The 1930s affected the social consciousness of Elmer Rice as deeply as they had Odets'. Economic and political events induced in Rice a desire to raise his voice in favour of the establishment of a society that was "designed to wipe out the existing inequalities of wealth and to . . . provide a decent minimum standard of food, shelter, education, medication and recreation for every member of the community." Such a society would result in "economic democracy" and value the democratic ideals of freedom and liberty.

Like Odets, Rice also expressed optimism in the alleviation of conditions. His humanism inspired his faith in man's capacity for self-realization through reason. Although committed to reformist ideas similar to Odets', the solutions that Rice suggested were more liberal, less radical, than those of Odets. Rice argued that society could be refurbished on an eclectic pattern based on a system that adopted the best of all existing systems. This liberal approach caused him to assess the Marxist-
socialist and capitalist systems closely. Realizing that pure communism would destroy the ideals of democracy, he concluded that a synthesis of the social fervour of communism and the emphasis on an individual’s liberty under capitalism would form an ideal society—one which might do away with prevailing social, political and economic injustices and at the same time preserve the American heritage. Thus, he recommended a society that cherished democratic traditions and at the same time gave equal economic and political treatment to all its citizens. Adopting a reformist path, he attempted to persuade people to examine the system’s shortcomings and realize their own potential to help make the world a better place in which to live. Therefore, he suggested the formation of a socialist utopian society in the 1920s, a Marxist analysis of a society which cherished the American democratic tradition in *We, the People* (1933), and recommended a system based on a transitional stage between capitalism and communism in *Between Two Worlds* (1934).

Rice’s commitment to achieving a peace-loving society led him to recoil against the Nazi seizure of power in Germany in 1933 as an increasing threat to freedom. This concern inspired him to direct frontal attacks on fascist forces, which ultimately became the
subject of *Judgement Day* (1934) and *American Landscape* (1938). Though he did not project a Marxian viewpoint in these plays, his liberalism impelled him to express ideas based on the communists' Popular Front policy of protecting democratic ideals from totalitarianism.

Rice had always been a committed pacifist². However, political events in the latter half of the decade forced a change in his attitude. The rising threat of aggressive Fascism in Europe precipitated his changing belief that war might be the only positive alternative to this threat. This became the theme of his 1941 play *Flight to The West*. Rice's eventual advocacy of defensive war did not mean that he abandoned his commitment. On the contrary, it resulted from a yearning to preserve the democratic ideals of liberty and freedom that fascist forces in Europe were threatening to destroy. Like the pacifist Albert Einstein, Rice proposed war, because, as Ira Levine said, "the exigencies of the historical moment required not the immediate establishment of socialism but rather the preservation of democracy with its liberties, institutions

²In the fall of 1940 Rice refused Robert Sherwood's request to sign a full-page New York Times advertisement "Stop Hitler Now," saying that his pacifism was too deep to allow him to sign a petition encouraging American participation in another war.

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and culture."3

Social issues had always occupied Rice’s consciousness. Since he regarded social criticism as the primary function of theatre, the social element became an indispensable part of his dramatic writings. But while he only made covert references to these issues in previous decades, he explicitly expressed the sociological message during the 1930s.

In his first play, On Trial (1914)4 which he wrote in 1914, Elmer Rice implicitly denounced the wealthy man through a condemnation of the banker Gerald Trask for his immorality and exploitation of innocent and materially poor girls. He expressed sympathy for Trask’s victims, Mary Strickland and her husband, who represent the pawns of wealth and power. Furthermore, he repudiated Glover’s capitalist mentality, morally corrupt mind and hypocrisy in trying to save an honest man when he himself is a thief.

In The Iron Cross5 which the Morningside Players

3Levine, Left-wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre 133.


produced in 1917, Rice indicted war. It was, according to Rice, "[a] serious anti-war play, produced on Broadway . . . on the day . . . [United States] broke diplomatic relations with Germany!" He had severely attacked the exploitation of child labour in The House of Blind Alley in 1916. This occurred after he witnessed the distressing conditions at the cotton-mill town of Gastonia. Rice wrote later that it was the sight of "pale, emaciated children of ten and twelve at work in the lint-laden air of the ill-lighted spinning rooms" that deeply disturbed his social conscience and resulted in this play. In The Home of the Free that The Morningside players produced in 1917, Rice highlighted the sufferings of the exploited.

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8Rice had gone to attend a National Child Labour Committee Conference in North Carolina and stopped on the way to a pay a visit.


The preoccupation of the nation with commercialization, and the mechanization of society in the post World War I period, together with the intellectually sterile atmosphere they generated, deeply disturbed Rice. Perceiving such developments as dehumanizing, reducing human existence to that of a robot, he attacked commercialization and mechanization in *The Adding Machine* in 1923. This play satirized the capitalist system and portrayed "the low level of existence to which a machine civilization dooms millions of the little human machines it exploits." Through Mr. Zero, a white collar worker, whose job requires nothing but the routine and impersonal task of adding numbers, he delineated the loss of personal dignity among those who have been reduced to "little human machines." Employed as an office worker, Mr. Zero is, as his name suggests, a depersonalized slave of a commercial civilization. His services are no longer needed when the company acquires a new adding machine. Out of frustration Mr. Zero murders his boss and is executed for his action. He goes to heaven only to discover technological unemployment there too. Even there he cannot be put to any productive use. Zero's unacceptability even

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12Anita Block, *Changing World In Plays And Theatre* 216.
in heaven reveals that the mechanical world has reduced him to a point where no culture needs him. Zero is on his way to earth again when the curtain falls. The meaninglessness of Zero's existence is Rice's way of showing the effect of an unfeeling, perfunctory world which condemns a human being for all eternity, reducing him to an "ignorant, inhibited, slave-soul produced by the capitalist civilization"\(^1\) who can never free himself from its pressures again.

In *The Subway* (1924), Rice expressed a similar sentiment against capitalism. The play's working-class heroine, Sophie Smith, suffers a similar fate as Mr. Zero. Like Zero, she too is a wage-slave and another victim of a mechanized world. And like him, the impersonal mechanistic society destroys her. Unable to live with the lechery of her affluent and corrupt employers, she throws herself beneath a subway train to protect herself from debauchery, and dies. She does not receive love in a world that does not nurture sentiment and compassion. Her death, in fact, represents a further destruction of such values. A victim of a soulless society, she is destroyed by "the mechanical monster which hurls itself through manmade subterranean

\(^1\)Block, *The Changing World in Plays and Theatre* 216.
These plays obviously resulted from Rice's repugnance towards the existing corruption and impersonal nature of the American economic system. His admission about his feelings towards the technocratic capitalist system confirms his creed:

I do believe—and have believed for more than twenty-five years—that the capitalist system is, in the main, the cause not only of most of our social disorders, but of international warfare as well. Undoubtedly, Capitalism has played an important role in the development of civilization; but it has I think, long ceased to be a constructive force and is now a barrier to further progress. . . . It has become, it seems to me, an agency for the economic enslavement of the vast majority of the population; and its operators are determined not only by any consideration of the needs or welfare of the masses, but solely by the self-interest of the small property-owning class.

