

## ABSTRACT

Buried Underground:  
*The Subway's* Contribution to the American Theatre

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*The Subway* (written 1923, performed 1929) is Elmer Rice's lesser-known American expressionist work. The play's lowered status amongst his dramatic work stems from its problematic production history, coupled with critical comparison to Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928). Rice speaks little on the play, giving the entirety of its production history a mere three paragraphs in his autobiography, *Minority Report* (1963).

Despite this, Rice believed the play to be a greater example of American expressionism than *The Adding Machine*. Further, the comparisons to *Machinal* are not coincidental but in fact indicate an influence on Treadwell's play. In examining *The Subway's* text, production history, and critical reception, this thesis strives to present a thorough appraisal of its theatrical relevance, rectify the obscurity surrounding the work, and consider evidence of the play's direct influence on Treadwell's text.

Buried Underground:  
*The Subway's Contribution to the American Theatre*

By

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Theater Arts

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To my family.  
Your unconditional love and support have made this work possible.  
Thank you.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### *Elmer Rice's The Subway*

Despite Elmer Rice's claim in his autobiography that he wrote "some fifty full-length plays (about twenty of them unproduced); four novels, three of which have been published; a book about the theatre; an indeterminate number of short stories, one-act plays, articles, book reviews, motion pictures, radio and television scripts; and the present volume"<sup>1</sup>, only two of his plays have garnered lasting critical attention: *The Adding Machine* and *Street Scene*. Of these, the former still stands as a major contributor to the genre of American expressionism while the latter earned Rice his only Pulitzer Prize. The remainder of his work, though vast, has often been lumped together in examinations of Rice's dramaturgy rather than analyzed individually.

One play in particular is frequently neglected in examinations of Rice's oeuvre. *The Subway* (written 1923, performed 1929) is Rice's least-known American expressionist work. Though it followed closely behind *The Adding Machine* (1923) in conception, it was not produced until after *Street Scene* (1929). *The Subway's* lowered status amongst his plays stems from its problematic production history and frequent comparison to Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928). Rice spoke little on the play, giving the entirety of its production history a mere three paragraphs in his autobiography, *Minority Report* (1963). Despite this, Rice believed the play to be a greater example of

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<sup>1</sup> Elmer Rice, *Minority Report: An Autobiography*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 470.

*Minority Report* (1963). Despite this, Rice believed the play to be a greater example of American expressionism than *The Adding Machine*. Further, the comparisons to *Machinal* are not coincidental but in fact indicate a potential influence on Treadwell's play. *The Subway*'s importance within the genre of American expressionism is indicated by these firm ties between *The Adding Machine*, *The Subway*, and *Machinal* and the similarities between *The Subway* and *Machinal*, calling for its reexamination. In examining *The Subway*'s text, production history, and critical reception, this thesis strives to present a thorough appraisal of the play's theatrical relevance and rectify the obscurity surrounding the work. Additionally, this study will illustrate the variety of ways *The Subway* exemplifies American expressionism and consider evidence of the play's direct influence on Treadwell's text.

### *Life and Works*

Rice was born Elmer Reizenstein on Sept. 28, 1892, in New York City. Following two years of high school, he began working at the age of 14. He entered the New York Law School and graduated cum laude in 1912. Although he passed his bar exams, he instead pursued writing. Rice's first play, *The Passing of Chow-Chow* (written 1913, published 1925), satirized the American tendency to romanticize marriage by presenting a couple on the verge of divorce after the husband throws the family pet down a flight of stairs. *On Trial* (1914), a courtroom drama with testimonies told through flashback scenes, followed. The importance of humanity over machine, which would later become a recurring theme in Rice's dramaturgy, first appears in this play; a juror makes reference to the spirit of justice, stating that it must rely on human understanding. Man is not a machine, foreshadowing *The Adding Machine*'s Mr. Zero and *The Subway*'s Sophie.

During the events of World War I, Rice spent two years in Hollywood as a screenwriter before becoming disillusioned with the manipulative micromanagement of film producers and moving to Connecticut. *The Iron Cross* (1917), his next work, tells the story of the schism and reunion between a patriotic war hero and his wife who, after being raped by an enemy soldier, chooses to care for the enemy's child. In his next play, *The House in Blind Alley* (1917), various fairy tale creatures are forced into child labor by indifferent elders and, by Act III, are fed directly into a machine, becoming food for the elite. This is intended as a metaphor for America's abusive child labor laws, which was a serious concern at the time. *The House in Blind Alley*, through its usage of rich visual metaphor and treatment of injustice to the working class, may be the strongest foreshadowing of the coming *The Adding Machine*.

His next two plays were *The Home of the Free* and *A Diadem in the Snow*, both composed in 1917. *The Home of the Free* details the comedic circumstances involving a man who attempts to marry his sweetheart, only to discover that she is his half-sister by his father. The play was a marked improvement in satiric writing from Rice's previous efforts, namely *The Passing of Chow-Chow*. *A Diadem in the Snow*, on the other hand, is the opposite in tone. It tells the fictional story of ex-czar Nicholas II's banishment to Siberia in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution and his subsequent acceptance of rural life over the pressures of the crown. The drama continued the trend of Rice's plays toward a nonmechanical, idyllic lifestyle, a trend which later led to his expressionistic ventures. Though Rice would write only full-length dramas afterward, both plays offer a glimpse at Rice's maturing technique in different ways.

*Wake Up, Jonathon* (1921) picked up the thread of corporate critique as left by *The House in Blind Alley*. It follows a monstrous business tycoon who alienates his family through continued financial swindling and corporate betrayals. Finally, when faced with the risk of losing his family, he decides to spontaneously reverse his attitude, ending the play on a happy note. Similar to *On Trial* and *The House in Blind Alley*, *Wake Up, Jonathon*'s condemns mechanized American society and business as corrupt.

This growing discontent with capitalism, which was evident as early as *On Trial*, culminated in Rice's first Broadway success, *The Adding Machine* (1923). An expressionistic critique of American society and corporate culture, the nightmarish play follows Mr. Zero, a dull worker drone who, upon murdering his boss and being executed, discovers that the cycle of life and death is one of monotonous, eternal toil. Ironically, while the play is now known as Rice's greatest work, the play earned him no money.

