



## The Negative Aspects of Materialism and Capitalism in Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*

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### ABSTRACT

Elmer Rice (1892-1967), one of the foremost American playwrights, was born in New York city. He was the son of a cigar salesman. He grew up among slums and tenement houses, which to some extent left a stamp on his writings. He attended the New York University Law School at night and graduated in 1912 with distinction. Having passed his bar examination, he was qualified to be a lawyer. However he had more interest in the theatre than in the legal profession, which made him give up law and be entirely devoted to playwriting. He wrote more than fifty plays which show versatility and a wide variety of techniques. Yet, he is remembered for only few of them. His first play, **Our Trial (1914)** was very successful. In this play, he developed the flashback technique. His second successful play was **The Adding Machine (1923)**, while the third one was **Street Scene (1929)**, he also wrote **Counsellor at Law (1931)** and **Dream Girl (1944)**.

Furthermore, Rice worked as a producer, director, film writer and novelist. His well-known novels are *A Voyage to Purila* (1930) and *Imperial City* (1937). In addition to the previous works, he wrote a book about the theatre entitled *The Living Theatre* (1959). He also wrote *Minority Report: An Autobiography* (1923).

To make an account for Elmer Rice's achievement in this respect, the researcher divides the present paper into an introduction, three sections and a conclusion:

The introduction of the paper sets the background of Elmer Rice's literary rise and significance in his subsequent literary American scene.

Section One discusses Zero's dilemma with the Boss. The researcher focuses on their struggle throughout the whole play. Section Two sheds light on the domestic problems between Zero and his wife Daisy, and to illustrate the negative impacts of Materialism and Capitalism on the individuals.

Section Three moves to reflect the internal and external struggle inside Zero's intellect.

The Conclusion sums up the findings of the paper.

**Keywords:** Zero, Daisy, the boss, adding machine, materialism, capitalism.

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### INTRODUCTION

*The Adding Machine* tells the story of a suppressed old clerk, Mr. Zero who, in a fit of uncontrollable anger murders his manager. It is because the employer has replaced Zero. The human adding machine, by an effective mechanical adding machine leaving him without a job. Zero experiences an experimental, found guilty and executed. His spirit wanders meaninglessly through eternity until he finds himself in a graveyard, which leads to the Elysian Fields of Heaven. He is seen working on an adding machine, but soon he is refused from heaven and sent back to earth, because he does not know how to master the new adding machine. Finally, he clings to an imaginary hope to adjust himself to his new destiny.

The play falls into Seven Scenes: Scene One- a bedroom, Scene Two- an office, Scene Three- a living room, Scene Four- a court room, Scene Five- a graveyard, Scene Six- a pleasant place, Scene Seven- another office. The setting is New York and a number of mystic places during 1920s.

*The Adding Machine* is, in general and specifically in its technique, an expressionistic play. Expressionism found its place in America after having been borrowed from Germany. The 1920s in America observed the writings of several expressionistic plays, or just as Raymond Williams puts it: "*In the 1920s, there was a vigorous American expressionist theatre, moving from O' Neill's [The]Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape to Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine*" [1]. Expressionism usually finds hope in a man who is mentally misshapen to remark the world, but the end of the first world war verified the opposite. That is why, we see no such adoration of man in *The Adding Machine*, although it is an expressionistic play. The reason behind that is because it was written in 1923, just few years after World War I. Accordingly, expressionism lost a lot of its status. Oscar G. Brockett clearly clarifies the situation:

*"Expressionism reached the height of its popularity during and immediately following World War I. Its desire to transform the world into a place where man's highest*

*spiritual potential might be realized appealed to many persons. But the high hopes which reigned at the close of the war were soon dissipated by the wrangling over peace settlements and by other factors which seemed to prove man's basic selfishness and urge for destruction. The foundation of expressionism were gradually undermined and the movement had ceased to be productive by 1925"[2].*

Rice was sympathizing with the poor and the repressed people who are suffering from the severe aspects of materialism and capitalism in most of his plays. In this regard, Allardyce Nicoll points out that "from the very beginning of his career Rice ... showed a strong constant sympathy with the repressed" [3], and surly he does that in *The Adding Machine*. Rice had the ability to transfer ideas even those that were unpopular; he said:

*"I have repeatedly denounced the men who sit in 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"[4].*

### **Section One: Zero's Suffering With The Boss.**

It is usual seeing many characters in the plays that focus on material values lose their individual and personal identities. They are identified by tags, nameless descriptions, or their professions, or even by meaningless names. The reason for that is to show that characters are no longer representatives of particular persons, but only of certain social functions or groups and types. Thus, Zero is devoid of his human quality and private identity. He functions only as a type, as a symbol, an abstract or rather a caricature accepting his negative existence in a society obsessed by greed and materialism.

Paradoxically, Zero is soon dismissed with no advance warning and replaced by a mechanical adding machine, no matter how realistic and prompt he has been during his twenty-five years in his job. His profit-obsessed society, characterized by his employer, is to blame for his dismissal.