Rice reinforced his revulsion to the economic system in *Street Scene* (1929), a play in which he reviled the system through an expose of a typical slum community in New York. To give a vivid picture of the slum dwellers' life-style, Rice deliberately presented, what he called:

. . . a fair cross-section of . . . the lower middle class. Of various national origins, religious faiths, political opinions and degrees

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14 Rabkin, Drama and Commitment, 244.

15 Rice, Untitled Article, TMs, nd, 4pp., F 75-94, The Elmer Rice Collection, HRC, University of Texas, Austin, 3-4.
of education, they included shopkeepers, clerks, artisans, students, a school-teacher, a taxi-driver, a musician, janitors, policemen.16

The community that Rice portrayed was one in which poverty destroyed beauty, compassion gave way to cruelty, neighbors revelled in petty bickering, and public charities and social institutions caused more harm than good. Frank Durham writes of Rice's vision of the lives of these people as a picture of urban Depression and of New York as a microcosm of the entire country which had become "the product of a mechanized, impersonal society." Durham sees Rice depiction of New York as an "elemental force in the shaping of the human being in a modern capitalist society . . . ."17 Nonetheless, Rice's faith in the resilience of human beings gives the play a characteristic optimism. Thus his heroine Rose, who struggles to choose between two men, rejects both with a certain degree of certitude in her own ability to find the courage to live better eventually.

This New York "street scene" that Rice presents comprises the Maurrant family, Sankey—a bill collector for the milk company, the Buchanans who expect a child at

16Rice, Minority Report 238.
any moment amidst the chaotic tenement atmosphere, the Joneses and their son who is constantly making cheap passes at Rose, the Maurrants’ daughter. Amidst this apparently arrogant, overbearing and callous group of people, Rice displays the worries and troubles of the working class under social and economic pressure. Shirley Kaplan works hard to take care of the family. Her father, a disillusioned Jew, manages to earn a few dollars from his writings for radical papers. Sam and Rose cannot marry under financial stress, and finally, out of frustration, Mr Maurrant murders his wife.

The Sam and Rose love story and the murder of Mrs Maurrant provide the springboard for the dissemination of Rice’s message about their socially depraved existence. Rose feels compelled to refuse Sam’s marriage proposal to her because, she says:

There’s lots of things to be considered . . . . Suppose I was to have a baby, say . . . . What would we do then? We’d be tied down then, for life, just like all the other people around here. They all start out loving each other and thinking that everything is going to be fine—and before you know it, they find out they haven’t got anything and they wish they could do it all over again—only it’s too late.18

Like Sid and his girl Flor in Odets’ Waiting for

Lefty, social circumstances and financial adversity prevent the fruition of their love. Yet Rose does not lose hope for herself. Like Odets' Cleo in *Rocket to the Moon*, her circumstances make her pragmatic. Realizing Sam's inability to fulfill her economic needs, she rejects him to search for security in her own inner strength. Just as Odets envisions hope in Cleo's rejection of her men to discover the "good" and "progressive" society, Rice regards Rose as the hopeful representative of the younger generation of the 1930s.

The murder of Mrs. Maurrant, in addition, obliquely refers to the emptiness and despair of society. It is also another attempt on Rice's part to highlight the flaws of the social setup. Maurrant murders his wife simply in a passionate fit of frustration and not because he plots to kill her. His inability to spend enough time with Mrs Maurrant due to the pressure of work had turned her affections towards Sankey. "You can't live without somebody to talk to," she tells her daughter. When Maurrant learns of this development, he is overcome by jealousy and so kills his wife. Afterwards he remorsefully tells his daughter that he never planned her death. The emptiness in their lives that economic pressure causes not

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19Rice, *Street Scene* 156.

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only destroys the mother but the whole family. Mr. Maurrant becomes a corpse in the electric chair and the two children are left by themselves—only to be submerged deeper in the slush of poverty.

Sam’s and Rose’s inability to marry and the chaos that Mr. Maurrant creates in his family, become symbols of a world that breeds countless numbers of jobless and poverty-stricken people whose lives have nothing but misery to offer.

It is Mr. Kaplan who finally expresses Rice’s aversion for the economic system insisting that his neighbours’ suffering is due to exploitation of the lower classes by the upper elite. Overwhelmed by Mrs. Hilderbrand’s eviction from her apartment, Mr. Kaplan vehemently blames the "kepitalist Klasses" for this injustice. He lashes out at the hypocrisy of charity houses that try to help the underprivileged: "Dees cherities are notting but annudder dewise for popperizing de verking-klasses," he complains. "W’en de lendlords steal from de verkers a million dollars, dey give to de cherities a t’ousand."20 This happens because:

Eet’s de folt of our economic system. So long as de institution of private property exeests, de verkers vill be at the moicy of de property owning klasses.

20Rice, Street Scene 48.
So long as de tuls of industry are in de hands of de kepitalist klesses, ve vill hev exploitation and sloms and--.21

His solution to end social disparity is Marxist: "put de tuls of industry in de hends of de vorking klesses. . . . 22

Kaplan’s condemnation of the capitalist system, demand for a society based on human needs, and the abolition of private property is a clear indication of Rice’s rejection of capitalism and penchant for a society based on socialist theory. Rice himself observed:

In a society in which most people have no means of self-support, but must look to employment in the Industrial machine as their only source of livelihood, it is no longer possible to permit ownership of that machine to remain in the hands of a few private individuals, no matter how able or enlightened they may seem to be. It is imperative, therefore, that the . . . archaic and anarchic capitalist system be replaced by a planned society based primarily on the socialization of land, natural resources, the means of transport and the tools of production.23

Rice’s conviction that the abolition of the capitalist order would end the alienation, squalor and

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21Rice, Street Scene 50-51.
22Rice, Street Scene 52.
23Rice, Untitled Article, TMs., nd, 4 pp. F 75-94, The Elmer Rice Collection, HRC University of Texas, Austin, 4.
misery, which were everywhere, became stronger during the early years of the Depression when economic and social conditions started to deteriorate. The consequences of the economic failure, to him, represented not only a collapse of the economic system, but also showed a perversion of justice, denial of freedom, failure of leadership, and triumph of economic and political dominance over the liberties and human rights of the vast majority of the nation's population. This feeling became manifest in *We, the People* (1933). Born out of Rice's sensitivity to rising unemployment and poverty, the play portrayed the decline and fall of the Davises, a working-class family hopelessly submerged by the tide of economic adversity. Furthermore, it dealt with the violence that grips society, the restraint upon freedom; pain and murder that peters out consistently destroying the economically weak and the helpless class; and the confidence that its citizens lack in their leaders.

Burns Mantle viewed *We, the People*, as being "inspired by the very problems that lie at the root of the depression and many other social ills for which . . . people, are seeking reasonable means of correction." But while the welfare of all Americans was Rice's main

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preoccupation at the time, his liberalism prompted him to avoid revolutionary solutions to the crisis. As a liberal humanitarian, Rice encouraged strong reforms to reestablish the ideals of the founding fathers—the rights to life, liberty, respect for human integrity, and equality for all.