Six years and two more productions would pass before his magnum opus, the naturalistic *Street Scene* which debuted in 1929 and garnered Rice his first and only Pulitzer Prize. At the same time, *The Subway*, very much in the shadow cast by *Street Scene*, had a short run before quietly fading into near obscurity. The next four years saw a novel, six new productions, and a trip to Europe and Russia. Of these six productions, Rice personally directed the debuts of five: *See Naples and Die*, 1930; *The Left Bank*, a 1931 satire involving futile escapes from American capitalism; *Counsellor-at-Law*, a 1931 naturalistic vignette of the legal system in which Rice had previously worked; *We, the People*, an ambitious 1933 epic which detailed the unfortunate circumstances surrounding a skilled laborer and his family in the Great Depression; and *Judgment Day*, a 1934 cautionary tale of the dangers of fascism inspired by Rice's distrust of Hitler.

With the exception of *We, the People*, the plays were a moderate financial success, though none of these productions achieved the status of his earlier plays. *We, the People*, however, drew harsher critical appraisal. Finally, after the failure of *Between Two Worlds* (which juxtaposed capitalism and communism in hopes of gaining middle ground between the extremes) in 1934, Rice announced his retirement from commercial theater, tired of scrutiny from theatre critics.

This retirement proved to be only temporary, however, as Rice served with the Federal Theater Project, helped organize The Playwrights' Company, and published a second novel within the next three years. During the course of World War II Rice worked with the American Office of War Information, the American Civil Liberties Union, and was president of the Dramatists' Guild. Throughout this time, Rice would continue to write and direct his work, though *Dream Girl* (1945), a comedy concerned with daydreams and fantasies, is the only notable work of this time. In the last two decades of his life, he wrote a third novel, an examination of the world of theatre (*The Living Theatre*), his autobiography *Minority Report*, an additional five plays, and numerous essays and pamphlets. Rice passed away from a heart attack in 1967.

### *Problem and Research Question*

Despite numerous publications on Rice's work and his placement as a significant writer in the American dramatic canon, little information is officially provided on his play *The Subway*. This study of Rice's "black sheep" play is significant as, to my knowledge, no attempt has been made to compile *The Subway*'s troublesome history in its entirety, particularly its complicated relationship with *Machinal*. With *The Subway*'s strong connections to the two quintessential American expressionist plays mentioned

earlier, the lack of comprehensive study on the work poses a glaring hole in both the history of Elmer Rice's work and of American expressionist theatre.

In addition to its notable absence in *Minority Report*, *The Subway* has received only limited scholarly coverage. There are several books dedicated to documenting Rice's work but none focus on a specific play, let alone *The Subway*. Works such as Robert Hogan's *The Independence of Elmer Rice* (1965), Frank Durham's *Elmer Rice* (1970), and Anthony F.R. Palmieri's *Elmer Rice: A Playwright's Vision for America* (1980) detail Rice's life, but provide only supplementary focus on his body of work. Michael Vanden Heuvel's *Elmer Rice: A Research and Production Sourcebook* comes the closest to detailing *The Subway*'s history, but its focus is limited to dates, reviews, and cast lists; while useful in detailing when and where a production occurred, it does not specify why.

Further, *The Subway*'s potential importance as an American expressionist text has not been recognized. Rice's usage of American expressionism is typically exemplified in *The Adding Machine*; rarely does *The Subway* appear as anything more than a footnote in comparison. On the rare occasions *The Subway* is featured as the focus of scholarly critique, it is to focus on a particular aspect of American expressionism within the play rather than treat the entirety of the play to a thorough examination. Mardi Valgema's "Elmer Rice's *The Subway*" (1967) and Cynthia McCown's "*The Subway*: Sophie as Elmer Rice's Ms. Zero" (2004) both shed light on the play but only focus on a single embodiment of American expressionism within its text, leaving its overall contribution to movement unsaid.

## *Methodology*

The research involved for this thesis relied heavily on archival work. Elmer Rice's papers are held and preserved by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, located at the University of Texas in Austin. Both the center and Rice's documents are vital in creating a detailed examination of *The Subway* and its production history. This study is divided into three chapters to cover the entirety of *The Subway*'s history, style, and controversy. Each of these provides crucial details when attempting to better understand *The Subway* within the context of the American theatre. The respective chapters, and brief descriptions of their content, are given here to indicate how this thesis will proceed.

The second chapter, "*American Expressionism and The Subway*," examines the elements of American expressionism, defining core beliefs and briefly listing distinctions from German expressionism. In addition to this, it examines Rice's own views on expressionist drama, both German and American, and how *The Subway* compares to the surrounding works in its author's oeuvre, namely *On Trial*, *The Adding Machine*, and *Street Scene*. Then, it provides a brief summary of *The Subway*'s action before focusing on the play's artistic style and its role in American expressionistic drama and Rice's dramaturgical evolution. Specifically, it discusses where the tenets of the genre arise within the text of *The Subway* and their physical stage manifestation in productions. Then, it addresses its problematic production history, positing a link between this history and its absence from scholarly review. Finally, critical reviews of the Broadway debut, in which many reviewers brought to light similarities with Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, are presented.

The third chapter, “*The Problem of Machinal*,” addresses the remarkable similarity between *The Subway* and *Machinal*. It begins by presenting Rice’s personal belief that the play bore too coincidental a resemblance to *The Subway*, written five years prior. This suspicion, made apparent in numerous letters and an attempted infringement claim, has been overlooked in every account of *The Subway*’s history. To investigate the playwright’s theory, the chapter examines the previously mentioned critical reviews and follows with an analysis of the similarities between the works, contrasting the female protagonists, their plights in a capitalistic and objectifying society, their disastrous affairs, and the choice for both plays to end with the characters’ deaths. After doing so, this chapter concludes with a summation of *Machinal*’s effect on *The Subway*’s reception.

Despite its lowered status amongst his plays and its financial failure, Rice maintained that *The Subway* “was even more expressionistic than *The Adding Machine*.”<sup>2</sup> The product of a playwright’s devotion to exposing the dangers of American industry and capitalism, *The Subway*’s harsh criticism of the mechanization of society is fully expressionistic. Further, its similarity to *Machinal* is not coincidental, nor is it a byproduct of the expressionistic style, as I will discuss in chapter three. These resemblances, along with the strong connections between *The Subway* and two of American expressionism’s most important plays *The Adding Machine* and *Machinal*, establish a need to reexamine *The Subway*’s place in the history of theatre.

