

**Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*: An Expressionistic Picture of a
Worker's Oppression
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Abstract

Expressionism is a twentieth century artistic theory that flourished in Europe immediately after World War I as a radical reaction against the realistic school. It helped in raising the individual's social awareness to the level of understanding his responsibility to make the necessary reforms for the well-being of his society. Elmer Rice, the American dramatist, considers Expressionism as "an attempt to go beyond mere representation and to arrive at interpretation" (124).

However, Expressionism generally aims at making inner experience concrete by exploiting some of the new modern theatrical devices such as revolving stage, masked characters, symbolic setting, dislocate a time-sequence, cryptic and patterned dialogue, as well as special effects in lighting, and sound.

Elmer Rice is a man of principles, categorized by many as a rebel and a reformer. He recommended a society based on social justice and freedom whose individuals are capable of self-development and change. He experimented with a variety of dramatic techniques in his plays especially in *The Adding Machine* reflecting thus his growing interest in the highly subjective and nonrealistic forms of expressionism. However Rice's main concern was to improve the quality of American life by uncovering its many imperfections as well as to elevate American theatrical production to compete with its European counterparts.

In 1923, Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* was considered as one of the finest examples of expressionism both in its subject matter and innovative form. Throughout its eight scenes that followed Mr. Zero's life, death, and after death, Rice succeeded in presenting his message by depicting man's plight being a victim of capitalistic system that turned him into a slave to the machine. He also condemns modern man's submissiveness to any oppressive system and called for a peaceful revolt or "utopian socialism" as the best solution to free his body, soul, and mind.

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مسرحية المر رايز آلة التعداد: صورة تعبيرية عن إضطهاد عامل

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ملخص

التعبيرية هي عبارة عن نظرية فنية ظهرت في بدايات القرن العشرين وازدهرت في أوروبا مباشرة بعد الحرب العالمية الأولى كرد فعل متمرد على المدرسة الواقعية التي كانت تميز الحركة الفنية والادبية في ذلك الوقت. لقد ساهمت التعبيرية في رفع الوعي الاجتماعي لدى الفرد الى مستوى فهمه للمسؤولية الملقاة على عاتقه لاحداث الاصلاحات المطلوبة لرفاهية المجتمع. اعتبر المر رايز التعبيرية على انها محاولة لتجاوز الظاهر للوصول الى الباطن. تهدف التعبيرية عموما الى تصوير دخيلة النفس الانسانية تصويرا مسرحيا يعين على فهم الخلجات العميقة مجسمة فوق المسرح وذلك من خلال توظيف الحيل المسرحية الحديثة كالمنصة الدوارة والاقنعة وديكورات المسرح الرمزية والغناء تسلسل الزمن النمطي واستخدام اللغة التلغرافية المنقطعة وكذلك المؤثرات الخاصة الصوتية والضوئية.

لقد وصف العديد من النقاد المر رايز بكونه رجل ذو مبادئ يميل الى التمرد على واقع الحياة في المجتمع الأمريكي. لذا فقد شرع رايز بتمردة هذا ومن خلال اعماله المسرحية الى إيجاد مجتمع قائم على الحرية والعدالة الاجتماعية وقادر على التغيير والتطوير الذاتي. لقد استخدم الكاتب في مسرحية آلة التعداد العديد من الحيل المسرحية الحديثة التي عكست اهتمامه المتزايد بالانماط التعبيرية الغير واقعية والمعنية برفض النفسية الفردية السطحية من اجل التوغل واستكشاف جوهر الانسان وعليه فقد انصب اهتمام رايز اولا على تحسين نوعية الحياة الاجتماعية الأمريكية بكشف عيوبها ومحاولة اصلاحها وثانيا على رفع مستوى الانتاج المسرحي ليضاهي نظرائه في أوروبا.