Ironically, while Zero is working in a society that has relegated and degraded him, he is as a matter of fact pledging and endorsing the ideals of that materialistic and bleak society. His everyday routines can also be seen not as reflections of his free will, but merely as responsibilities to meet the demands of that business-minded society. Hence, while he lives in this demanding society which profits by his work, he is offered little or rather nothing in return. As for Daisy. She dreams to be loved and kissed by men, especially by Zero: *"I wonder what it feels like to be really kissed"[5]*, but Zero does not listen to her. She also wishes she could get rid of the gas smell in the room: *"I can't stand the smell of gas. It makes me sick"* (ibid).

William T. Stafford does not find Zero the proper hero, and the play to him is a *"ruthless exhibition of the non-hero, Mr. Zero"*[6]. Yet, the best example about materialism and capitalism is, as far as the technique de-familiarizations concerned, when Zero gets mad and shocked at being fired and replaced by a machine. Now while he is thinking of murdering the boss, *"the part of the floor upon which the desk and stools are standing begins to revolve"*, (ibid, 298). To reflect and express the confusion and bewilderment inside his trebled mind and to dramatize his inner state. Floors usually do not spin in non-materialistic drama, while in materialistic drama; ideas are sometimes given human qualities. When Zero murders his boss, this action is conveyed to the audience by a lot of light and color devices accompanied with off – stage and on-stage *"noise ... deafening, maddening, unendurable. Suddenly it culminates in terrific peal of thunder. For an instant, there is a flash of red and then everything is plunged into blackness"* (ibid). Hence, the act of Zero's murdering his boss is displayed to us the appearance of blood spots splashed on the backdrop.

Rice describes the stage revolving wildly and flooding with theatrical sound effects:

*"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"[7].*

Those properties serve to definite Zero's astonishment and prevention. The boss rejects him what he earns as a consequence of tough work. He misses his occupation after twenty five years of un-appreciation. Zero is able of one moment of passion. He kills his employer by stabbing him with a bill file. He feels distanced 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' antalkin ... suppose you was me, now may be you'd a done the same thing" (ibid).*

## **Section Two: Zero's Domestic Problems.**

Daisy is worried about impending spinsterhood, a dreadful idea which follows her even after death when she is in a heavenly place. She wonders if she can even have Zero as husband asking Shrdlu if that is possible: "*Can we get married right away*" (Brockett, Oscar 1964, 100)? Yet, Zero has already made this suggestion almost unattainable telling her: "*I'd be thinkin' how if the wife dead, you an' me could get married*" (ibid, 101). This means that Daisy will devote her life spinster if Mrs. Zero does not die early enough, or even if she dies there is no assurance that Zero will keep his promise and will not back out. Thus, Daisy's dream of ever getting married might never come true. Dreams are only dreams, usually with no tangible hopes.

Daisy is found in the enjoyable place after having committed suicide by gusting out the gas when she lost her job. Soon, she gives another reason, as she tells Zero: "*That ain't the real reason. The real reason is on account o' you*" (103). Be it this cause for that reason, the real cause is to follow Zero and try to deceive him into marriage, which is the main motive of her act aiming to put an end to her frustration and aloneness. The theme of spiritual downfall and dehumanization goes further when Zero gets no promotion although, as he says, he spent twenty-five years in one job an' I never missed a day (105).

Human beings, like Zero, are looked upon as if they were slaves. Thus, Charles, the agent of the cruel society, tells Zero: "*The mask of the slave was on my from the start ... If there ever was a soul in the world that was labeled slave it's yours ... All the bosses ... have left their trademarks on your backside*" (105). Moreover, Zero is referred to as "*A failure. A waste product. A slave to contraption of steel and iron, ... and ... boob*" (107). Zero is inquired to leave the pleasant place and go back to earth because he is below the level of mankind. Furthermore, he is worse than animals, as Charles who stands for the society which assistants the individuals, tells him:

*"The animal's instincts ... the animal's appetites ... true you move and eat and digest and excrete and reproduce. But any microscopic organism can do as much. Well-time's up! Back you go-back to your sunless groove-the raw material of slums and wars-the ready prey of the first jingo or demagogue or political adventurer who takes the trouble to play upon your ignorance and credulity and provincialism. You poor, spineless, brainless boob-I'm sorry for you"(107)!*

This is how poor and weak people live in a capitalistic country where "*business-business-BUSINESS*" (76) controls everywhere. Henceforth, they try to rebel against the humbling society which has desensitized them. They look like dummies worked by strings held by the greedy society under whose control they suffer. Everybody in the play, finds mistake with his or her life and is bored and getting sick of many inconvenient things. Thus, the phrase "getting sick of" and its likes are repeated many times. When we first meet Mrs. Zero she is bored with the cowboy stories: "*I'm getting sick o' them Westerns*" (67). Daisy says: "*The smell of gas makes me sick*" (72), and when she and Zero are bickering at the office, she tells him: "*I'm getting sick o' this. I'm going' to ask to be transferred*" (73). Zero complains of women telling Daisy: "*You make me sick ... women make me sick*" (70). In another place when Zero tells Daisy "*You make me sick*" (ibid), she retorts: "*You make me sicker*" (ibid).