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<sup>2</sup> William R. Elwood, *An Interview with Elmer Rice on Expressionism*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), 5.

## CHAPTER TWO

### American Expressionism and *The Subway*

#### *German and American Expressionism*

The growing popularity of expressionism in 1920s America caused trouble for theatre critics and artists attempting to differentiate it from not only the multiple forms of nonrealism popular at this time but also its German counterpart. Ronald H. Wainscott gives a thorough description of the theatrical movement in *The Emergence of the Modern American Theater, 1914-1929*:

More specifically, both American and German expressionism were methods of presenting theatrical event, character, language, and location that objectified and externalized theatrically either what is subjective and internal for the characters in the play or the point of view of the theatrical artists presenting the work.

Wainscott continues that the result was “extreme subjectivism” which “distorted, abstracted, and fragmented representational event, location, and character, often leading to depictions of destruction, madness, and irrational emotional expression.”<sup>1</sup> This description covers both German and American expressionism but does not serve to distinguish the two.

It is important to note here the distinction between the German and American strains of expressionism and their further sub-classifications. Jonathon Chambers provides a description of both in his article “To Break Down The Walls Of The Theatre:

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Wainscott, *The Emergence of the Modern American Theater, 1914-1929*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 91.

John Howard Lawson's *Roger Bloomer*.” He begins by describing German expressionistic drama as divided into mystic and active expressionism. Mystic expressionism, Chambers expounds, contains a universal hero who “constantly battles bitterness and frustration but is ultimately doomed to sacrifice him/herself to internal pressures.” In opposition to this is active expressionism, in which the hero “strives to impress his/her message upon the world and through his/her struggle, transforms society.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, where mystic expressionism follows the doomed hero’s spiritual journey, active expressionism focuses on social change. Of the two, however, mystic expressionism was the more widely implemented. Chambers adds that the American expressionists were also divided into these two categories and that the uniquely American subject matter of American expressionism is its largest distinction from its German counterpart, which deals with society from a strictly nihilistic ideological perspective.<sup>3</sup> Examples of this “uniquely American subject matter” here are topics of masculinity, capitalism, corporate greed, and corruption of the American Dream. German expressionism, on the other hand, focused primarily on its roots in Nietzschean philosophy.

When speaking of German expressionism, there are three major classifications, as originally proposed by Mel Gordon: *geist*, *schrei*, and *ich* performance. The first category, *geist*, describes plays which are wholly concerned with visual spectacle, using mystic stage imagery and abstraction to create a transcendental connection with the entranced viewer. August Stramm’s *Sancta Susanna*, with its emphasis on atmosphere

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<sup>2</sup>Jonathon Chambers, “To Break Down The Walls Of The Theatre: John Howard Lawson's *Roger Bloomer*,” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 14, 2002, 44-5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

over narrative, best fits this category. The second, *schrei*, reverses this, focusing its expressionistic abstraction on its characterization as opposed to its atmosphere. Physical and literary characterization in *schrei* becomes as abrupt, violent, and angular as the stark onstage imagery of *geist*, manifesting in the actions and words of the characters. Walter Hasenclever's *Der Sohn* (*The Son*) exemplifies this form, as its characters' violent, often abrupt, confrontations contrast with its otherwise fairly unexpressionistic setting. The third, *ich*, is similar to *schrei*, but further provides a contrasting chorus for its lead character, creating an oppressive society from which the protagonist is isolated. Where *geist* seeks to create a transcendental experience for the viewer, *ich* attempts to convey the need for social change to the audience, utilizing the opposing crowd of characters as a representation of society's failings. Georg Kaiser's *Von Morgens bis Mitternachts* (*From Morn to Midnight*) provides the best example of this sub-genre, offering the Bank Teller's journey toward self-realization as a contrast to a materialistic society.<sup>4</sup>

In each of these classifications, the overall ideal of German expressionism is the Nietzsche-inspired creation of the New Man; the protagonist attempts to free himself of material ties by challenging the industrial, materialistic society from which he is forcibly awoken. More often than not, however, his efforts end in failure, as society has become too entrenched in its mechanized state. While women are not entirely excluded and serve a role in this original German ideology, it is merely one relegated to facilitation or hindrance in the inherently masculine process of becoming the New Man. On the whole, German expressionism is largely preoccupied with the essence of humanity, attempting to prescribe an ideal state for man. As Chambers notes, the American strain of

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<sup>4</sup> Neil H. Donahue, *A Companion to the Literature of German Expressionism*, (Rochester: Camden House, 2005), 19-20.

expressionism, while containing the containing the essential essence of this philosophy, is grounded in an innate “Americanness” which informs its social and political opinion. Thus, the protagonist is defined predominantly in dealings with the dangers of commercialism and masculinity. Further, women play a substantially larger role in American expressionism. Overall, American expressionism is more interested in individual psychology than humanity as a whole.

In an earlier analysis of expressionism, theatre scholar Sherril E. Grace posits another defining trait of the movement: its level of abstraction. To exemplify this, she provides another, separate distinction that classifies the genres, both German and American, as falling into either iconic or non-iconic expressionism. The key difference here relies on the level of abstraction within the work. Expanding on the theories of Wilhelm Worringer, a German art historian who theorized that more abstract or non-iconic expressionist art led to greater spiritual transcendence, Grace posits that expressionism varies between extremes of regression and apocalypse. Where regression refers to a primal desire to return to the instinctual, apocalypse signifies a cleansing cataclysm which brings about rebirth and regeneration.<sup>5</sup> She argues that while all expressionism is naturally anti-mimetic, the distance from mimetic realism defines the difference:

The closer the text stays to the mimetic conventions of realism and to the socio-political concerns of the author, the more likely it will be that the resources of an expressionist poetics will serve a central, suffering, recognizable hero, as, for example, in the work of Toller, Kafka, O'Neill, Lowry, and Ellison. By contrast, the more symbolic and mythic the

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<sup>5</sup> Sherril E. Grace, *Regression and Apocalypse: Studies in North American Literary Expressionism*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 38.

writer's intention, the more abstract the discourse will become, as can be seen in Kaiser, Doblin, Voaden, Barnes, and Watson.<sup>6</sup>

According to Grace's synchronic model of expressionism, an example such as O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* would be considered iconic, embodying an inherent urge for the primal through its long-suffering protagonist. These extremes of regression and apocalypse, Grace continues, are resultant of expressionism's underlying dichotomous nature; "expressionist texts develop through complementary codes of inversion and explosion that inscribe aspects of regression and apocalypse respectively."<sup>7</sup> It is this eternal conflict within that creates the style of stark contrasts, fragmentation, and jagged extremes of dark and light that characterize both strains of expressionism.