In scene after scene Rice recounts the tragic events that occur in the Davis household. William Davis, a foreman in the Applegate industrial factory, loses his job when the company decides to lay off some of its employees. Already in debt, the loss of his job incurs a big disaster in his financial income. Shortly after, he loses all his savings because his bank fails. Consequently, he loses his home as well. The worst jab comes when he is shot while leading a group of unemployed strikers to discuss their problems with their boss. Meanwhile, Davis’s young and bright son, Allen, is imprisoned while stealing coal to keep the house warm and forced to quit high school. He is later accused of murder while addressing a street rally in self-defence and sentenced to death. Davis’s daughter Helen, a high school teacher who hasn’t received her salary for three months, remains unpaid because of her employer’s bankruptcy. As a result she is unable to marry her lover Albert Collins. Albert cannot afford to tie the knot because he must support his mother who lives on a
defunct farm. Meanwhile, Albert's brother, shell-shocked in World War I, and frustrated with his life, misbehaves at the farm, causing his wife to leave him and his son to join the Marines Corps.

Rice ends the play with a mass meeting using the stage as a public platform from which the characters beg for another trial for Allen, exposing the unjust social system which victimizes him. They appeal to the people for a return of the judicial principles of social justice and a recognition of the Bill of Rights as declared by the constitution.

Rice uses the dismal happenings in the Davis family as a point of departure for a number of other instances that relate to social issues. He raises problems pertaining to particular forms of hypocrisy and injustice. He illuminates the latter via incidents relating to Dr. Purdy, the corrupt president of the state university, and the industrialist, Applegate.

Rice exposes the problem of racial prejudice through the behaviour of the Collins family towards their Negro servant Steve, whom they constantly rebuke. Rice attacks Mrs Collins' hypocrisy when he has her proudly acknowledge, on the one hand, that her two uncles and father fought for the North in the Civil War, and at the same time, claim that "the Negro should know his place
and not presume upon the kindness that's shown him."25

Rice probes the question of racial discrimination further through Professor Hirschbein's victimization by Dr. Purdy's anti-semitic prejudice. Hirschbein, who had raised his voice against the Applegate management's mistreatment of Davis and other workers, is expelled from the university. But evidently, Hirschbein's expulsion is not based primarily on his protest against shooting of workers. It is done because he is a Jew. Professor Carter Sloane, who is guilty of the same offence but has affluent family connections, is not removed from service.

Hirschbein's dismissal also represents the suppression of free speech in a country that boasts of granting freedom to all its citizens. Not only does this incident reflect Rice's personal objections to social injustice, it also represents an attempt on his part to make his audience aware of reality. Rice broaches the subject on freedom of speech through Helen's complaints about her student Tony Vallerra's repudiation, to his parents, of the government and the ruling classes. Rice obviously sees this as a way of putting a damper on persons trying to express their opinions. Likewise, Allen Davis is denied free speech when he is arrested while

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25Elmer Rice, We, the People. A Play in Twenty Scenes (New York: Coward McCann, Inc., 1933) 60.
addressing a street rally to protest his imprisonment for a petty crime.

Obviously, Rice puts responsibility for social injustices upon unscrupulous businessmen whose minds, he thinks, are enwrapped solely with the idea of making money for themselves. He highlights the apathetic attitude of the wealthy towards the poor at the Drew Banking firm (where Albert is employed) by mockingly drawing attention towards a painting that is being bought for half a million dollars, while only five thousand dollars are being contributed for unemployment relief. In addition, he blames leaders such as Dr. Purdy, who are wholly occupied with the thought of accumulating power.

Rice targets his attack on America’s economic system, portraying it as a device designed to reward the management, and which, because of its competitive nature, widens the gap between the poor and the wealthy. He drives this home in the first scene, when he reveals that Louis, Tony’s father, is forced out of business because a ‘padrone’ opens a big shop with more sophisticated machinery next to his. Rice attacks the system again through the factory owner Applegate’s uncommitted and cold behaviour towards his employee Davis. When Davis leads his unemployed compatriots to the factory gates, instead of listening to their problems, Applegate has him shot.
Applegate’s telephone conversation with Drew further reveals their contempt for workers in the interest of business:

Now, Walter. I’ve just had New York on the phone . . . he agrees entirely with me that we must meet the dividend on the preferred stock. Well, we’ll have to pay it out of surplus. . . . You’ve got to cut wages. Well, it’s a question of cutting twenty thousand men ten or fifteen percent or of shutting off the income of a hundred thousand preferred stock-holders.  

Through Helen, Rice emphasizes the system’s encroachment upon the poor. In an emotional outburst she says that "it does seem a shame that some should have so much more than they need and that others should have to struggle so, just to get enough to eat."  

Rice also alleges that the present economic system breeds war. Applegate’s conversation with Senator Gregg reveals that regardless of the destruction that it causes, rich entrepreneurs favour war so they can make investments that will promote industry, increase unemployment, and thus maximize profits and minimize their economic risks. Thus Applegate tells Gregg: "If we went to war today, every industry in the country would boom overnight. There’d be jobs for everybody and we’d have

26Rice, We, the People 39-40.  
27Rice, We, the People 151.
Applegate’s attitude is comparable to that of Mother Courage in Brecht’s *Mother Courage and her Children.* Both she and Applegate are prepared to pay the price of destruction for their materialistic pursuits. But while it is the desire to preserve her family that motivates Mother Courage, which makes her intentions seem noble, Applegate’s selfish interest is simply despicable. Evidently his sole concern is with the prosperity of industrial ventures:

> We’ve seen industry in this country slow down until it’s damned near come to a standstill. And why? Because we’ve let ourselves be led astray by a lot of this talk about internationalism . . . Let’s have less talk about peace and goodwill, . . . We’re always worrying about the foreigners. We’d be a damned sight better off if we served notice on them that we mean business . . .

The pursuit of selfish interests jeopardize the country’s economy and corrupt the smooth functioning of its administration. The Drews and other influential friends’ selection of Dr. Purdy as a presidential candidate while they sit over brandy and cigars,

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28Rice, *We, the people* 212.


30Rice, *We, the People* 159-160.
highlights the unfairness and irresponsible nature of the procedure for selecting the country's highest officer.

But Rice is sanguine about progress through change. He expresses this through Professor Sloane who, at a board meeting in the office of The Sentinel (the university newspaper), tells a group of students:

Progress comes through change. . . . The impetus must come. . . . If we are against militarism, against war, against social and economic injustice and political corruption, we must make ourselves articulate, right here and now. I don't agree . . . that protest is futile. I think that every voice that is raised has its effect. My opinion is that if you have convictions, you shouldn't be afraid to express them.31

All these events culminate in Rice's final indictment, in the last scene, of the meaninglessness that the ideals of free speech, free thinking and free association have acquired in a country that took pride in practicing them. As a political reformer, Rice cannot condone this and appeals to the country's citizens, for rectification. He makes this appeal through Professor Sloane:

. . . I find it necessary to take this platform, in order that I may raise my voice against acts that are committed in contravention of those ideals and those rights, acts that deny the noble and humanitarian principles upon which our government was founded. . . . The right to live.

31Rice, We, the People 138.
... That is all that any of them asks. And no social system that denies him that right has a claim to the continuance of its existence. In the name of humanity, ladies and gentlemen, in the name of common-sense, what is society for, if not to provide for the safety and well-being of the men and women who compose it? "To promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty."--You'll find it there, set forth in the preamble to the constitution. Does that mean a denial of the rights of assemblage and of free speech? Does that mean millions without employment or the means to provide themselves with food and shelter? We are the people, ladies and gentlemen, we--you and I and every one of us. It is our house: this America. Let us cleanse it and put it in order and make it a decent place for decent people to live in!"

