

Stages of Conscience: The Dramas of Elmer Rice

Ms. Shivangiba K Kathiya,
Assistant Professor,
C. U. Shah University, Wadhvan, Surendranagar

Abstract

This research paper explores the moral and ethical dimensions of Elmer Rice's dramatic oeuvre, with a particular focus on how conscience is dramatized across the different phases of his career. Through close readings of selected plays such as *The Adding Machine*, *Street Scene*, and *Counsellor-at-Law*, the study investigates how Rice's characters grapple with societal norms, personal guilt, and ethical choices. The paper examines how conscience operates as both a narrative and thematic device, reflecting Rice's enduring concern with justice, individualism, and social reform. It situates his work within the broader context of American realism and expressionism, linking personal conflict with historical and political developments of the 20th century. Ultimately, this paper positions Rice as a dramatist of conscience whose works resonate with both the moral anxiety and hope for transformation in American society.

Keywords: Elmer Rice, American drama, conscience, morality, social realism, expressionism, *The Adding Machine*, *Street Scene*, *Counsellor-at-Law*, political theatre, ethical conflict, modern drama, justice, social critique, character analysis, , urban life, psychological realism, theatrical legacy.

Introduction

Elmer Rice (1892–1967) was a trailblazer of American theatre, known for his daring innovations in form and his unflinching critiques of societal injustices. A prolific playwright, Rice's works span a wide spectrum—realism, expressionism, legal drama, and social commentary. Central to Rice's work is the exploration of conscience, not merely as personal guilt but as a societal force. In Rice's plays, conscience becomes a dramatic lens through which he interrogates power, identity, justice, and human dignity. This paper delves into how Rice stages the drama of conscience, examining its evolution from personal introspection to societal critique. In doing so, the research also discusses the shifting American moral landscape of the 20th century, mirrored in Rice's dramaturgy.

1. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The analysis draws upon theories of moral philosophy, Freudian psychoanalysis (especially the concept of the superego), and Marxist literary criticism. Conscience, from these angles, is

understood as both an individual and a socially constructed phenomenon. Methodologically, the paper applies close textual analysis, comparative drama studies, and historical contextualization. Special attention is given to character development, conflict structure, and stagecraft as manifestations of internal moral struggle. The theoretical framing also allows us to see Rice's evolving worldview, shaped by his legal training, political activism, and engagement with modernist aesthetics.

2. Early Dramas and the Birth of Conscience:

The Adding Machine (1923) *The Adding Machine* marks Rice's venture into expressionism, capturing the alienation of modern man in a mechanized society. Mr. Zero, the protagonist, represents a man devoid of self-reflection, living a life dictated by routine and submission to authority.

- **Conscience as Absence:** In this play, conscience is notably absent—Mr. Zero is unaware of his moral emptiness until after death. His lack of emotional and ethical insight renders him both tragic and pitiable.
- **Expressionism as Moral Landscape:** The play's surreal structure externalizes the internal void. Rice uses the absurd and grotesque to depict the erosion of human individuality and the mechanization of the soul.
- **Critique of Capitalism:** The capitalist system is portrayed as eroding conscience, replacing it with mechanical efficiency. Mr. Zero's replacement by an actual adding machine literalizes the fear that conscience and humanity are expendable in the industrial world.

3. Social Conscience and Humanism:

Street Scene (1929) *Street Scene* moves from expressionism to realism, depicting a microcosm of urban America through the lives of tenement dwellers.

- **Conscience as Community:** Here, conscience becomes collective. The play suggests that individual morality is shaped and tested within a social environment. Rice dramatizes how communal living intensifies ethical dilemmas.
- **Lena Maurant's Tragedy:** Lena's affair and eventual death are steeped in moral complexity. She is trapped between personal longing and societal judgment. Rice's sympathetic portrayal of Lena critiques the rigid moral codes imposed on women.

- Youth and the Future: The young lovers Rose and Sam represent a conscience trying to transcend inherited prejudice and hardship. Their desire to escape the tenement symbolizes hope and the potential for moral evolution in society.

4. The Legal Mind and Ethical Dilemma:

Counsellor-at-Law (1931) This courtroom drama is one of Rice's finest examples of psychological realism and a powerful commentary on professional ethics and Jewish identity.

- George Simon as a Moral Actor: George, a successful Jewish lawyer, confronts betrayal, class bias, and professional ruin. His internal struggle between ambition and integrity is at the heart of the play. His journey reflects the immigrant's paradox: the pursuit of the American Dream comes at the cost of moral compromise.
- Class and Ethnicity: The play dramatizes how social mobility and prejudice complicate the moral choices of marginalized individuals. Simon's Jewishness is both a source of pride and a barrier in elite legal circles.
- Law as a Moral Battleground: Rice suggests that the courtroom is not only a legal arena but also a stage for the performance of conscience. The play invites the audience to judge not only the defendant but also the legal system itself.

5. Political Conscience:

We, the People (1933) and *American Landscape* (1938) These lesser-known but politically potent plays reflect Rice's increasing involvement in public affairs and his critique of American imperialism and inequality.

- Collective Ethics and National Identity: Conscience now operates on a national scale. In *We, the People*, Rice critiques economic disparities and the betrayal of democratic ideals. He challenges the myth of American exceptionalism by highlighting poverty and systemic injustice.
- Dramatizing Ideology: These plays show Rice's belief that art should confront political conscience and foster social change. They are less character-driven and more polemical, signaling Rice's shift toward agitprop theatre in response to rising fascism and domestic inequality.

6. Later Works and the Crisis of Modern Conscience

In later works such as *Dream Girl* (1945) and *The Winner* (1954), Rice returns to themes of individual conscience amid existential uncertainty and the commodification of values in post-war America.

- **Internalization of Conscience:** Rice's later protagonists are more introspective, grappling with the psychological residue of modernity. Their crises are often internal and reflective of broader societal malaise.
- **Satire and Irony:** These works blend humor with critique, exposing the paradoxes of ambition, love, and self-worth. In *Dream Girl*, the protagonist's daydreams reflect an inner moral struggle between personal desire and social conformity.
- **Disillusionment and Resistance:** *The Winner* portrays the emptiness of material success and the loss of ethical purpose in corporate America. Conscience becomes a whisper against a backdrop of noise and spectacle.

7. Elmer Rice in the American Canon:

Conscience as Dramatic Legacy Rice's influence lies in his ability to dramatize the inner life of moral conflict within the outer structure of American institutions—family, court, economy, and state.

- **From Individual to Systemic Ethics:** Across his body of work, there is a clear trajectory from the personal drama of conscience to the systemic critique of societal ethics. This shift reflects the playwright's evolving understanding of how conscience functions within institutional and historical frameworks.
- **Legacy and Relevance:** In an era of ethical uncertainty and ideological division, Rice's plays remain relevant for their moral clarity and dramatic courage. They continue to inspire new interpretations in contemporary theatre and remain key texts in the study of American drama.

Conclusion

Elmer Rice's plays map the stages of conscience—from its absence and awakening to its societal and political maturation. His characters are often torn between internal morality and external pressures, making his work both timeless and timely. Through a blend of experimental form and social realism, Rice compels audiences to confront the ethical underpinnings of modern life. His dramas are, ultimately, not just stories—they are acts of conscience

themselves. As such, Rice's legacy is not only that of a dramatist but of a moral commentator whose stage became a platform for the conscience of America.

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