Besides its central examination of society through the eyes of an enlightened protagonist, American expressionism employs several artistic hallmarks. A common trait is the literal mechanization of society which serves to alienate the isolated protagonist. When the rest of society is synchronized in its goals and ideas, the hero or heroine's individualized thoughts run against the grain and can cause difficulty in accomplishment, effectively isolating them. With the protagonist pushed out of the neat, mechanical society, he or she is then freed to see the machine for what it truly is. Examples of this can be found in the automated upper class in scene five of *The Hairy Ape*, in which Yank attempts to fight multiple robotic businessmen, and the clerks in *Machinal*'s first scene, whose patterned speech highlights the Young Woman's anxiety.

Language is also important to expressionism. Speech patterns are often clipped and fragmented, meant to signify not only the stark contrasts for which expressionism is

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 66.

known but the inner thoughts of the characters. Imbalanced language represents an imbalanced mind, while mechanical language represents a mechanical mind. An example of this is the aforementioned patterned speech of the Young Woman's co-workers; this synchronized order of their language reflects their inner thoughts. They are essentially machines, programmed to work and to gossip.

Usages of overwhelming sound and imagery are also vital. Disembodied voices appear often in American expressionist work, serving as paranoiac thoughts accusing or encouraging the protagonist toward release. These can be repeated lines from the earlier text, serving as harsh reminders of the past, or can be new fears created through the hero/ine's personal fears. For example, before *Machinal's* Young Woman murders her husband, a chorus of voices calls out for stones, overwhelming her and driving her to desperation. These voices, chanting the words of her lover's tale of murder and escape draw her to the bottle of stones, preparing her to commit the same act. In similar fashion, but to a harsher effect, overwhelming noise is also utilized frequently and typically accompanies a psychologically stressful conflict for the protagonist. As such, the mounted pressure of stress and harsh noise becomes insurmountable, and the hero/ine loses control. Rice's *The Adding Machine* creates such a cacophony to instigate Mr. Zero's act of murder. Underlying his termination by his boss, the chaotic din pushes Zero to his limit:

The music swells and swells. To it is added every off-stage effect of the theatre: the wind, the waves, the galloping horses, the locomotive whistle, the sleigh bells, the automotive siren, the glass-crash.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Elmer Rice, *The Adding Machine*, (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1923), 30.

Thus, these usages of sound create a physical manifestation of the character's desperation, driving them towards an extreme act.

Similarly, expressionism also incorporates stark, exaggerated imagery to provide an ominous presence. These can take the shape of individuals or creatures, lending physical form to paranoiac thoughts. These could be as non-threatening as the aforementioned mechanical society that refuses to respond to Yank's belligerence or as terrifying as the formless black shapes that plague Brutus Jones during his escape in *The Emperor Jones*. This imagery may also materialize in the set, forcing the hero/ine against literal oppressive structures onstage. Perhaps the greatest example of this is the colossal adding machine that Mr. Zero operates in his afterlife, brought to life in *The Adding Machine*'s 1923 Broadway debut. Although it dwarfs Zero in sheer size, he jumps from lever to lever, operating the massive machine without question to its purpose. These two forms of imagery can act in tandem. In *The Subway*, Sophie's traumatic subway ride in scene two makes use of both individuals and set, the animalistic businessmen and the claustrophobic subway car, to materialize Sophie's suffocating fear. These frightening images, alongside an overwhelming cacophony arising from a combination of the subway rails, the screams of passengers, and the shouts of conductors ensure the claustrophobic and horrifying conditions needed for Sophie's collapse.

This heavy reliance on imagery and sound was, in part, borne from necessity. Dennis Jerz, in his dissertation on technology's effect on American drama states that American playwrights of the time "took great pains to establish their sound effects - in part because the theatre of the time was competing with a movie industry that had just

discovered sound and with a radio industry that knew how to use it.”<sup>9</sup> Theatre of the 1920s found itself evolving to compete with these significantly newer mediums of storytelling by incorporating technological advances and nonrealism into its staging. Thus, theatre attempted to rival film’s technical aspects while branching into unique territory; where the burgeoning film industry initially attempted to simulate the real, theatre would simulate the nonreal.

While many theatre critics of the 1920s were eager to credit expressionism as the American theatre’s single saving grace from the mire of realism into which it had fallen<sup>10</sup> this was not entirely the case. In fact, American expressionism followed closely after the dreamlike, exploratory theatre of the 1910s, given the name ‘experimentalism’ by theatre scholar DeAnna Toten-Beard.<sup>11</sup> Experimentalist theatre rejected neat categorization, but as a whole its plays largely retained realistic plots occasionally interrupted by sequences of nonrealism. One example of this, as posed by Toten-Beard, would be Theodore Dreiser’s *Laughing Gas* in which a physician, whilst undergoing a medical procedure, hallucinates under the effects of laughing gas and holds conversation with multiple abstract concepts. Thus, the hallucination only temporarily derails the naturalism of the previous scenes, eventually returning to reality at the conclusion of the dream-like state. Another example given, Alice Gerstenberg’s *Overtones*, utilizes this nonrealism differently. In the play, two women confront their desire for the same man. This conflict

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<sup>9</sup> Dennis G. Jerz, “Soul and Society in a Technological Age: American Drama, 1920-1950,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 2001), 58.

<sup>10</sup> DeAnna Toten-Beard, “American Experimentalism, American Expressionism, and Early O’Neill,” in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, ed. David Krasner (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 53-54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

is portrayed both realistically and nonrealistically simultaneously; alongside the two women are their primitive, inner selves, as portrayed by two other actresses, which inform their outer selves and bicker with each other. Unlike *Laughing Gas*, there is no singular interruption of the real but an entire underlying subjectivity. In all cases, however, ties with traditional, natural theatre are left intact. Expressionism, then, is the extension of this, given over entirely to symbolism and subjectivity and completely removing itself from naturalism and realism.