Though this plea has an unmistakable Marxist flavour in that it indicts economic and social disparity in the present system and suggests the need for change to a system where wealth and status should be equally shared, it is far from being doctrinaire. For though it demands change, it does not invoke revolutionary action. On the contrary, it calls for social reform, restoration of justice and preservation of every individual's rights. Thus, Rice's liberalism doesn't allow him to assent completely to Marxist theory but teaches him to adapt Marxian moralism to the needs of American society. For this reason, despite his use of the agitprop method of stagecraft (patronized by left-wing theatres and

32Rice, We, the People 252-253.
playwrights during the 1930s, on which he bases the banding together of working class to protest the authorities' injustices, and conversion of the stage into a platform from which the actors make a direct address to the audience) he does not end the play with cries for a unity of the "proletariat." In its stead he makes a forthright political appeal to the citizens for a restoration of the principles of the American constitution.

After 1933, the fascist threat occupied Rice's mind as much as the Depression. He perceived the rise of fascism as a symptom of an insane world "fast succumbing to the onslaughts of megalomaniacs and despots." It became the subject for his next play Judgement Day, in 1934. This play was also the first professionally produced drama to express the growing resentment towards Fascism and Nazism.

Through a fictionalized account of the events and trial connected with the burning of the German Reichstag in February 1933, Rice in Judgement Day indicts Fascism and exposes its atrocious nature. The drama of the courtroom

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3Elmer Rice, Radio Speech on the Constitution of the United States, WQXR 21 Feb, 1938, Box 75 # 49, The Elmer Rice Collection, HRC, University of Texas, Austin, 3.
trial involves Lydia Kuman and her husband; George Khitov, and Kurt Schneider; all of whom are charged with the assassination attempt on the dictator, Gregori Vesnic. The dishonesty with which the trial is being conducted in the dictator’s favour is Rice’s method of exposing the corrupt and degenerate nature of a totalitarian regime. It also serves as a warning to the audience about the dangers of submission to tyranny. The play, however, ends with the death of the dictator and an acquittal of the accused, showing Rice’s faith in the power of defiance for the defense of one’s human rights. For Rice indicts totalitarianism through George Khitov, who, in his final defence of the accused, exposes Vesnic and his dictatorship.

I stand here tonight, as spokesman for our oppressed people, to charge Gregori Vesnic . . . with tyranny, cruelty, ruthlessness and wholesale slaughter, with annihilating the liberties of the people and the institutions of justice. I charge him with destroying the precious heritage of our science and our art and with sending into exile the flower of our intellectual life. I charge him with racial and religious fanaticism, with deliberately endangering the peace of the world. I charge him with the murder of the thousands of innocent men and women who have perished on the scaffold, in

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34The characters represented people involved in the real trial. In Minority Report Rice stated that in order to avoid a documentary version of the events at the Reichstag fire trial he changed the trial’s locale to an unspecified Balkan country and made the plot turn into the attempted assassination of a fascist leader.
the torture chamber and in the concentration camps."

The courtroom trial is Rice’s device to expose the corrupt and unjust use of the law machinery by bureaucrats. The complaisant attitude of the judges—Tsankov, Sturdza and Murusi—of the high Court of Justice towards the dictator reveals the dishonesty practiced in the courtroom. The witnesses are evidently paid to provide false testimony in the government’s favour. In order to strengthen evidence against Kuman and Khitov, the government arranges for a bomb to be thrown through the window of the consultation room which kills the court room clerk. The prosecution blames the People’s Party for the action. In fact, the charge itself implies this corruption, for it is made because the accused belong to the People’s Party. The falseness of this accusation suggests the dictator’s plan to crush any kind of public resistance.

Rice further exposes the fraud, dishonesty and callousness of a dictatorial regime. The frivolous tenor of the judges’ questions about the cost and quality of cognac, the flippancy of Judge Sturdza’s behaviour while drinking wine and discussing the case, and the casual

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demeanor of the witnesses who are ready to provide false testimony to appease the prosecution seem reprehensible to Rice. Murusi’s apathy towards the defendant, who becomes a target for Murusi’s jokes when his life is at stake, intensifies the levity of the situation. Judge Tsankov’s declaration that justice for him is secondary as compared to his interest in the National party reveals the abuse of justice and power in a Nazi regime.

To impart potency to his commitment, Rice melodramatizes the play and uses emotional language to receive an empathetic response from the audience. Incidents like Sonia’s (Lydia Kuman’s daughter) testimony to save her mother, and the sudden revelation of Kuman’s alleged suicide heighten Rice’s message. Vesnic’s arrival in the court to verify the testimony of the assassination attempt on him creates a sensation in the courtroom. The whole situation becomes overly theatrical when Alexander Kuman, who has been declared dead, suddenly appears in the courtroom and confronts Vesnic. It gets more intensified as Judge Tsankov and Parvan draw their revolvers to kill Kuman. But soon a guard disarms Parvan, whereupon Judge Slatarsky, who refused to give a false verdict, takes advantage of the confusion in the courtroom. Judge Slatarsky shoots Vesnic, shouting “Down with Tyranny! Long
live the people!"36

This overwrought indictment of Fascism has a didactic purpose. It strives to teach the public about the consequences of losing their freedom. The ending of the play best illustrates Rice’s didacticism. Vesnic’s death in the courtroom, which is not a logical result of the trial, but a consequence of Slatarsky’s impulsive reaction, shows the public that such action is necessary when justice is abused and liberty threatened. Favourably impressed by the melodrama, Robert Hogan writes that Rice’s play not only “engages us with its excitement but also arouses us with its pertinence.”37

Vesnic’s death also represents Rice’s wish-fulfillment to see the end of totalitarianism. Vesnic’s demise inspires joy and hope—joy for the acquittal of the falsely accused, and hope that if mankind were to take the required action, it would not be difficult to rid society of the burden of injustice and oppression.

For an effective dissemination of his message, Rice employed Soviet dramatic techniques. In the manner of the “violent propaganda techniques of Soviet drama in which a powerful emotional attack often replaced a rational

36Rice, Judgement Day 201.
37Hogan, The Independence of Elmer Rice 74.
argument,"38 Rice filled the courtroom with violence and uproar, altercations and shouts of charges and counter-charges. He injected this clatter and shouting in order to draw the public’s attention to the depravities of a fascist rule, with greater force. Rice stated that "to emphasize the extravagant and sinister character of the proceedings, I pitched the performances high, aiming at an emotional response from the audience. That was exactly what I got."39

Rice’s overwhelming emotional response to existing injustices, however, induced him to portray (as did most of his committed contemporaries) victims of oppression—people like Kuman—as righteous and affable, while tyrants like Vesnic are top officials and men of power and status. Nonetheless, as a convinced liberal, he encouraged the establishment of a democratic government instead of a proletarian rule. For his humanism taught him that "there can be no enduring peace in the world until democracy is established everywhere and the principles of social justice are universally applied."40

38 Durham, Elmer Rice 98.
39 Rice, Minority Report 338.
40 "Rice, "What are We Fighting for?" Herbert Agar ed., TMscc., July 6, 3 pp. Box 75-108, The Elmer Rice Collection, HRC, University of Texas, Austin, 3.
Rice's liberalism caused him to reinforce the idea of such change in his next play *Between Two Worlds*. Placing communism and capitalism in juxtaposition in the play thus suggested that reconciliation of the two systems would bring about an ideal society. The title itself indicates this theme, for it not only refers to the locale of the ship (on which the play's action takes place) between Europe and America but also to the focal conflict between the capitalist and the communist worlds.