قدم المر رايز مسرحية آلة التعداد سنة 1923 والتي اعتبرت أفضل مسرحية تعبيرية من حيث الموضوع والشكل المبتكر. لقد نجح رايز في مسرحيته هذه والتي تتناول حياة وممات وما بعد ممات السيد صفر أو زيرو في تقديم رسالته عن مشكلة الإنسان في العصر الحديث بوصفه ضحية للنظام الرأسمالي الذي حوله الى مجرد عبد للآله. لقد أدان رايز كذلك في مسرحيته هذه خضوع الإنسان في العصر الحديث لأي نظام إستبدادي ولذلك دعى الى التمرد السلمي أو ما أسماه بالإشترابية اليوطوبية والتي وجد فيها الحل الأمثل لتحرير جسد وروح وعقل هذا الإنسان.

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Elmer Rice was born under the name Elmer Leopold Reizenstein (1892 – 1967). He is an American playwright, director, and novelist. He is best known for his plays *The Adding Machine* (1923) and his Pulitzer Prize-winning drama of New York tenement life, *Street Scene* (1929). Rice believed in the American Dream and held a firm devotion to America as the land of freedom and equal opportunities, therefore, he struck out in revolt at any forces or situations that oppose, corrupt, or betray both America as well as the individual human being.

Rice had chosen to be the voice of individuals' rights and freedom against the tyranny and injustice of modern industrialized and capitalized American society. He was the champion of what he called "Utopian Socialism", even though he was accused of advocating and following the ideologies of Communism. Categorized by many as a rebel and a reformer, Rice's personal heritage was strongly influenced by his close relationship with his paternal grandfather, who lived with the family and who was a political activist in the revolution of 1848 in the German states. Anthony F. R. Palmieri explained in his *Elmer Rice: A Playwright's Vision of America* that Rice's grandfather appeared to have had some influence on Rice's approach to life and art. Thus "when one considers Rice's later reluctance to attend Hebrew school, his skepticism about religion in general, his role as a rebel in society and the theatre, one senses the affinity of spirit between the grandfather and grandson" (3). This personal inheritance enlightened Rice's mind and motivated his later involvement in social causes and in his using the stage as a platform for promoting social, political, and dramaturgical changes.

Moreover, Rice assured his rebellious attitude towards everything that opposed his well-established principles. Thus after his graduation from New York Law School in 1912, Rice began a short-lived legal career since he resigned in 1914 due to his refusal to make immoral or unethical ideological compromises. He instead sought refuge in playwriting where the stage would be his arena to win battles against prevailing social, economic and political ideologies.

Rice tried through his new career as a playwright to restore American idealism and to establish the "Utopian Socialism" that he had read about and believed in strongly as the only solution to make reforms. Rice's concern with social criticism or the study of individuals who suffered from the tyrannical treatment of evil society put him under the influence of the great Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw as well as the concept of Fabian Socialism found in the

works of Shaw and other dramatists. Gholamreza Sami mentioned in his *Ragged Individualism: America in the Political Drama of the 1930s* that Rice was attracted by the “the nonrevolutionary and evolutionary tenets of Fabian Socialism found in the works of George Bernard Shaw” (64).

Shaw's influence on Rice exceeded all the others since after reading Shaw's works, Rice underwent a radical change in his intellectual thinking. Rice's comment on Shaw's intensive influence on him is crystal-clear in his book *Minority Report: an Autobiography*:

I can say without exaggeration that the total effect completely altered my life, my way of thinking, my mode of life – Everything ... There was opened to me a whole new world and a whole new orientation in politics, in religion, in education, ... in all these things completely new ideas, new ways of thinking and new attitudes toward life, which have colored everything that has happened to me, everything I have done and everything I have thought since (85-6).

Shaw provided Elmer Rice with possibilities since he came close to tackle different subjects related to social evils that touch modern life. Consequently, Rice concluded that a revolutionary change in human institutions and attitudes would be essential in his time. However, this revolutionary change was by no means intended to be by force or arm like the case was with the Bolshevik Revolution, but he thought of a peaceful and non-violent socialism that he believed to be the best tool to achieve reforms. Thus Rice, Frank Durham explained “was, from the first, never a Marxist, never a communist, he was a utopian” (30). Eventually his “Utopian Socialism” seemed to be his solution to modern man's problem. Rice's conversion to his *unique reading* of socialism was related to his reading a theory and then the fictional representations of that theory. His experiences and readings of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1887), revealed his great support to socialism that he reflected cleverly in his writings. Durham confirmed that “his [Rice] socialism is theoretical and emotional, derived from thinkers like Fabians and Edward Bellamy and confirmed by imaginative literature” (31)