Influences from the earlier German expressionism are also apparent, despite the protestations of multiple American expressionist playwrights. Rice adamantly upheld that he had little prior knowledge of expressionism as a theatre form when he wrote *The Adding Machine*; “the fact is that, though I had heard of expressionism, I had not read any of the German plays.”<sup>12</sup> Further, while Kaiser’s *From Morning to Midnight* (1917), the first German expressionist play to receive an American production, did premiere a month before Rice wrote his *The Adding Machine* in 1922, he denied having access to see it. “In fact, I think the only expressionistic play that had been done in this country was *From Morn to Midnight*, Kaiser's play, which the Theatre Guild, I believe, had done a year or two before. I did not see it. I was living in northern Connecticut at the time and didn’t see it.”<sup>13</sup> O’Neill also denied German influence, claiming that Kaiser’s plays in particular, “would not have influenced me” as they were “too easy.”<sup>14</sup> The shadow of post-war politics on American playwrights must be noted, however. With strong anti-

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<sup>12</sup> Rice, *Minority Report*, 198.

<sup>13</sup> Elwood, “Interview with Elmer Rice,” 3.

<sup>14</sup> Mardi Valgema, “O’Neill and German Expressionism,” *Modern Drama* 10.2, 1967, 111.

German sentiment growing in the United States during and following the First World War, it is not difficult to understand why American writers such as Rice or O'Neill would swear off German influence.

Works like O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* (1920) and *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), John Howard Lawson's *Roger Bloomer* (1923) and Treadwell's *Machinal* (1929) gained prominence as quintessential examples of the genre, with *Machinal* being among the last, as its onstage popularity began to fade with the onset of the Great Depression. German expressionism quickly dissipated as its artists turned to new objectivity or abstraction. So too did the American expressionists, eager to innovate new styles of symbolic avant-garde or incorporate this symbolism within realistic work. Expressionism's impact, however, had already been assured. In theatre, it helped launch the career of Eugene O'Neill, whose first successes were proponents of the genre. Further, it would serve to heavily influence playwrights known for their use of "magic" realism such as Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. In terms of genre, expressionism helped to usher in other, more abstract artistic movements. The transition from realism had been completed, and playwrights were free to explore abstraction. Consequently, wildly decentered movements such as surrealism, theatre of the absurd, and symbolic realism appeared shortly thereafter. Sherril Grace summarizes the expressionist effect on the American stage:

Thanks in large part to the expressionists the modern stage was freed from a slavish realism, so that, without a direct influence from the German stage, contemporary dramatists... could write plays that require expressionistic handling on stage, exploit expressionist strategies for character presentation and thematic development, and assume an audience's understanding of the form.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Grace, *Regression and Apocalypse*, 233.

With American expressionism's influence on theatre acknowledged, it is important to document its emergence in Rice's oeuvre before analyzing *The Subway*'s embodiment of the form.

### *Rice's Dramaturgy in Terms of American Expressionism*

Rice's forays into expressionism, *The Adding Machine* and *The Subway*, followed a series of experiments with nonrealism. While his earlier works such as *The Passing of Chow-chow*, *On Trial*, and *The House in Blind Alley* exhibited trace amounts of nonrealism, these plays more accurately fall under the classification of experimentalism. His works after *The Subway* abandoned this nonrealism in favor of naturalism, with *Street Scene* hailed as the greatest American example of the genre<sup>16</sup>. It is *The Adding Machine* and *The Subway* that mark the pinnacle of his nonrealist plays.

*The Passing of Chow-Chow* (written 1913, published 1925) was written shortly before Rice abandoned his law career to pursue playwriting. Created partially to alleviate the boredom of being a law clerk, the small comedy follows a couple in the midst of a heated argument after the husband inadvertently kills the family dog. The play, however, is a gentle satire on the romanticization of marriage, therefore ends happily with the family simply getting a new dog. Rice's commentary on the fickle American attitude towards romance and marriage reaches farcical proportions within the work, becoming too over-the-top for naturalism. One of his first plays to be written, however, the play created a firm foundation in realistic and nonrealistic playwriting, a line that Rice would straddle in the following works. *On Trial* (1914) is a courtroom drama with testimonies

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<sup>16</sup> Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, *Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870*, (NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 518.

told through innovative use of flashbacks; each testimonial flashback reveals an earlier piece of information, effectively giving the impression of moving backwards in time. The plot follows a court case in which a man is suspected of armed burglary and murder.

Over the course of the play, various testimonies, revealing more and more of the backstory, disclose the victim to be a blackmailing adulterer and that the real burglar was his butler. Thus, while these flashbacks break up its otherwise fairly realistic plot, they stop short of dominating the entire play, allowing the events of the court case to play out realistically.

*The House in Blind Alley* (1917) is Rice's most unusual work. Essentially propaganda wrapped in a Mother Goose nursery rhyme, the play furiously denounces the child labor laws of the time. The play, set into the framework of a boy's dream, tells of a giant-killer who tries and fails to save a group of children from becoming the dinner of giants. The giants, only interested in the children for the golden loaves of bread that can be made from their bones, try to please their stockholders with semiannual banquets. In the end, the giant-killer fails, the giants murder the spirit of childhood for their own greed, and the boy awakes to false promises of a better tomorrow. *The House in Blind Alley*'s metaphoric plot and treatment of working-class injustices models an early example of *The Adding Machine* and *The Subway*. Its framing narrative is still grounded in realism, however, keeping the play strictly experimentalist. It is *The Adding Machine* that marks Rice's first major departure from realism, however, with *The Subway* as his second and last.

After writing *The Subway*, Rice turned from expressionism entirely. A brief explanation of the similarity between the movements of naturalism and expressionism

helps clarify Rice's transition between the two seemingly opposed genres. Naturalism objectively examines the protagonist as a result of their environment, showing neither approval nor blame for the actions of the hero/ine. This protagonist, therefore, inhabits a highly natural world based in scientific reality in order to better study the effects of the environment on him/her. On the other hand, expressionism, as previously stated, studies the protagonist's subjective reaction to his or her environment, creating an often-nightmarish world for the hero/ine to inhabit. Both share the intent to create characters as resultant of their environment but differ as to the means of doing so. Rice makes note of the difference in his definition of expressionism as follows:

The author attempts not so much to depict events faithfully as to convey to the spectator what seems to him their *inner significance*. To achieve this end the dramatist often finds it expedient to depart entirely from *objective reality* and to employ symbols, condensations and a dozen devices which, to the conservative, must seem arbitrarily fantastic. This, I suppose, is what is meant by expressionism. [Emphasis added]<sup>17</sup>

For Rice, the expressionist playwright leaves behind the naturalist's world of objective fact, favoring a subjective dreamscape.