Rice satirizes the infertility of mass society when he refers to Zero. In one occasion, Zero regrets having got married "*I was a fool to get married*" (Brockett, 73). He wishes he could kill his wife: "*I wonder if I could kill the wife without anybody findin' out. In bed some night, with a pillow*" (ibid). He tells Daisy who is attracted to him: "*Marry you! I guess not! You'd be as bad as the one I got*" (73). Daisy tells Zero: "*you talk to me as if I was dirt*" (73).

Anyhow, the previous quotations are probably more done for humor than woman-hater. Zero wants to blame everything on women in order to find a vent to drain away his miserable thoughts about life. There are other humorous passages when Zero and Daisy call each other names and start bickering at the beginning of the play. The same is true when the play starts with Mrs. Zero's complaints berating her husband for coming late and doing nothing. If Zero speaks ill of his wife behind her back, she abuses him face to face while she is in bedroom with him. He is lying in bed before she is ready to go to bed. She keeps talking to him or rather to herself not being worried whether he hears her or not. She keeps saying: "*but it's my own fault, I guess, I was a fool for marryin' you*" [1],and "*I didn't pick much when I picked you*" (ibid).

There is also a kind of racism in *The Adding Machine* especially when Zero looks down on black people saying: "*this big nigger steps right on my foot. It was lucky for him I didn't have a gun on me. I'd have killed him sure ... but a nagger's got on right to step on a white man's foot ... the dirty nigger*" [8].However, it was not on purpose, but only by accident when the negro stepped on Zero's foot. These quotations more aim to satirize racism than to support segregation

and fanaticism. It is not logical when Rice defends the dehumanized Zero comes up again to make him a racist. It is probable that Rice in this particular scene pours down his bitter satire on a general aspect of society.

The satire of this scene is like the humorous satire on society which accepts indecent women like Daisy living among decent people. Thus, Zero reports an indecent woman to the authority and she gets imprisoned. She tries to entrap men by exposing her body to them. Gullible men Zero find pleasure in keeping watching her. To make this incident more comic, Zero regrets having reported the woman to the police. He wants her forgiveness and wishes to visit her in jail. When her prison term is over, he would *"like to make a date with her"*(Brockett, 72), blaming everything happened on his wife who asked him to report the ill-repute woman. This is why this woman went to have a dirty look at his grave and laughed a lot and gloated over his death.

### **Section Three: The Impact of Materialism and Capitalism in *The Adding Machine*.**

Intestinally, Zero is a combination of a lot of flexibility and controversy. He is a hero but rather no-hero, or even an anti-hero; he is an individual yet he is more a type than an individual. He has a name, but in reality he is nameless, as his name means nothing. He represents himself, but indeed he stands for all victimized people in the world of materialism. He is both wanted and unwanted, womanizer and a woman-hater. He condemns people to death and he is condemned to death; he is both alive and dead, we watch his life, after life and rebirth. He is both dreaming and awake. He talks sense and nonsense. He is everybody and nobody. However, Zero to his author, Rice, is *"a man who is at once an individual and a type"*[5]. He is an individual when we look at him "from the outside. We see him in terms of action and actuality" (ibid), as Rice enlarges. But when he talks about Zero as a type in materialistic play, he talks only about his inner picture, which has more truth than the outer picture, although it is not as clear as the external picture:

*"But in materialistic play we subordinate and even discard objective reality and seek to express the character in terms of his inner life. An x-ray photograph bears no resemblance to the object as it presents itself to our vision, but it reveals the inner mechanism of the object as no mere photographic likeness can" (ibid).*

During the 20's the world sophisticated materials 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"[9].*

Lastly, no matter how obscure *The Adding Machine* is, it is still regarded one of the best American plays. It *"remains one of the most significant productions of the theatre guild, as George Freedley and John A. Reeves clarified"* [10]. Moreover, *"the playwright introduced to American audience the materialistic technique which Toller and Kaiser were working on in Germany. Rice brought consummate skill to his innovations of the technique,"* [11] as Lumley strongly asserts. As for Matlaw, he thinks *"this internationally known play is one of the finest examples of materialism and capitalism"* [12].

### **CONCLUSION**

*The Adding Machine* is a sarcasm of materialism and capitalism. The play is still considered one of the best American plays due to its mystery and ambiguity. It remains one of the most significant productions of the Theatre Guild. Elmer Rice introduced the materialistic technique which imposes negative effects on the individuals' behavior. The machine dominated the world which reduces individualism to numbers is pertinent to the new age. The idea explored is found in the material age of the twenty-first century. The machine is compared to a snake like a tape that sneaks into man's life, abolishing his innocence. The machine is also portrayed as the poison ivy that covers the walls, the furniture, and the floor giving hence a horrifying picture of man's misery and ruin in a cold, sterile and dead world due to the negative aspects of materialism and capitalism. Rice interprets human nature and asks a question about the importance of man's life, and whether he can have a final decision or not. Everything in this world changes, and nothing is constant.

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