For this purpose, Rice brings together a collection of disparate people from diverse cultures, on a large transatlantic liner. These include Kovolev—a Russian film director; Margaret Bowen—a rich American lady; Edward Maynard who is an advertising executive; Vivienne Sinclair—a Hollywood actress; her negro maid Rose; the Russian princess Elena, and her American friend Arthur Lloyd. Through their varied professions and social attitudes, Rice conveys his message. Kovolev and Margaret who represent the communist and capitalist systems respectively, expose the virtues and flaws of the two systems. Margaret's attitude in the beginning of the play gives the impression that life is easy-going and meant to be frittered away in fun. The frivolous tenor of the conversation that takes place amongst most of the
passengers, the meaningless talk, flippant behaviour and enjoyment of childish pranks symbolize the superficiality and unproductiveness of American society. Frank Durham perceives them as "cheap, noisy, ignorant, frivolous, complacent, bigoted and basically materialistic."

Edward Maynard becomes Rice’s spokesman and indicts the spirit of American people.

Parasites, that’s what we are. Parasites and blood suckers . . . Look at me. Do you know what I am? An advertising man—one of the biggest in the business. Imagine that. I’ve got brains, I’ve got nerve, I can do more work than three average men. I worked my way up from nothing, and what do I make of myself? An advertising man! Next to a stock-broker, practically the lowest form of animal life. What do I do with my brains and my talents? Sell them to the highest bidder—sell them to any robber baron, who made his pile by sweating his hired help and gypping the public. That’s how I put in my time. Frightening Bronx stenographers into thinking they smell bad and teasing the wives of Rotarians about the state of their intestines. There’s a career for a man with brains . . . . A first-class whore, that’s what I am."

He sees revolution as the only suitable course of action to "wipe this rotten, decadent, middle class civilization of ours right off the face of the earth." By revolution,}

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"Durham, Elmer Rice, 102.
"Rice, Between Two Worlds 232.
however, Rice means an enormous change that will expedite the country's progress. Being "unequivocally opposed to violence as a means of effecting social change" his revolution implies a transformation that would "not be guided by hysteria and mob spirit."  

Margaret also recognizes the capitalist system's unfairness. Later in the play she admits to Kovolev's accusation that she who produces nothing has everything because of workers' exploitation:

... there's a great deal of truth in that. I've thought about it more than you would believe. When I read about people starving or hear about somebody who's absolutely poverty-stricken, and stop to think how well-off I am, I have a real sense of guilt about it."

She finds her life quite meaningless and unfulfilled. This emptiness in her life is filled by her brief romance with the communist. When it is time to say goodbye, she confesses to him that she has discovered a new sense of social purpose. She tells him:

I've been restless and dissatisfied with myself for a long, long time and suddenly it all seems to have boiled over .... You've made me look at a lot of the things I've accepted as a matter of course and I feel as though it's given me a


"Rice, Between Two Worlds 214.
different point of view, not only about myself but about everything."

Margaret’s admission about the inadequacies of the American social system and her attraction towards the values that Kovolev represents show Rice’s longing for society to reform its vices and adopt the virtues of other systems. Margaret’s and Maynard’s, (both products of a capitalist society) recognition of the need for reform also epitomizes Rice’s attempt to elicit the same realization from the audience.

Rice further reinforces this thesis through a number of other striking and meaningful contrasts between Kovolev and other American representatives. Most obvious is the difference between Vivienne Sinclair and Kovolev, which contrasts not only on a personal but on a professional level as well. The dissimilarity between them emphasizes that a communist system does not encourage class differences. The glamorous and beautiful, but dumb, Hollywood actress’s attitude towards her profession differs by an order of magnitude from that of the serious minded and dedicated communist film director. He regards all art as political and views it as a means of social expression, condemning American movies for their

\text{"Rice, Between two worlds 298-99.\}
frivolousness. "This story of the little house and the romantic lovers, money, success, moonlight and birds singing, all this is [to him] only a dream, a beautiful vision to make the toiling classes forget their problems. It is only one of the weapons in the arsenal of capitalist propaganda."47 He also thinks of Jazz dancing in America as "a corrupt bourgeois custom".48 Vivienne, on the other hand has a different attitude towards her profession. Her main concern is to achieve success in terms of social status and money. She is only interested in the glitter that Hollywood offers. Her attitude symbolizes the fascination of American culture with glamour. In their personal attitudes too, there exists a vast difference. She mistreats her Negro maid, Rose, regardless of the latter’s education and training as a librarian, with callous indifference. Kovolev, on the other hand, shows the maid great compassion and consideration. Kovolev’s kind treatment of Rose, who is now an ordinary worker, makes her feel better than a second-or-third-class citizen. Rice’s admiration of an ideal classless society is further revealed when Kovolev tells Margaret that the "ones who spin the thread and weave the cloth, the ones

47 Rice, Between Two Worlds 203.
48 Rice, Between Two Worlds 247.
who catch the furs and dig the jewels, they do not wear these things. They give their sweat and their toil in order that you may fulfill every desire."

Attempting to make his premises more effective, Rice exposes the difference between the Russian princess Elena and Kovolev. The princess, after the loss of her parents in the revolution, has found a well-paid job as a beauty consultant in Margaret's father's departmental store. Yet, her financial security does not fulfill her emotional insecurity. Rice finds her existence inane and "as pointless and unproductive as it would have been had there been no revolution." The difference that Rice highlights here is between the useless and pampered child of the nobility against whom the revolution was directed and the self-confident and dedicated revolutionary who seeks to destroy or at least level those living at the expense of the poor.

Another contrast that intensifies Rice's thesis is the sexual impotence of the American, Lloyd Arthur, as juxtaposed to the strong sexual drive of Kovolev. Arthur's impotence serves as Rice's way of representing the sterility of the American system. Kovolev's potency, on

49 Rice, Between Two Worlds 214.
50 Hogan, The Independence of Elmer Rice 78.
the other hand, symbolizes the strength of the communist system. He evokes desire in Margaret and, as Durham observes, their union, becomes the "symbolically desirable union of the two cultures, prophetic of a new fertility in the old and a more humane vision in the new."51

This "humane vision," as Rice sees it, is an imperative need in the new order. Therefore, despite his sympathy for communist ideals, Rice, "the convinced libertarian . . . could not deny basic freedoms even to those he detested."52 Although he admires Kovolev's drive and commitment towards eradicating class differences, he cannot appreciate his insensitivity and lack of empathy for others. Just because he is an avowed member of the Communist Party, Kovolev feels that he can order the execution of other people. His dedication to the Party does not leave any room for personal relationships. After sleeping with Margaret he tells her next morning that he cannot take her back to Russia with him because the party would not accept it. "There are many women in the world," he tells her, "but for a Communist, there is only one party."53 This

51 Durham, Elmer Rice 101.
52 Rabkin, Drama and Commitment 253.
53 Rice, Between Two Worlds 285.
attitude reflects a total disregard for her feelings on his part. Rice also disapproves of the manner in which he ruthlessly tells the former princess Elena, that it was he who ordered her father's execution. Since Rice never did completely swallow the Communist ideology, such dogmatism seemed to him heartless and potentially disastrous—-that it could lead to a complete loss of one's essential human traits. The traits of tyranny are demonstrated in Kovolev when he converses with Margaret:

Margaret: What's your idea? To make everybody alike? To level everybody down, until we're nothing but a lot of machines.