In 1928, Rice created the highly naturalistic *Street Scene*. The play follows a tragic day in the lives of a tenant house's various boarders as one murders his wife in a jealous rage. The entire façade of a New York apartment building provides the setting, allowing a window for each family of boarders. The play was a critical success, propelling Rice into international fame and garnering him the 1929 Pulitzer Prize in Drama. Thus, despite Brady's hopes that producing a Rice play so quickly on the heels of the Pulitzer Prize-winner would result in a hit, it is likely that the success of *Street Scene*

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Dukore, *American Dramatists 1918–1945: Excluding O'Neill*, (Macmillan International Higher Education, 1984), 29.

in conjunction with the repeated failure of *The Subway* solidified Rice's return to the realistic. Jerz confirms this:

If the theatrical naturalism of *Street Scene* had not met with such stunning success, Rice may have refined his experimental *The Subway* into something more worthy of his talents; but this - his most thoroughly expressionistic play - was already six years old.<sup>18</sup>

Durham makes an interesting point regarding the naturalism of *Street Scene*, however. He notes that many critics, in reviewing the play, attested to traces of expressionism beneath its naturalistic surface. Krutch, he explains, marks the play as stopping “just short of the point where his scene, his events, and his dramatic personae would all be symbols.”<sup>19</sup> The naturalistic method only dominates the surface; the plot is simply too dramatic and deeply interwoven to suggest narrative naturalism, which would let the pieces of dramatic action fall as they may. Therefore, while Rice turned to naturalism for style, he employed dramatic narratives reminiscent of his earlier, expressionistic work.

Following *Street Scene*, Rice would write *See Naples and Die*, *The Left Bank*, and *Counselor-at-Law*, all predominantly realistic in style. In fact, he would remain staunchly within the style for the rest of his career. Thereafter, the only significant stylistic breakaway from naturalism and realism in the later half of Rice's oeuvre is, ironically, his last popular success, *Dream Girl* (1945). In it, Rice blended naturalism, realism, and expressionism by having the protagonist's departures from reality to fantasy embodied by scene transitions that occur in full view of the audience. In the original production, a single backdrop provided the artistic ambiance while wagons, representing specific locations, were wheeled on and offstage. Thus, both dream and reality blended easily,

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<sup>18</sup> Jerz, *Technology in American Drama*, 106.

<sup>19</sup> Krutch, “Drama-Tempests in Teapots,” *Nation CXXXIX*, 1934, 392.

allowing the audience to enter into the subjective world of the protagonist Georgina's dreams.

### *Plot Summary of The Subway*

Elmer Rice's *The Subway* follows Sophie, a young filing clerk with a subway construction company who has become infatuated with her coworker George. George, however, unknowingly disrupts her visions of marriage (projected literally upon the stage) by announcing his intent to pursue a career in Detroit. Following this upsetting news, Sophie's boss enters, leading Hurst and Eugene. The two men are writing a piece on the company, and Sophie's boss explains the benefits of its windowless, artificial environment. The men seem more interested in Sophie, who feels their stares. Hurst has Eugene sketch the office, Sophie included, and then all three men leave.

In scene two, Sophie is using the subway to return home. Its atmosphere is stifling as men wedge themselves into the tight space of the car, crowding in on Sophie. Shouts from the conductor and station police also complicate the already overwhelming environment. Finally, when a car passes, Sophie turns to find the men in her subway car have donned the faces of vermin and predators and she passes out. In scene three, Sophie's home life is disclosed; her family is a series of automatons, obsessively repeating observations on their own matters while performing household chores and activities. They ignore Sophie and Eugene, who enter and talk between the family's mechanical outbursts. Eugene, having saved Sophie after her attack on the subway, briefly discusses various topics with her, becoming increasingly personal (with Sophie becoming correspondingly more self-conscious) until he leaves. She explains to her oblivious family that Eugene has taken a liking to her. As the family resumes their

mechanical movements, imposing cage bars descend at the foot of the stage, imprisoning Sophie.

Scene four reveals Sophie's claustrophobic bedroom. From this cubicle, she recalls, in disjointed fragments, her love for George before disavowing him for Eugene. Her thoughts turn to means of escape, whether by suicide or by running away. Finally, she prays for forgiveness, pleading for an end to her loneliness. The stilted rhythm of her monologue reveals her frantic thoughts:

. . . I won't stay home and help Annie . . . I'll kill myself, that's what I'll do  
. . . Oh, dear Jesus, why do you make me ride in the subway? . . . I hate it,  
hate it, hate it . . . They put their hands on you . . . all over you . . . But I'm  
too scared to say anything . . .<sup>20</sup>

Scene five occurs some time later, as Sophie and Eugene attend a movie on a date. As they watch, they voice their thoughts, unheard by the other, aloud. Sophie, outwardly fascinated by the landscapes and stars of the motion picture, voices her anxiety about Eugene while he speaks of his simultaneous disgust for her childlike wonder and his inexplicable attraction to her. When he repeatedly attempts to hold her hand, they both cry in distress. His intentions escalate, and he wraps his arm around her. Her protests turn to sexually charged taunts. As this sensual tension comes to a peak, Eugene suddenly springs up and draws Sophie out of the theater, presumably to have sex.

Scene six reveals Eugene's apartment, where disembodied voices issue from the darkness and accuse Eugene of being a liar. He fidgets anxiously until Sophie arrives. When she expresses doubt about their affair, longing for a public relationship, Eugene manipulates her, professing his own unworthiness. He puts out the lights and encourages

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<sup>20</sup> Elmer Rice, Elmer Rice, *The Subway: A Play in Nine Scenes*, (New York: Samuel French, 1929), 52.

Sophie to stay despite her doubts. When she does, he describes her as an inspiration for his next story, a post-apocalyptic tale in which the eternally beautiful body of a girl is found amongst the twisted ruins of a subway. Declaring they have found a means of escape in each other, the lovers embrace. In scene seven, also at Eugene's apartment, Sophie meets Anderson, an associate of his, who reveals that Eugene has shown him nude sketches of Sophie before accusing her of hindering the artist by encouraging his mediocre talent. He then reveals that he has plans for Eugene; he hopes to offer him a job that will take him overseas and end his artistic career. When Eugene arrives, Anderson offers him the job and promptly leaves. Sophie, unnerved by Anderson's comments, becomes unresponsive to Eugene's flirting.