Actually, Rice rejected any dogmas that disapprove the development of society by submitting the implements of production for the satisfaction of human needs rather than for the enrichment of

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certain individuals. Gholamreza Sami asserted that:

To him, socialism was not an absolute dogma, but a regulating force that could help eliminate social injustice in the world. In fact, Rice tried to find a middle ground between Communism and Democracy. His social idealism was a third way that accepted neither a capitalistic democracy based solely on individual rights, nor a rigid communist way of an obstinate expansion of the political state and restricted liberties (64).

Often called a reformer, Rice liked to dramatize the threatening forces that exist to the idea of personal freedom. The word "Freedom" would sum up his philosophical attitude to life and interpret his goal that he committed himself to fulfill and establish and be the base for American future development and individual change. However, to fulfill his reforming mission, Rice started his journey with theatrical experimentation that eventually introduced him to a radical literary movement that started to prevail in the American theatrical scene especially during 1920s, which is called Expressionism.

Expressionism is a twentieth century artistic theory that flourished in Europe, particularly in Germany immediately after World War I. The term was first coined by Julien-Auguste Herve in 1901 under the title "Expressionism". It sustains the primacy of emotion and is based on the refusal to imitate, repeat and reproduce what already exists. Richard Sheppard defines Expressionism as "an attempt to create a visionary world, liberated from the language and values and patterns of bourgeois society, expressive of the deepest levels of the personality, and utilizing symbols derived from the modern industrial world" (277). Anyhow, the goal of Rice's expressionism was to immerse deeply into the social, economic and political fabric of modern American society through its individuals who were trapped in a seemingly hopeless environment. When asked to explain his expressionism, Rice resembled it to an x-ray photograph stating that:

In the expressionistic play we subordinate and even discard objective reality and seek to express the character in terms of his own inner life. An x-ray photograph bears no resemblance to the object as it presents itself to our vision,

but it reveals the inner mechanisms of the object as mere photographic likeness can not (198-9).

So much so, the American dramatists found in expressionistic technique an outlet to their new cultural orientation that would help them accomplish their American Dream where social justice and self-reform would be inseparable parts of that dream. Thus, Rice believed that the social betterment can be achieved through individual affirmation and creativeness. So, Rice's "satirical expressionism attacks the machine, but even more it condemns the person who refuses to rebel against it" (Nathans 285).

However, Rice's *The Adding Machine* is an expressionistic play as affirmed by many critics. Frank Durham explained the critical opinion of Philip Moeller, director of the play and a member of the Socialist press Club, who asserted Rice's employment of expressionistic technique as part of his eagerness to experiment in theatre and to show the rich barrenness and the ridiculous unbeauty of the slave Psychology (Durham 53). Also distinctive was Palmieri's critical opinion who asserted Rice's interest in expressionistic technique as his main concern following the steps of O'Neill in elevating American theatrical production to compete with its European counterparts. He said that *The Adding Machine* "is one of Rice's best plays. Many, in fact call it his masterwork ... It belongs alongside the expressionistic drama that the great O'Neill was creating at this time" (57).

Nevertheless, *The Adding Machine* that premiered in 1923 by the Guild Theatre was timed at the very height of postwar American industry and just prior to the Great Depression. The increasing interest in production had led to an expansion in building factories whose owners' greedy spirits were concerned only with the efficient running of their business paying no attention whatsoever to the well-being of the workers.

From its beginning, the play's title is indicative of its expressionistic form as it expresses the protagonist's plight in modern industrial world. It is a machine-dominated world where the worker regresses backward and accepts to be dominated by the thing that he himself created. The title outwardly is about a machine that adds figures, yet inwardly it refers to Zero himself. A worker programmed

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to perform the same task over twenty-five years. From the beginning of the play we see Zero's submissiveness to authority both at home and at work.

