

## Spiritual Depletion of Man in Elmer Rice's Play The Adding Machine

Assistant Professor Sabah Atallah Diyaiy, Ph.D.  
University of Baghdad  
College of Education (Ibn Rushd)

### Abstract

Elmer Rice (1892-1967) is an American playwright who challenged the evils of American capitalism. He also criticized the frailty of the American Judicial system. He was a moralist whose plays are considered records of the American cultural life. His play *The Adding Machine* (1924) shows the dilemma of the protagonist Mr. Zero. On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his employment he is replaced by an adding machine. In rage, he kills his boss and he is tried and executed. In his play, Rice satirizes the dehumanization and manipulation of man in a mechanized society.

### خلاصة البحث

تحدى الكاتب المسرحي الأمريكي المر رايس شرور المجتمع الرأسمالي الأمريكي. كما انتقد ضعف نظام القضاء الأمريكي. تتميز كتابات رايس بالالتزام الأخلاقي، وتعطي مسرحياته صورة عن الواقع الثقافي الأمريكي. ان مسرحيته (الألة الحاسبة 1924) تصور معاناة شخص يدعى السيد زيرو (صفر) حيث يتم استبداله بألة حاسبة بعد خمس وعشرين سنة من الخدمة. في نوبة غضب يقتل مديره حيث يحاكم ويتم اعدامه. في مسرحيته، ينتقد رايس امتهان واستغلال الإنسان في مجتمع تسوده الألة.

Elmer Rice (1892-1967) was born in New York city. In 1908 he entered New York Law School and in 1913 he passed the bar exam. At the age of 24 he gave up his legal career to become a writer. Rice read the works of great playwrights as Henrik Ibsen and Bernard Shaw. He published 30 plays. Rice won the Pulitzer Prize of Street Scene in 1929. During the Depression, he became the New York director of the Federal Theatre Project. As the dean of American playwrights, Rice has been a member of the board of directors of the Dramatist Guild and Academy of the American National Theatre. He retained his chairmanship of the National Council on Freedom from censorship. He participated in the formation of the playwright's company to eliminate the commercial procedure.

Rice was a man of principles who would not hesitate to act when moral issues were at stake. He resigned in protest when the State Department refused to permit the opening of Ethiopia, by Arthur Arent, the first of the Living Newspaper presentations. The Federal theatre was supposed to be free and uncensored. In 1951, Rice left the playwrights Television Theatre when the networks and agencies intensified the use of a blacklist of actors. He was able to convey ideas even those that were unpopular; He said:

I have repeatedly denounced the men who sit in the Kremlin judging artists by political standards. I do not intend to acquiesce to the same procedures as followed by police commissars who sit in the offices of advertising agencies or business corporations<sup>1</sup>

Rice was a member of the American Civil Liberties Union. As a political activist, he satirized American business and ideology. He was in search of a medium for his message. He wrote an article in the New York Times in 1938:

What I have been trying to say is simply that there is nothing as important in life as freedom and that the dominant concern not only of every human being, but of all of us as we function as members of society should be with the attainment of freedom of the body and of the mind through liberation from political autocracy, economic slavery, religious superstition, hereditary prejudice and herd psychology and the attainment of freedom of the soul through liberation from fear, jealousy, hatred, possessiveness and self-delusion. Now that I have stated it, I see that I was right in saying that everything I have ever written seriously has had in it no other idea than that.<sup>2</sup>

Rice wrote *The Adding Machine* in 1924 and it was produced on Broadway the same year by the Theatre Guild. The play is a nightmare view of modern society. The characters belong to the lower middle class and they are trapped in

a helpless environment. The play is a satire of a man who is a slave to his job and a victim of the system he champions.<sup>3</sup> He is a repressed store accountant called Zero. People are given numbers according to their social standard. Though numerical, Zero's name designates nothing as it refers to spiritual nonentity. He is a nobody who is going nowhere in life.

Zero's life is a study of failure. It is empty, dull and meaningless. His concerns are trivial. He lives in a dull grey house. He suffers endless moaning from his nagging wife to whom he never speaks. Mrs. Zero says that she has been a good wife and she should live a better life.