In the next scene, once more in Sophie's cramped bedroom, formless voices call out her internal fears, accusing her of dishonoring herself. She finds comfort in Eugene's voice for a moment, but the voices redouble. They announce Sophie's fears of pregnancy, offering two solutions. The first is a dishonorable death resultant of a botched abortion. The second is life with a bastard child. As the voices become deafening, she rushes out. In the final scene, Sophie appears in the subway station, disheveled and still in her nightgown. Hurst appears and, perceiving Sophie's compromised state, gives her alcohol and attempts to coerce her into accompanying him home in a taxi. Sophie becomes fascinated with an approaching train, ignoring the lecher. Finally, the noise of the oncoming train reaches its climax, and Sophie discovers her own solution to the problem; taking her fate into her own hands. She declares herself happy at last before throwing herself onto the tracks.

### *The Subway's Embodiment of American Expressionism*

A defining trait of expressionism is the isolation of the protagonist. By utilizing subjectivity, the hero/ine's viewpoint stands out, effectively cutting them off from the remainder of society, seen entirely as an "other." The protagonist then attempts to fix this other or resume its role within it. In *The Subway*, Sophie is left to her own devices through the automation of her family and the clockwork precision of her employment. George, and later Eugene, appears to be the only cure for this predicament by affording her a companion, but only serve to further her isolation through eventual betrayal. George, in fact, is leaving for Detroit in order to fix machines. As mentioned previously, expressionism can be classified as either mystic or active, depending on whether or not the protagonist is successful. In the case of *The Subway*, as with most plays in the genre, it must be deemed mystic, as Sophie's attempts to escape society only end in her doom. Alongside this classification, we can also use Grace's analysis of iconic and non-iconic, or regressive and apocalyptic, expressionism to further analyze the play; as the resources "serve a central, suffering, recognizable hero,"<sup>21</sup> the play can be classified as iconic. Furthering this description is Sophie's main source of anxiety: masculine mechanization. She longs to return to an idyllic, pastoral life through regression.

The mechanization of society is deeply embedded within *The Subway*; the title itself discloses its preoccupation with the theme, as the transport "is a symbol of the mechanical world that is crushing the life out of us."<sup>22</sup> As such, automated images litter

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<sup>21</sup> Grace, *Regression and Apocalypse*, 231.

<sup>22</sup> Elwood, "Interview with Elmer Rice," 6.

the text. When the play opens, Sophie is sorting letters “with mechanical rapidity.”<sup>23</sup> These letters arrive by office boys, whose entrances and exits sync with Sophie’s automated sorting, creating a cohesive machine. Jerz also notes that later in this same scene “the manager treats Sophie like any other piece of office equipment, forcing her to demonstrate a complex filing system.”<sup>24</sup> In true expressionistic fashion, Sophie is merely a cog in a larger, ambivalent machine.

The only disruption capable of halting the machine is George’s entrance. Upon his entrance, Sophie ceases her work and dreams of a pastoral bungalow. The literal presentation of her internal thoughts is, of course, expressionistic, but so too is the disruption of the mechanical. For a moment, Sophie is free. Then George, a mechanic through and through, repairs the mechanization of the scene. He speaks to Sophie in “the language of advertising pamphlets and brochures. He underscores qualities like ambition, efficacy, the proper use of time, success....”<sup>25</sup> Unable to think for himself, George has become one of the machines that he longs to fix, and Sophie’s role as the only human amongst a city of machines is introduced.

Sophie’s family is another example of this mechanized symbolism. The various automatons are too focused on their individual tasks to acknowledge Sophie. Their lines, which never address Sophie or Eugene or even each other, are symptoms of a robotic state of tunnel vision, joined occasionally by their like-minded comrade, the cuckoo-clock:

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<sup>23</sup> Rice, *The Subway*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Jerz, *Technology in American Drama*, 98.

<sup>25</sup> Shipra Misra, “Elmer Rice: The Concept of Freedom in His Plays,” (Ph.D. dissertation, V.B.S. Purvanchal University, 2010), 82.

Mrs. Smith: I'll never get this ironin' done. I been at it all day. And it ain't even half done yet.

Mr. Smith: Steel Trust Cuts Twenty-seven—Million—Dollar Melon.

Annie: Let me get my hands on her—that's all. I'll break her neck.

Tom: Giants May Cinch Flag Tomorrow.

The Cuckoo-Clock: Coo-coo! Coo-coo! Coo-coo! Coo-coo! Coo-coo!<sup>26</sup>

Father and son spout newspaper headlines while mother and daughter fume in bitter jealousy, completely unaware of anything outside their preoccupation. Sophie's conversation with Eugene disrupts this rhythmic current, setting her apart from the "robots" that birthed her. The scene is punctuated with Mr. Smith's comment "Subway in Record Day, Carries Two Million, Three Hundred and Ninety-Seven Thousand, Four Hundred and Twelve," numbering well over a third of New York City's population in 1920. The subway is an ever-present part of the community, healthy and thriving on a constant stream of passengers.

Eugene's story "The Subway," in which industrialization causes the eventual collapse of the western world, also conveys this preoccupation with the mechanical. In it, man achieves his technological apex, expanding his steel grasp over both sky and earth. Below, the subway rules, and the Canaanite god Moloch eats his own followers.<sup>27</sup> War, the child of industrialization and invention, follows and man's precious city is torn to pieces. From this destruction, nature blooms. Scientists from the nonmechanical, nonwestern continent of Africa, a primitive "other" to America's former technological majesty, investigate the ruins and discover the body of a girl asleep, eternal beauty herself. This eternal beauty, who has survived the unnatural destruction of

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<sup>26</sup> Rice, *The Subway*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> This is similar to a scene from Fritz Lang's German expressionistic film *Metropolis* (1927), in which the hero receives a vision of Moloch devouring workers and is spurred to action against technology.

industrialization, is Sophie:

A vision of beauty, Sophie . . . eternal beauty . . . beauty that survives death . . . that endures forever . . . that cannot be destroyed . . . [*He raises her to her knees and takes her face in his hands.*] You're that girl, Sophie . . . that vision . . . that's what you've given me . . . a vision of beauty . . . a new faith . . . ecstasy . . .<sup>28</sup>

Thus, Sophie is again the only opposition to the crushing mechanization, the expressionistic heroine who awoke to discover her place as a cog in the machine. Despite the epic's intended purpose within the story as Eugene's means of seducing Sophie, it serves figuratively to further single her out from the masculine-mechanical society entrapping her.