The setting of the first scene that took place in a bedroom, visualizes Zero's mind which is shaped by figures "*the walls are papered with sheets of foolscap covered with columns of figures*" (*The Adding Machine* 3). It is presented in such a way not because the room is papered in that way, but "because that is the way it appeared to the numerical-ridden mind of Mr. Zero" (Ball 13). Throughout Mrs. Zero's long monologue the audiences were enabled to probe into Zero's life which she criticized as monotonous and purposeless and condemned her role in such a life as a slave. She said: "slavin' my life away to give you a home. What's in it for me, I'd like to know? ... I was a fool for marryin you ... I've been waitin'-waitin' for you to get started-see? It's been a good long wait too. Twenty-five years! An' I ain't seen nothin' happen" (*The Adding Machine* 5).

Scene two takes the audience into an office of the department store where Zero works with Daisy, a middle-aged woman who is in love with him. Rice in this scene has crept deeply into Zero's and Daisy's repressed desires and inner turmoil in his effort to expose the truth concerning these two characters. Zero's and Daisy's real plight caused by the modern mechanized life that stripped them their humanity and alienated them, thus each one is living in his own thought. One of the main expressionistic devices that Rice, in this scene, establishes as a second level of communication is the 'aside'. Both workers keep their eyes on their work, but speak out their thoughts aloud to the audience (Hogan 35). Daisy expresses her desire to commit suicide because of her hopeless love to Zero "I wish I was dead ... I'm scared to do it though" (*The Adding Machine* 8). Mr. Zero, on the other hand revealed a desire to kill his wife and set himself free from her nagging and criticizing nature "I wonder if I could kill the wife without anybody findin' out. In bed some night. With a pillow" (*The Adding Machine* 9). Moreover, the audiences are taken further into Zero's mind to share with him his mental anguish that turned an automaton and timid man like him into a madman, actually a killer.

Worth-mentioning also Rice's success in presenting a powerful expressionistic scene related to an encounter between Mr. Zero and his boss when the latter informed Zero that he is going to be replaced by an adding machine. Rice intensified this encounter and its horrible consequences with visual and sound effects. Their talk is accompanied first with soft music and a slight revolving of the stage where both Zero and the boss are standing as a sign of Zero's troubled mind who was in need of time to comprehend the unexpected calamity. Rice's stage direction, however gave a full description of this critical moment, thus it mentioned that:

*His [boss] voice is drowned by the music. The platform is revolving rapidly now. Zero and the boss face each other. ... The music swells and swells. To it is added every offstage effect of the theater: the wind, the waves, the galloping horses, the locomotive whistle, the sleigh bells, the automobile siren, the glass-crash ... the noise is deafening, maddening, unendurable. Suddenly it culminates in a terrific peal of thunder. For an instant there is a flash of red and then everything is plunged into darkness (**The Adding Machine** 14).*

However, an off-stage murder took place putting an end to Zero's job and life as well.

To show the social order of his characters and the dehumanization of modern society in his age, Rice in Scene Three numbered them and he put his main character, Mr. Zero, at the bottom of this order as he is a nonentity, a zero who counts nothing in the world of human beings. John Gassner explained Zero's position in society as being a nobody whose "life is meaningless, even his life after death is meaningless. Even in the afterlife Zero remains a cipher, obviously having learned nothing, since he still subscribes, ironically, to the false ideals of the society that killed him" (260).

Furthermore, through the conversation of Mr. Zero's guests, Rice criticized various social ills that were prevalent in modern American society and which he was determined to include in his agenda of reform. The conversation of these nonentities is restricted to weather, clothes, ailments, gossip and racial attitude towards foreigners, Catholics, Jews, and Negros.