Kovolev: To level, but not down. To use machines to liberate the oppressed classes and to build a classless society.

Margaret: Yes, and I suppose it doesn't matter how many people you torture and kill when you're doing it.

Kovolev: It is all a question of which people you kill.

Margaret: There's no justification for cruelty and cold-blooded murder.

Kovolev: You call it murder. We call it class-justice. It depends altogether upon whether you're killing or being killed.  

Rice's condemnation of Kovolev's dogmatism shows that for Rice, the integrity of the individual, dignity of human

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54Rice, Between Two Worlds 203-204.
relationships and the sanctity of the human soul are indispensable for any just society. This belief is again manifest in Margaret’s words to Kovolev:

I don’t understand philosophy or politics or any of those things. But I know there’s such a thing as treating others with consideration and that it’s a better way of life than yours is. I know that everyone wants to live his own life in his own way and to have his individuality respected.55

In praising its virtues and at the same time exposing the flaws of the communist system, Rice strikes a balance in his analysis of the two systems. Furthermore, as he has Margaret admit the flaws of the American system, he ensures an apology to her from Kovolev for his harsh behaviour. Kovolev admits that it was unfair on his part to overlook the virtues of sympathy and compassion, while striving to advance his cause. This attempt to view life from the other’s point of view makes them both better human beings. The implication is that it is perhaps possible to find a meeting ground after all. Such an ending is designed to inspire hope. The convergence theory of Soviet-American evolution is here being dramatized.

55Rice, Between Two Worlds 287.
Since Rice had made common cause with the Communists on many humane issues, it is not surprising that the Communists’ liberal ‘Popular Front’ policy of protecting democracy from Fascism appealed to him. Recognizing the fascist threat as disastrous to human dignity, he realized, as Atkinson says, "that the time has come to defend the heritage of free people and free institutions." He propounded the principles of freedom with immense fervour in his 1938 play American Landscape. In Rice’s own words the play became:

"Once more a plea for tolerance, for freedom of the mind, of the spirit. It is an affirmation of the American way of life. It is a call to the colors . . . in the sense that the principles of our democracy, now in grave danger, are something worth defending from extremes without and within."

Rice expressed the need for preserving the traditional values of freedom and basic human rights through a dramatization of a crisis in a typical Connecticut family which stands as a symbol of American traditions. For fear of the unionization of workers, the head of the family, Captain Frank Dale, decides to sell

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the family business—a shoe factory, to a larger company which intends to close it down after the purchase. After the business deal is completed, Dale wants to retire to Florida where he can live free from the harassment of workers. In addition, he also intends to sell off the family farm, which, in an economically precarious age, is no longer profitable. He thinks of selling off his old homestead to an American Nazi Bund that wants to use it as a youth camp for the training of young Nazis. The rest of the family members, however, object to this idea of losing control over their family property and business, and assemble to convince him against his decision.

To dissuade the Captain from selling the family business, the ghosts of their ancestors arrive to become a part of the family councils. Among the ghosts are Tony, Carlotta’s blind husband and a victim of the first World War; a revolutionary war captain; Moll Flanders, a remote grandmother; and Mrs Harriet Beecher Stowe who is a distant cousin. The chief objection is to selling the homestead to the Nazis whom the family perceives as a terrible threat. The heritage of the family tradition is too precious for them to lose. However, Captain Dale dies of a heart-attack before reaching any decision, and the property falls into the grandchildren’s hands, who resolve to preserve it. Grandfather Dale’s death before he
can make a decision is Rice’s way of stressing the continuity of American ideals. Rice cannot allow the abrogation of American heritage into foreign hands and thus arranges for the property to pass on to the younger generation. Connie, who receives sixty percent of the factory stocks, wants to keep it operating, and Fran, who gets a large part of the rest of the property, also wants to use it productively as an abode for her husband to resume his “serious writing”. This turn of events preserves not only the Dale heritage but also symbolizes a reaffirmation of the country’s strength in the face of internal and external threat. Rice intensifies this theme in the concluding speech of Tony and Captain Frank Dale respectively who reemerge purged as ghosts from the past.

Tony: Beware of those who seek to enslave you and to force you and your children into uniform, whether of the body or of the mind. You have sharp brains and strong hands. Use them to create, to build, to make things grow—not to slaughter and destroy.

Frank: I leave you a tradition . . . of freedom and of the common rights of humanity. It’s a priceless heritage. Cherish it! Cherish it! And be prepared to defend it . . . . the future is in your hands.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{58}Elmer Rice, American Landscape. A Play in Three Acts (New York: Coward McCann, Inc., 1939) 141-42.
Vesting responsibility with the younger generation also reveals that Rice, like Odets, feels that it is up to the next generation to protect their country. For this reason he evokes a positive response from the children.

But even though America's traditions are to be preserved, Rice does not forget to point out that the system calls for socio-economic changes. According to Rice, "old concepts of rugged individualism, as represented by Frank's point of view, must be replaced by new social theories." Connie's decision to marry the factory foreman, Joe Kutnoe, "a proletarian who is involved in the fight for unionization" manifests this change. Other changes that the system needs include removal of racial prejudice, alteration of government policies towards agriculture in favour of the farmer, and better conditions for workers. Rice reveals his anger toward racial prejudice through the victimization of Joe Kutnoe and his immigrant Polish family. Kutnoe talks about the privileges that, despite decades of having lived in the United States, he and his family have been denied. He complains that even though they've resided in the country longer than the Dales, his father is "just the

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59 Rabkin, Drama and Commitment 256.
60 Rabkin, Drama and Commitment 256.
hand that runs the farm, and . . . [his] old lady cooks
the dinner (for the Dales) and . . . [his] kid sister helps
out. And it’s the same with all the other Polacks and
Finns and Canucks. \(^{61}\)

On the other hand, Frank Dale blames the government
as responsible for the farmers’ economic difficulties.

I learned to work the land when I was a boy, and
I’ve seen many a crop through from the first
turning of the earth to the milling of the
grain. But farming is no longer farming, I tell
you. It took me a while to learn that I wasn’t
running my farm, that it was being run by
middlemen and speculators and obscure fellows in
government offices--city slickers who had never
known the smell of a stable or the feel of a
handful of damp soil. . . . The costs went up
and the prices went down. It used to sicken me
to see the fine, firm apples rotting on the
ground because it didn’t pay to crate and ship
them.\(^{62}\)

Here Frank Dale becomes the spokesman for the entire
farmer
community who suffered severely during the thirties from
the avalanche of the Depression.

