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Dehumanization of Man in Machine Age – An Essay on the Play *Adding Machine* by Elmer Rice

P. Malathy, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate



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Advancement in Technology brings a dramatic change in Man's life style. Man, a creation of God, creates machines and is overwhelmed by his own creation.

Mechanization is a welcome step forward, when there are few hands to carry out the task at hand. But it becomes an evil demon when more hands are available for the work. The problem in the world is not to find leisure for the inhabitants but to make use of their free hours. The invention of machineries enables man to find ample leisure, which he utilizes in inventing various machines and gadgets to perform his work. This reduces the pressure on his shoulders. But eventually man, an independent animal, gradually becomes dependent on machines in every phase of his life. In the modern age, also termed as the Machine Age, Man continues to save labor by inventing various machines and this results in unemployment and starvation. In the world of Modern Technology, Man is transformed into a non-self, thoughtless automaton, and this research paper attempts to focus on Man's dependence on Machine, which transforms the very texture of human thought, with special reference to *The Adding Machine* a play written by Elmer Rice, an American playwright.



Elmer Rice 1892-1967

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elmer_Rice

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In the Machine age, it is the machine that dominates the economy. The life of man seems to run on machines beginning with the alarm clock. Man invents machines to make his life better, but in reality life becomes worse. Machines have driven man to such an extent that he has nothing else in memory to recall except the work with machines. Machines carry out most of the work, and it results in less physical activity and loss of immune power. In short, man is not as strong as the man of the past ages, who trusts his pair of arms and legs. Man introduces machine as his slave to perform his work but as time passes, the machine begins to rule his heart, body, brain and finally the whole world. Man finds it difficult to work without machines. Machines become part and parcel of his life, without which life becomes quite difficult and horrible. Thus man the inventor of machine becomes a slave to the machine. Man's dependence on machines makes him lose his spirit for work.

The World of Zero

Elmer Rice, in his Expressionistic play *The Adding Machine*, depicts the dehumanization of man in the twentieth century. The play revolves round Mr. Zero a white-collar worker, who exploited at work, and nagged at home, finally murders his boss. The play depicts the evolution of man as a slave in the machine age and also in the after-life. The play also stresses the impersonal and dehumanizing aspects of a mechanized world through the characters, who have numbers like Mr. and Mrs. Zero, One, Two, Three, etc., instead of names, and through their robotic behavior. People are allotted numbers based on their social standing. Zero a hopeless cog remains literally a Zero, a nobody. His job is to add columns of sales figures, day in day out, doing the same job 51 weeks of the year, for 25 years.

Life of Mr. Zero

The world of Zero is the world where man is dehumanized, becoming more or less a machine. He survives in the world losing his dignity and identity leading a mechanical life. In short he is *The Adding Machine* justifying the title of the play. Zero's hollowed-out soul responding only to numbers, is blind to the devotion of doggy-eyed

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timid assistant Daisy. He doesn't even have the sense or the feelings, any mental ability to accept his attraction to Daisy. During his days off, he visits the church and endures never-ending grievances uttered by his hardhearted, dispassionate wife. Mrs. Zero is embittered against Zero. His marriage becomes a mere "pleasure less exchange of accusations and vituperations" (Durham41). Her indifference to Zero is expressed in her sarcastic monologue:

MRS.ZERO: You'd better not start nothin' with women, if you know what's good for you. I've put up with a lot, but I won't put up with that. 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- instead of bein' just a slave, washin' pots an' standin' over the hot stove. I've stood it for twenty-five years an' I guess I'll have to stand it twenty-five more. But don't you go startin' nothin' with women. (Rice 69).

Complex Problems Due to Growth of Industry

Before the advent of industrial revolution and the machine age, there were no factories, and people survived at a low level of poverty. The growth of industry increases the production on the one hand, but gives way to new and more complex problems on the other hand. Machine begins to rule man and man loses his dignity and self. This results in dehumanization of workers and laborers, and humanity suffers in stature.

Industrialization results in exploitation of the poor people, brings conflict between the labor and capital and increases poverty and unemployment.

Mrs.ZERO: If I'd 'a' had any sense, I'd 'a' known what you were from the start .
I wish I had it to do over again, I hope to tell you. You was goin' to do wonders, you was! You wasn't goin' to be a book keeper long- oh, no, not you. Wait till you got started-you was goin' to show 'em.