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After Zero's confession of killing his boss, Rice presented an impressive expressionistic picture of Zero's trial in the fourth scene. The setting of this scene portrays not only Zero's vision of the court room, judge, and jurors, but also that of Rice's:

*A court of justice. Three bare white walls without doors or windows except for a single door in the right wall. At the right is a jury box in which are seated Messrs. One, Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six and their respective wives. On either side of the jury box stands a uniformed officer. Opposite the jury box is a long, bare oak table piled high with law books. Behind the books Zero is seated, his face buried in his hand ... The jurors give no sign of having seen him. Throughout they sit with folded arms, staring stolidly before them (*The Adding Machine* 20-1).*

It reflects Rice's comprehension of the frailty of the American judicial system which proved its corruption and indifference towards human rights especially those related to the downtrodden workers. It was a system that badly needed reforms; a humane touch, and an understanding of the poor conditions of the workers who were threatened to be eliminated and killed spiritually by the mechanized modern world.

Despite Zero's well-known passivity, he proceeds in criticizing the court procedures and the lawyers' crooked and immoral ways in finding excuses to the criminals "Them lawyers Don't let 'em fill you full of bunk" (*The Adding Machine* 21). Through Zero's speech we are reminded of Rice's disenchantment and disapproval of the law as explained by Palmieri who repeated Rice's comment in his autobiography that court cases are "often won by obfuscation, trickery and histrionics" (64).

Scene Five was part of the original script, yet it was omitted when the play was produced for the first time in 1923. However, it is a continuation of the previous scene as it is related to Zero's trial. It intensifies the inhumane and indifferent law towards modern ordinary man. The setting describes a cage which is a symbol of social alienation where Zero, waiting for his assigned punishment, is encaged like an animal in the zoo in full view of the spectators who care for nothing except satisfying their personal pleasures as indicated

by Palmieri who said that here Rice “suggests that murder is a crime peculiar to Americans, and that we are a nation of statistic lovers and sensation seekers” (66).

In the graveyard scene, Rice presented a nightmarish expressionistic picture of a society where evil dominates and morality has no existence. In this scene Rice shifted from realism to fantasy where everything is acceptable and might happen. It is this world that Rice, throughout his life, was trying to eliminate from the history of American society as part of his reforming mission that he set himself to accomplish. Durham in his book *Elmer Rice* affirmed Rice's intention behind drawing such a nightmarish scene describing it as:

a world without love, without decency ... It is a world of paradox where conventional goodness is evil, where the sinner flagellates himself and masochistically hungers after the flames of a non-existent hell ... it is a world where one must laugh in order not to weep (47).

Rice in this scene presents new characters as a specimen of the corrupted society. Judy, the prostitute whom Zero reported to the police for her immoral activities and Shrdlu whose name expresses his actual role in the play. Walker mentioned that in a letter sent by professor Jean Collette in 1953 to Rice, Collette told the latter that ‘Shrdlu’ is “the sequence of keys on the second line of a linotype machine ... this suggests that he represents an arbitrary – and therefore meaningless – order” (179). Like Zero, he occupies a meaningless and arbitrary existence in life since he lost his individuality long ago being a captive under his mother's authority. Yet, finally responding to an unconscious impulse, he has committed a horrible crime by killing his mother.

Rice's coming station is also situated in the world of fantasy, the Elysian Fields. A beautiful “idyllic countryside, unbounded by the prison walls of human conventions” (Brown 103). Accordingly, this place suited Rice's expressionistic style since it provided the opportunities that Rice would challenge his characters with to prove his point of view concerning their servitude nature and their resistance to any other system that would help liberate their souls from captivity to the mechanized capitalistic world. Thus this place does not suit Zero who feels uncomfortable in a place where the individual can

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enjoy the privilege of free choices since he used to chain his soul to blind servitude and does not have the courage to set himself free even if he is given the chance to do so. Annette J. Saddik however, affirmed Rice's reforming aim in this scene when she mentioned that the characters shunned by society on earth

are rewarded in the paradise of Elysian Fields for opposing oppression and standing up to injustice. Mr. Zero's murder of his boss, therefore, is seen as a positive act—a gesture of resistance against a hypocritical capitalist immorality that would allow the callous disposal of a faithful employee after twenty-five years of service (6).

As a result, to Zero the Elysian Fields is a chaotic place governed by no ethical rules or higher authority. Zero is doomed to slavery on earth and is thus unfit for heaven, yet according to Rice man has created this oppressed and dominating society and chained himself to its familiar rules and consequently he is the only one who can decide where and when to set himself free.

