stick only to the context given in the play. In this light, breaking away from all the political connections which many critics have made, we can analyse the character of Berenger based on his portrayal within the play, using the tools Horney provides. He comes under the self-effacing neurotic. And in this way, when his need for love is not met despite efforts, he is aware of his "personal ignorance" (Ibid, 116). Connecting Swanson's use of personal ignorance to what Horney says, this study's findings suggest that there are flashes of vindictive elements and the realization of being betrayed, which helps Berenger see through his blind side or the fakeness of his so-called friends and lover. His stance is due to his striving for love, which, when thwarted, gave rise to the spread of vindictive elements. Using the Horneyan framework, Berenger's stance at the end of the play can be interpreted as a way to deal with conflict. With vindictive elements spreading, there comes self-hate, and he feels damned if he joins the herd, and he feels damned if he chooses to remain a human. In short, Berenger's refusal to transform does not make him a "hero of action"

(Lamont 1993, 125), nor is it “a joyful acceptance of the potential of the human spirit” (Rigg 1992, 543), but rather a victim of his neurosis.

Conclusion

Berenger’s passivity, reflected in his indecision, avoidance of crowds, helps him from being ensnared by ideological traps, thus becoming “sources of a gentle kind of strength” (Lamont 1993, 124) when viewed through the lens of Horney, offers a complementary perspective where his passivity qualifies him as a self-effacing neurotic.

To sum up, this study, with the help of Karen Horney’s theories, can help us understand Berenger’s stance at the end of the play. Using Horney’s framework, Berenger’s need for love takes on the qualities of his sloppy attire, admiration of Jean, blindly agreeing and submitting to Jean, surrendering to Daisy, allowing Jean and Daisy to add meaning to his life, apologizing to Jean and begging Daisy not to leave him. However, in the process of trying to win love, there is a constant tug from the opposing forces, seen when his expansive drives become dominant. Hate is repressed to win love, surfaces when he fights with Jean and when he slaps Daisy. And soon vindictive elements start to grow. The journey of emotional turmoil hastens the spread of vindictive elements. Everyone around Berenger turning into scary rhinoceroses is how the self-effacing Berenger feels: alone, small, and timid while being surrounded by monstrous beings that can hurt and harm him. With ‘taboos’ and ‘shoulds’ being crossed, self-hate is turned inward, shaping his stance at the end of the play, and vindictive elements soon turn to vindictive triumph. This struggle between the expansive and the self-effacing comes into play as Berenger is under constant crossfire; he is damned if he becomes a rhinoceros, and he is damned if he remains human.

Although the play was written in 1959, in our contemporary scenario, we have a lot of modern Berengers. With the rise of digital and artificial intelligence, the ease of connectivity equals personal disconnect with our true selves and near ones. Like Berenger, who tried hard to connect but failed. Many entertain a fractured self-image as virtual reality becomes the ideal version of what one wants to be. Hence, the comparison starts when the happy pictures posted online fail to match the sad life behind the screen. As the gap widens, the disconnection brings self-criticism and low self-esteem. In the character of Berenger, we can find ourselves, and the theories of

Horney can be a mirror helping us understand ourselves better and put us on the road to recovery. Given the compulsiveness of the trait, Berenger's interactions with Jean and Daisy are only experienced in the language of his neurotic trends; therefore, there are reinforced clinging behaviours. Due to his basic conflict between his contradictory trends (his expansive drives and his self-effacing drives), the sparks of his passive protests that surfaced here and there finally overpower his self-effacing drives, reflected in his stance when others have transformed into rhinoceroses. The limitation of this study is that, since its approach is grounded in a literary background, the theories of Horney do not focus on their clinical and empirical interpretation, opening a space for interpretation from researchers with a background in psychology.

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