"I 've been slavin' away for twenty-five years makin' a home for you an'nothin' to show for it. If you was any kind of a man you'd have a decent job by now an' I'd be getting some comfort out of life".<sup>4</sup>

Zero is a victim of a harsh economic system, his mechanical life has killed his soul. He struggles to survive in a machine age which reduces men to robots. He is exploited at work. He is the adding machine of the play's title. He shows up to work on time. He just adds numbers blindly, at a desk 51 weeks of the year. He lives in a narrow world, burdened by worthless responsibilities and he is happy with that.

Rice satirizes the sterility of mass society when he refers to Zero. The latter is Rice's modern American Everyman. He is:

A waste product. A slave to contraption of steel and iron. The animal's instincts, but not, his strength and skill. The animals' appetites, but not his unashamed indulgence of them.<sup>5</sup>

Zero ignores a female co-work, Daisy who loves him,. The conversation between them is little more than numbers punctuated by complaints. Daisy says:

Aw, don't be givin' me so many orders. Sixty cents. Twenty-four cents. Seventy-five cents. One fifty. Two fifty. I don't have to take it from you and what's more I won't.<sup>6</sup>

Zero and Daisy call out figures for entry into the lodgers and end by speaking their separate inner reveries:

Rice establishes this pattern of repetition. He adds confessional lines from both zero and Daisy that the other cannot hear - with the litany of numbers beating a tattoo under the dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

Zero is servile to his boss who doesn't even know his name. He expects that he will be successful in his life. This expectation is shattered when the boss who wants profits, fires him. There is an emphasis on the world of

business. The firm installs an adding machine designed for business owners, rendering Zero's services unnecessary. He is replaced by a machine that can do his job more efficiently and more accurately. The boss says:

I'm sorry – no other alternative greatly regret – old employee – efficiency – economy – business – BUSINESS.<sup>8</sup>

Zero is dazed by the boss' words. Rice describes the stage revolving wildly and flooding with theatrical sound effects, reflecting the turmoil of Zero's mind:

The wind, the waves, the galloping horses, the locomotive whistle, the sleigh bells, the automobile siren, the glass-crash, New year's Eve, Election Night,...The noise is deafening, maddening, unendurable. Suddenly it culminates in a terrific peal of thunder<sup>9</sup>

Those effects serve to express Zero's shock and frustration. The boss denies him what he deserves as a result of hard work. He loses his job after 25 years of hard work. Zero is capable of one moment of passion. In rage he kills the boss by stabbing him with a bill file. He feels dissociated from the crime. He believes that he is not responsible for the death of the boss.

I thought he was going to give me a raise...Do I look like a murderer? Do I? I never did no harm to nobody... I never got into trouble... Twenty –five years in one job an' I never missed a day. Fifty-two weeks in a year... He canned me after twenty five years, see? I .. It gives me a headache. And I can't get the figures outta my head, neither...But he kept talkin' an talkin... Suppose you was me, now May be you'd 'a done the same thing<sup>10</sup>

Zero is tried and found guilty. Before his execution he cries:" Don't take me away! Don't kill me! Gimme a chance! Gimme another chance... I don't want to die! I don't want to die! I want to live!<sup>11</sup>

After Zero's death, the play shifts to fantasy. He is sent to the Elysian Fields. It is a paradise of trees, grass, flowers and music. People there:

seem to think of nothing but enjoyment or of wasting their time in profitless occupations. Some paint pictures from morning until night, or

carve blocks of stone. Others write songs. Still others do nothing but lie under the trees and look at the sky.<sup>12</sup>

Zero meets Daisy who has committed suicide to be with him: "I didn't want to go on livin'. What for? ... I didn't have nothin' to go on livin' for"<sup>13</sup> She makes him recognize her feelings for him. They dance and he hears music of paradise. In the Elysian Fields Zero could find true love and freedom. He could enjoy pleasures he missed on earth. He is presented with choices. Yet Zero's soul is slavish as he fears freedom and cannot accept it. He is unalterable as he carries his prejudices with him. He rejects Daisy's offer of love. Zero chooses flight from all he has dreamed of in favour of familiar routine. He searches for a proper destiny. Only Zero hears the sound, a ghostly reminder of the adding machine which took away his livelihood and to which he is enslaved in the after life. Zero goes to a purgatorial office. He is placed into a room for 25 years. He returns to his job of accounting, he is fused with the giant adding machine. His operation is underbroken in a meaningless mechanical activity. "Not only is he tied to the machine, he has become a machine himself in his response to love, life and beauty".<sup>14</sup>