The Final Scene of this play is built on expressionistic technique from the beginning. Exaggeration is a characteristic feature of its setting which is preceded by the sound effects of the clicking of an adding machine to emphasize the visual effect of the huge adding machine situated on the stage and is used by Zero.

*Before the curtain rises the clicking of an adding machine is heard ... in the middle of the room Zero is seated completely absorbed in the operation of an adding machine. He presses the keys and pulls the lever with mechanical precision. He still wears his full-dress suit but he has added to it sleeve-protectors and a green eyeshade. A strip of white paper-tape flows steadily from the machine as Zero operates. The room is filled with this tape ... it covers the floor and the furniture; it climbs the walls and chokes the doorways (*The Adding Machine* 55-6).*

Rice used exaggeration in this scene to attract the audiences' attention to the increasing effect of the world of machine on modern man like Zero. Zero's pantomime and his robotic movements while operating this machine affirms his intrinsic slavery nature that he is comfortable to return too often even after the freedom experience in

the Elysian Fields.

Like Yank in the ship in O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, Zero in *The Adding Machine* embodies the perfect integration of an individual to his work. Rice envisioned such integration through Zero's rhythmic harmony when he satisfactorily is operating the new gigantic adding machine as if he is playing joyfully with a musical instrument. However, Yank is destroyed by Mildred's intruding gaze that shatters forever his sense of identity and harmony with his environment; Zero on the other hand must be dragged from his machine back into a life he does not want (Koritz 26). Zero is pulled by force from the adding machine by two officials, Lieutenant Charles and Joe.

However, Lieutenant Charles is given supernatural capacities not only because he is responsible for Zero's reincarnation, but to attract the audiences' attention to him for taking a symbolic role as Rice's messenger and mouthpiece. He would conclude Rice's implied message to his audience whom he hoped to understand their real plight and to advocate a positive revolting attitude to reform themselves and their society as explained by Frank Durham in his book *Elmer Rice* when he said that:

Charles is, of course, stating the basic message of the play ... Zero's reaction to Charles's estimate of him is to think, to think about his condition, something new for him. At first this seems to be Rice's solution: stir the inert masses to think about their condition and action will follow thought. (50)

Charles offers a new chance to Zero which is represented by operating a new adding machine: "It will be a superb, super-hyper-adding machine, ... [operated] without any human effort except the slight pressure of the great toe of your right foot" (*The Adding Machine* 60). Zero is so excited and rejoices to accept such a familiar job that relates to the world of machines proving again his stupidity, weakness and inability to think properly of his condition as a free individual not a slave. Lieutenant Charles is so infuriated for such stupidity that he deflates Zero in a lengthy speech criticizing his slavery nature and his continuous failure to get himself out of the slavery cycle:

You're a failure, Zero, a failure, a waste product. A

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slave to a contraption of steel and iron. The animal's instincts, but not his strength and skill. The animal's appetites, but not his unashamed indulgence of them ... You poor, spineless, brainless boob—I'm sorry for you (*The Adding Machine* 61).

In addition, to tempt Zero start the whole thing all over again, Charles tells him that he would not go alone, but a beautiful girl named "Hope" would accompany him. The girl symbolizes the dirty and deceivable ways which modern mechanized capitalistic society follow to keep control over people like Zero. Annette J. Saddik explained the role of the illusionary character named "Hope" in this scene and presenting at the same time Rice's suggestion to help man release his soul from its self-imposed cage. She says that:

Social and economic conditions have won control over the human spirit, and "Hope" is only an illusion that keeps us enslaved. By presenting a situation in which neither love nor death offer escape, and social systems force individuals to participate in their own oppression, Rice suggests that the only option for salvation is social reform. (6)

In short, Rice, who believed strongly in the promise of the American Dream, put his hope on those individuals who could truly understand their situation in such a technological society. His main concern was to expose the imprisoned state of the human soul in an age of increasing spiritual emptiness and lack of individuality under American capitalism with its captivating control over modern man. Accordingly, by implication Rice demonstrated that man need not be the failure he has become, instead of regression he should and could be in the front as the master not the slave of technological advance.

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