Dale’s decision to sell off his business when
numerous workers depended upon it for their livelihood,
represents management’s maltreatment of their employees.
As Joe Kutnoe says, “there’s men down there that have been

\(^{61}\)Rice, American Landscape 47.
\(^{62}\)Rice, American Landscape 109.
working thirty, forty years and lots of family men, too. Where are they going to find jobs?" This explicitly affirms Rice’s belief that the owners ought to be more responsible in dealing with the workers. At least the former can get back a substantial amount of money by liquidating their assets. For this reason, Rice favours unionization of workers and collective bargaining which, though unable to prevent factories from closing down, protects their rights. He thinks that the introduction of such a change will help the country build a stronger foundation for itself. Through a description of the Dale’s living room, a symbol of the nation, he metaphorically suggests the need for a strong foundation on which to build the nation’s values:

Some of the furniture is old, some new. . . . In one corner is a spinning wheel, in another a radio cabinet. One lamp has a pewter base, another is a large modern reading lamp. . . . Some of the ash trays are from provincial France and Italy, and some from the five-and-ten-cent store. . . . The fire place has a brisk hearth, and old andirons. . . . It is not a house of luxury or ostentation, but of good, solid, sensible living."

Rice’s feeling of repugnance towards "ostentation" and aversion to "materialistic" values becomes clear in

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"Rice, American Landscape 45.

"Rice, American Landscape x.

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his indictment of Hollywood which epitomizes America's preoccupation with the pursuit of wealth. Rice sees the motion picture industry's influence on personal relationships as shattering. For this reason he refers to Jerry's attachment with a cheap but glamorous actress, Lola Landen, as nothing more than a jejune affair, which jeopardizes his marriage with Fran. Finding their life together quite meaningless and filled with hypocrisy, Fran contemplates divorce. To her, life at Hollywood means to get "all prettied up for a party to which you were asked because the hostess didn't know what the hell else to do . . . ."65 However, the marriage is saved when Jerry abandons Hollywood and comes back to the farm--his "valuable and traditional old" heritage."

Rice's plays reveal that his commitment arose primarily from an honest concern with human welfare. For this reason he condemns exploitative institutions, war, Fascism and praises a preservation of the American heritage. While his anger towards existing political and economic institutions causes his indictment of them, his humanism boosts faith in humankind's willingness to make

65Rice, American landscape 23.
66Hogan, The Independence of Elmer Rice 94.
progress through constructive change.

To achieve reform in society, Rice tried to evoke a response from the public. To accomplish this he needed to create images of real people on stage. Thus, most of his characters in *Street Scene*, *We, the People*, *Judgement Day*, *Between Two Worlds*, and *American Landscape* are alive and recognizable human beings. In *We, the People*, Alan's painful experience in the prison throws light on the real suffering of those who become easy victims of exploitation. Likewise Larry Collins' psychological wounds resulting from his participation in the 1917 war reveal the agony of those who fought for their nation.

I’m all through, am I? I was good enough for the trenches, wasn’t I? I was good enough for the rats and the cooties and the latrines. I was good enough to kill Germans and cough up gas and my goddam lungs along with it. But that’s all over. The war’s over. And they’re through with me.67

On observing his expertise at creating believable characters in *We, the People* Kenneth McKean remarked: "We counted no more than half a dozen characters out of his fifty who did not have the breath of life".68 It is this

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67Rice, *We, the People* 106.

68Kenneth McKean, "We, the People flashes many similar types of present-day Americans," *Stage* 10,6 (March 1933): 21.
"breath of life" which effectively presents not only the physical and spiritual demise of the orderliness of society but also the psychotic wounds and the private neuroses of people who suffered. Similarly, the typical attitudes of the various characters in Between Two Worlds, represent their cultural values and attitudes.

In order to induce reality on stage, Rice created a dialogue that seems true and honest to the voices of the people he intended to portray. In We, the People Alan’s revelation to Mary about his miserable stay in the prison where "[i]f . . . [he]’d have had to stay there much longer, . . . [he] would have killed [him]self. . . ." is not a fantastic concoction but the articulation of a victim of perfidious accusation. In Between Two Worlds the realistic and evocative dialogue of the various characters matches each one’s personality and complex nature. Although the verbal exchange between judges and the accused that takes place in the courtroom in Judgement Day is highly melodramatic, it fits within the serious framework of the play. On the other hand, though the reemergence of characters as Ghosts of the past in the melodrama American Landscape reemphasizes this point, the idea seems too far-fetched to be convincing.

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“Rice, We, the People 231.

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However, the authenticity of most of Rice’s characters, and the deftness with which the spoken discourse in Rice’s plays presented reality were effective in drawing the socially minded public’s attention. After a performance of Judgement Day the crowd in the balconies responded passionately, giving "vent to the increasing excitement by thumping applause and shouts for the author." The play’s just indictment of a significant contemporary problem made it popular in England as well as in Europe. Such a response is convincing proof that Rice’s plays were widely welcomed. This response, in fact, convinced him of the play’s success, after which he wrote to The Times: "The cheers of the audiences who are coming to see Judgment Day convince me that they are delighted and thrilled to hear a fighting subject discussed in fighting terms."

Furthermore, the timeliness of the play’s theme impressed critics with Rice’s growing sensitivity to the increasing fascist threat and commitment to rectify the situation. By the year 1938, with Fascism raging high in Europe, the fear of another war turned into dread. This

71Quoted in Hogan, The Independence of Elmer Rice 71.
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led a critic to comment, after a performance of the play at Cleveland in 1938:

Time has served Mr. Rice well. In that four years’ period, Mr. Rice’s [apparent] exaggerations have come to seem prophetic and his passionateness of feeling [now seem] moderate and justifiable.72

Underlying some of Rice’s plays is an assumption about the effect of external forces upon mankind’s behaviour. It is the system, implies Rice, that creates criminals. In Street Scene, Maurrant’s frustration with his poverty and inability to provide the comfort that his wife’s lover does results in his killing her. In We, the People it is the authorities’ false accusation that pushes Allen on the path of crime. Showing Mary a gun which he bought for six dollars, he expresses little hesitation about using it “just in case they ever try to make . . . [him] go back to that place.”13 Likewise in Judgement Day it is the mendacity and hypocrisy of the administration in the courtroom trial that induces Judge Slatarsky to kill Vesnic.

To present a wide spectrum of the injustices prevalent in society, Rice uses a panoramic method. In

72Quoted in Minority Report 372.
73Rice, We, the People 232.
Street Scene he shows the poverty and misery of the lower middle-class through a cross-section of a New York slum community. In We, the People he throws light on various social injustices through the suffering of a worker, a school teacher, a white-collar man, a war veteran, a professor and a Negro. In Between Two Worlds he presents as many characters as there are plots, interweaving them into a whole to present at once a microcosm of the split world as he views it. The disparate characters [as in We, the People] help provide 
"... a panoramic presentation of the economic-social situation in America, an expose of the forces of reaction which stand in the way of a better life for the masses of the American people and a plea for a return to the principles enunciated in the declaration of Independence and the Constitution."74

Committed to social reform, Rice presented dramas that were didactic and designed to teach a lesson to the audience to which he was catering. He hoped to awaken his audiences by scenes of responsibility to fight prevailing ills. Street Scene teaches the viewer to be wary of any economic system designed for individual profits. We, the People teaches one to restore the democratic values of

74 "Apologia Pro Vita Sua," 3.

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freedom, liberty and human integrity. Judgement Day gives a lesson about the disastrous consequences of succumbing to the pressures of a totalitarian system. Between Two Worlds attempts to convince that an ideal society would comprise a synthesis of capitalist and communist ideals.