Zero is happy in his soulless situation. He hopes for a reward after his efforts. Instead he is told that he must return to earth with the same slave mentality and live, the next stage of his slave's progress to spiritual extinction in a machine dominated world. Zero is petrified. He says that he spent:

Twenty-five years. Three hundred months, ninety-one hundred and thirty one days... This is the first time I heard about goin's back...<sup>15</sup>

He is deluded by progress and he does not want to return to earth to be dehumanized

I 'm through! I had enough! Let 'em find somebody else to do the dirty work. ...why cant they stop pickin' on me? I 'm satisfied here-doin' my day's work<sup>16</sup>

Zero is compelled to go back to earth as a pathetic super-hyper adding machine operator. He sits by it pressing its keys and pulling its lever. A strip of white paper tape flows from it like a poison ivy that covers the walls, the furniture and the floor giving thus a horrifying picture of man's

suffering in a cold, sterile, dead world. The machine resembles a snake that creeps into man's life, destroying his innocence. The protagonist starts as a slave and ends as a zero.

There is the satirical dissection of the soul of mass-man seen both as a result and a cause of the dehumanizing effects of mass-culture<sup>17</sup>

During the 20's the world cultivated technologies like artificial intelligence and chemical processes. Rice predicted the super-hyper adding machine that functioned without human intervention. Such machines are supposed to make life easier, yet they distort human life. Philip Moeller, the director of the production said what Rice did was to expose the starved and bitter littleness and the same time, the huge universality of the Zero type, of the slave type, that from eternity to eternity expresses the futility and the tragedy of the mediocre spirit.<sup>18</sup>

The Adding Machine is a satire of automation. It accuses modern industrialism which degrades people. The machine-dominated world that reduces individuality to numbers is relevant to the new millennium. The idea explored is found in the technological age of the twenty-first century.

The Adding Machine may be the first American play to dramatize human beings nonentitled by mechanized society.<sup>21</sup>

Rice, deciphers human nature and raises the question about the significance of man's life, and whether he can have a lasting impression or not. Everything in this world changes, and nothing is reliable.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bigsby, C.W.E A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama. Vol. ONE. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Dukore, Bernard F. American Dramatists 1918-1945. London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1984.
- Gagey Edmond M. Revolution In American Drama. New York: Colombia University Press, 1948.
- Gassner, John, ed. Best American Plays. New York: Crown Publishers, INC., 1963.
- Krasner, David, ed. A Companion To Twentieth-Century American Drama. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006.
- Lewis, Allan. American Plays and Playwrights. New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann Publishers, 1978.
- Pradhan, N.S. Modern American Drama: A Study in Myth and Tradition. NewDelhi: Gulab Vazirani for Arnold Heinemann Publishers, 1978.
- Weiand, Hermann.J. ed. Insight IV : Analyses of Modern British and American Drama. Frankfurt am Main: Hirschgraben-Verlag, 1979.

**NOTES**

- 1 -Allan Lewis, American Plays and Playwrights, (New York: Crown Publishers, INC.,1966), P.139
- 2 -See C.W.E. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama Vol. One, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.127
- 3 -Edmon M.Gagey, Revolution in American Drama, (New York: Colombia University Press, 1948), p.151
- 4 -John Gassner, ed., Best American Plays (New York: Crown Publishers, INC., 1963), P.101
- 5 -Ibid., p.127
- 6 -Ibid.
- 7 -Ibid., p.102
- 8 -David Krasner, ed., A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama,(Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), p.64.
- 9 -Gassner, Best American Plays, p.105.
- 10 -Ibid., p.105
- 11 -Ibid ., pp.109-110
- 12 -Ibid., p.115
- 13 -Ibid., p. 124
- 14 -Ibid., p.122
- 15 -Lewis, American Plays and Playwrights,p.137
- 16 -Gassner, Best American Plays,p.125
- 17 -Ibid., p.127
- 18 -Herman J.Weiland, ed, Insight IV Analyses of Modern British and American Drama, (Frankfurt am Main: Hirschgraben-Verlag, 1979), p.225
- 19 -Gassner, Best American Plays, pp.98-99.
- 20 -N.S.Pradhan, Modern American Drama: A Study in Myth and Tradition, (New Delhi: Arnold – Heinemann Publishers, 1978), p.70.
- 21-Bernard F.Dukore, American Dramatists 1918-1945,(London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1984), p.27.