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There wasn't no job in the store that was too big for you. Well, I've been waitin' - waitin' for you to get started-see? It's been a good long wait too.(Rice 69)

Peace no longer exists on earth. Zero starves from lack of spiritual and mental peace. Life for Zero becomes meaningless and unworthy of enjoyment. Zero becomes a zombie, and is obsessed with his work, while his boss becomes more selfish.

Technology and Human Relationship

The play also hints at advancing technology and its effect on human relationship. The machine instead of supplementing or increasing the efficiency of human labor, in reality, displaces man. A single machine does the work of hundred workers, and this swells the numbers of the unemployed. In short, the machine in no way adds to the stature of man, but disrupts the world.

Boss: That's it. They do the work in half the time and a high- school girl can operate them. Now, of course, I am sorry to lose an old and faithful employee.(Rice76)

Unless the machine is put in its proper place the disruption will prolong.

Rice views technology from a negative angle. People are replaced easily by technology and people become almost unnecessary for the performance of any work. Rice looks upon advancement in technology as something that would be man's complete undoing. Mechanization in workplace always supports advancement in pursuit of more profit and less workforce.

Murder

Mr. Zero, a hard-working downtrodden, wage-slave, expects promotion after 25 years of loyal service as a book-keeper. The announcement of his boss to replace him with an adding machine stuns him. The boss declares the installation of the adding machine, the mechanical device that does addition automatically. He further explains that the machine to be installed is so simple, and even a high school girl can operate it.

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Bluntly, he states that in business organization, efficiency is of highest importance. In no time the old and faithful employee is fired without any regrets. His faithful service is no longer needed by the boss. It takes some time for Zero to follow the words of his boss.

Zero does not view this news lightly and murders his boss in retaliation. Man no longer has the capacity to bear pain and suffer inconvenience. This results in irritation, anger, hatred and murder. Thus Mr. Zero searches for happiness in a dehumanized atmosphere.

Applies to All Societies

The theme of the play is applicable to all those societies that are technologically advanced. The play produces a frightening picture of the future of society. If technology continues its rapid advancement, the human force will become obsolete. The soul of Zero is not the soul of an individual but the soul of the small time –workers. Zero commits the sin of murdering his boss, but blames his boss for firing him. His argument of self-defense falls flat, and he is sentenced to be hanged for murdering his boss. Durham remarks “Thus the machine of justice rolls over the lesser machine that is man.”(45).

Rice’s Craft

Zero is a failure due to his own weakness. Robert Hogan commenting on the play states that “Rice’s indictment in the play is as much psychological as social” (31).As stated by Hogan , Rice in his *The Adding Machine* criticizes the society in which Zero lives and also makes an attempt to explain the psychological effects the depersonalized environment has on his protagonist.”

Like Ibsen and Shaw, Rice is a social reformer, and he contributes toward the betterment of society and bewails the plight of the workers. People like Zero seek no improvement, but adapt their work to the dictates of technical innovations.

ZERO (looking up): Hey! Hey! Can’t you slow up? What do you think I am – a machine?

DAISY: (looking up): Say, what do you want, anyhow? First it’s too slow an’

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then it's too fast. I guess you don't know what you want.

ZERO: Go ahead. You can't make me mad. (Rice73)

The daily wage earners – these slaves - are at the mercy of overpowering industrial leaders. Though Rice's target in presenting *The Adding Machine* is to tell all about technology, there is also a little bit of exposure of capitalism.

Thus, man's dependence on modern gadgets makes him a complete slave to machines. The artificial man-made paradise created by man doesn't turn out to be a paradise. Rather, man has become a prisoner with bars of machines all around him. The man-made paradise turns out to be an artificial cage imprisoning the human soul. The condition of zero is well explained in the words of Charles.

CHARLES: You're a failure, Zero, a failure. A waste product. A slave to contraption of steel and iron. The animal's instincts, but not is strength and skill. The animal appetites, but not his unashamed indulgence of them. 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. Your poor, spineless, brainless boob- I'm sorry for you!(Rice107)

Modern man trapped in the golden cage craves for spiritual freedom. Gadgets have made our life simple, easy, comfortable and luxurious .But man has reached a stage where he cannot do anything in life without the aid of machines. Being a slave to machines has made man a pleasure-seeking animal caring only for his comforts. Too much of dependence on machines makes man physically and mentally lethargic and emotionally dead. The only way to release him from the slavery is to resort to hard manual work, and consequently to instill in him the spirit of strength and vitality.

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