Rice responded fervently in an age that demanded social protest. His plays of the 1930s leave little doubt about his commitment to social and political reform for the benefit of mankind. The reasons for his humanitarian concerns become clear upon a reflection of his years of struggle and the poverty and suffering that he witnessed around him. Rice confessed:

"My family lived always on the border of indigence, to contribute to the support of the household. . . . my sensitivities were roughly bruised by the sudden and unfamiliar contrast with the realities of life. The awakening emotions . . . cried aloud for expression and frantically—although, of course, unconsciously—-I sought for a faith: an escape from the actualities of the sordid and stifling world into which involuntarily I had been thrust."

The misery of human beings not only transformed him into a humanist but caused him to probe into the root of the problem. Rice reported:

7Rice, "An Appeal to American Intellectuals," Box 75, F 75--110, TMs., nd, 3 pp. The Elmer Rice Collection, HRC University of Texas, Austin, 1-2.
During all those years of shackled living and distressful searching, there was slowly awakening in me the beginnings of what may be called social idealism. My own half-conscious discontent with the sterility of my own existence, and my somewhat inchoate visions of what a good life might be like, sharpened, no doubt, my perceptions of the external world and made me acutely aware of the sordidness and squalor, the poverty and misery that were everywhere. The actual existence of a great majority of the populace seemed in shocking contrast to one's imaginings of a desirable world.76

As a result of this experience Rice searched for answers to existing problems. This search drew his attention to the writings of British and European playwrights like Shaw and Ibsen, who taught him that the purpose of the theatre was to present political, economic and social themes. Other works included More's Utopia, Bacon's New Atlantis, Campanellas' City in the Sun, Swift's Voyage to the Houyhnhnms, Bellamy's Looking Backward, Morris' News From Nowhere, Butler's Erewhon, Wells' A Modern Utopia, and Hudson's The Crystal Age, all of which he read in his youth. Though the rebellion against "poverty" and the "squalor" had been Rice's primary motivations, these writers, according to Rice, showed him "that the existing order of things does not express the best that mankind is capable of." The writings of H.G Wells, Shaw, Annie

7Rice, "An Appeal to American Intellectuals" 2.

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Besant, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, which expressed an animosity for capitalism, strengthened his faith. And the works of Ibsen, Hauptmann, Galsworthy, Gorky, Brieux, Dickens, Charles Reade, Zola, Upton Sinclair and Frank Norris made him aware of "the inequities, cruelties, hypocrisies and corruptness of the existing social order" and "convinced . . . [him] of the evils of the capitalist system and its concomitant institutions." They showed him "the need for revolutionary changes in human institutions and attitudes" and won him over "to what may generically be called Socialism." 17

This influence, as Rice himself testified, imbued him with a spirit of reforming the system. Rice wrote:

"In the pages of these writers I heard enunciated in clear and ringing tones my own half-formed and inarticulate cries of protest . . . I saw for the first time the vision of a new world: A world in which chaos was dissolved and disorder banished, a world harmoniously compounded and built upon the foundations of justice, tolerance and peace." 18

The miserable conditions of workers and the social conflicts in society strengthened his social beliefs further and became the subject of discussion in The Iron Cross. In the depths of the Depression Rice's concern with

"Rice, "An Appeal to American Intellectuals" 3.
the plight of human beings reached its peak. The need for
social protest imparted a socialist slant to his thinking
and caused his affiliation with many left-wing causes.
Though not committed to leftist dogma, he expressed faith
in socialist ideas through active membership in "groups
concerned with the betterment of society" such as The
Socialist Press Club, an association of leftist writers.

Rice's disgust with the commercial spirit of the
American theatre strengthened his commitment. In 1934 he
wrote: "I was disenchanted with the commercial theatre
long before I was ever in it. . . . I have always been,
and still am, interested in the drama as an art form, a
social force and a medium for the expression of ideas."79
It is not surprising then that a writer with socialist
convictions and an inclination to use the theatre as a
medium of social protest, should turn his back towards the
commercial theatre and help amateur organizations like
the 'Morningside Players' and the 'University Settlement
Dramatic Society' in producing plays that were related to
contemporary affairs. His commitment to the eradication of
social injustices led to his resignation from the position
of regional director of the Federal Theatre on 23 January,
1936, after F.D.R's administration imposed censorship on

79"Elmer Rice says Farewell to Broadway," New York Times,
11 Nov. 1934., Sec.9: 1.
the Living Newspaper production of Ethiopia. His founding of the Federal Theatre Project with Hallie Flanagan in 1935 was itself a manifestation of his humanitarian commitment. The project gave great impetus to the production of socially efficacious plays, following a political pattern which closely resembled the ideology of the Popular Front. By virtue of its low ticket prices, it brought plays within the vicinity of those hitherto excluded from the theatre for lack of funds. Rice's affiliation to this project is significant. As Ira Levine observes:

Itself a political institution brought into existence for the purpose of ameliorating an explicit economic problem, the unemployment of professional theatre artists and technicians, the project was inevitably conscious of socioeconomic conditions. This awareness was enhanced by the theatrical orientation of those who molded the project--Flanagan, Elmer Rice, Philip Barber—all of whom agreed that the theatre was not simply a commercial enterprise, but that it was properly an educative and social force that could, at the very least, illuminate some of the problems that confronted America.

His formation of 'The Playwrights' Company', a non-profit organization which concentrated on the production of protest plays, and close association with the Federal

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*Levine, Left-wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre 153.*
Theatre reflect his concern with expediting the social function of the theatre. His repudiation of Broadway that it was "the cheapest and tawdriest street in the world," reveals his determination to rescue the theatre from "the hands of business men, of real estate operators and entrepreneurs, whose chief interest is to capitalize the creative talents of the authors and actors and turn them in to dollars and cents." For this reason, he defiantly stated that *We, the People*, which did not receive much appreciation, was not written for Broadway:

It was written for the people who believe that the theatre can be something besides a place of entertainment and forgetfulness, that art can serve as a useful social function, that the stage is a legitimate forum for the discussion in emotional and dramatic terms of problems that affect the lives and the happiness of millions, that the theatre has the right to touch reality and realize its voice in behalf of social idealism.

He also said that "if Broadway had liked *We, the People*, I should have known that I had failed in what I attempted

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Rice continued to fight against all forms of injustice in the next two decades as well. In 1945, he resigned as director of the New York City Center after the banning of Trio; he protested against the ban on *The Moon is Blue* in 1953. He asked for amnesty for sixteen communists imprisoned under the Smith Act in 1955, and he resisted the censorship imposed on various groups in 1956, which threatened the freedom of expression.

Nonetheless, as political and economic conditions improved, the intensity of his commitment to social protest in drama started to decrease.

To recall Rice's work primarily as social drama is not to denigrate his artistic and aesthetic abilities. His prolific and versatile style, the inventiveness with which he used forms such as expressionism in *The Adding Machine*, naturalism in *Street Scene*, and realism in *We, the People* to convey his social ideas, and his panoramic method which enabled him to present at once a wide range of social problems effectively, all exhibit a highly talented craftsman. All this, along with the fervour with which he spoke out against the conflicts of the period, gives him a

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*Quoted in Durham, *Elmer Rice* 95.

*Rabkin, *Drama and Commitment* 247-248.*
special place not only amongst important social dramatists of the thirties but also in modern American drama.