Adding to the textual examples, *The Subway*'s expressionistic usage of sound is also deeply mechanical and closely tied to its imagery. Scene two's chaotic subway platform overwhelms Sophie with both sight and sound. The barking commands of the conductor, the shouting of the patrons, and the roaring of subway itself intensify the action, creating a cacophonous din reminiscent of *The Adding Machine*. Finally, when the noise can grow no louder, the subway-men turn around to reveal their transformation into beasts. In scene eight, the voices in Sophie's mind call out to her, revealing her paranoia about her affair with Eugene and the threat of pregnancy. She automatically attempts to pray, but the voices drown her out and chastise her. When the voices become deafening, pointing fingers emerge from the darkness to accuse her, creating powerful stage imagery to match. Again, sound is utilized to increase the tension until, at its apex, frightening imagery is used to send the heroine over the edge. Rice makes use of this expressionistic "sound, then sight" effect repeatedly, but the final usage comes with a twist. In the final

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<sup>28</sup> Rice, *The Subway*, 98.

scene, the noise of the oncoming subway car in the final scene gradually becomes deafening, signaling the unseen doom of the heroine. This is a subversion of the technique; when the overwhelming sound of the train reaches its peak, the stage goes dark, leaving the final, frightening image to the viewer. This effect is not unique to *The Subway*. *The Hairy Ape* utilizes it for the purpose of psychological torture against its female character; in scene three, Mildred enters the stokehole and sees Yank. After a raging monologue in which Yank violently threatens the foreman's life, he turns sharply on Mildred. The combination of Yank's tempestuous rage and animalistic visage is too much for Mildred, and she passes out.

However, imagery and noise also work independently in American expressionism, such as the black, shapeless forms of *The Emperor Jones*. In these circumstances, subjective imagery is enough to convey the hero/ine's point of view. In the case of *The Subway*, when George, the object of Sophie's affection, enters, the back wall becomes transparent, and the facade of a suburban bungalow appears, revealing her plans for him. When George reveals his intent to move to Detroit, the image vanishes, no longer a viable dream. In the same scene, Hurst gazes at Sophie and her dress becomes transparent; the figurative act of undressing her with his eyes becomes literal, and we see the vulnerability that Sophie feels. Scene three contains several visually expressionistic images. Besides the robotic movements of her family, the wallpaper of the scene, a series of vertical stripes, suggests imprisonment, of Sophie as some animal trapped behind the bars. Furthering this image, the scene closes with a curtain of bars, caging Sophie into her tedious and mechanical life. In regard to usage of sound, Eugene and Sophie speak their thoughts aloud in scene five, similar to Sophie's family. Unlike those of the automatons,

however, these are individual thoughts. Eugene and Sophie voice their anxiety at each other's touch. Simultaneously, Sophie quotes the film while the actors' lines gradually come to apply to its patrons. Eugene words, initially condescending, gradually turn from cynical criticisms of Sophie to the nervousness of a young schoolboy. Conversely, Sophie's thoughts turn bolder; while she is at first frantic at Eugene's touch, she gradually longs for it, finally taunting him to squeeze her even tighter:

Sophie: [*Faintly*] Don't! Don't!

Eugene: [*Hoarsely*] Sophie!

[*He draws her closer. Their Heads touch.*]

Sophie: "Time and Kathleen's loving care bring back strength to Masters."...Tighter! Tighter! Why doesn't he squeeze me tighter?<sup>29</sup>

In the next scene, while alone in his apartment, disembodied voices accuse Eugene of lying. He ignores these, but they continue until Sophie's arrival disbands them. As the scene then follows Eugene's successful seduction of Sophie through his assertion that she is the eternal beauty that will outlast the subway-beast, these accusations reveal the selfishness in his motives. The greatest example of expressionistic imagery, however, is the play's titular mechanical image, the subway.

### *Railways and the Power of the Subway-Beast*

The eponymous subway represents the overwhelming, oppressive structure of industrial society. A character in its own right, the subway seems to stalk Sophie in her paranoiac fear, its subway-men even appearing in her dreams. Its ambivalence towards its human passengers, who crush each other and themselves to use it, is nearly malevolent in itself. Indeed, it almost appears to feed on them, a symptom of a greedy capitalist society. However, the usage of above-ground railroads must be briefly explored before Rice's

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<sup>29</sup> Rice, *The Subway*, 78-9.

demoniac subway can be truly understood; the communal role of the train can only serve to highlight the subway as its inverse.

At its outset, the railroad was a source of anxiety to its Victorian passengers, who believed railway travel to cause permanent neurological damage. As such, this anxiety was reflected in the melodrama of the age; trains became interchangeable with demons and gave rise to the now-popular melodramatic trope of villains tying heroines to railway tracks.<sup>30</sup> Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, societal attitudes toward railroads changed and the train became a modern space of isolated community, foreign from the world outside the train car. The motion of outside landscape spurns on the thoughts of this community, prompting both interaction between its members and personal introspection. As Kyle Gillette, in *Railway Travel in Modern Theatre*, explains:

On the train, layered thoughts among several thinking subjects and the spaces they traverse forge a tentative communal experience unique in its collusion of radically public and private spaces and its ontological dependence on motion.<sup>31</sup>

Whenever thought is halted, Gillette continues, one need merely look out the window and let the passing scenery dislodge the next topic from the mind. “The flow of locomotion promotes the flow of thinking...”<sup>32</sup> Introspection is close to the heart of this mode of travel, which does not require immediate input from its passengers. The members of its community are left to socialize, or not, at their own behest. They agree to cohabitate, at least temporarily, to reach a shared destination. By merely allowing people to travel in

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<sup>30</sup> Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Nervous Stage: Nineteenth-century Neuroscience and the Birth of Modern*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 508.

<sup>31</sup> Kyle Gillette, *Railway Travel in Modern Theatre: Transforming the Space and Time of the Stage*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 147.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

the same direction together, the railroad fosters a community. Rice's eponymous subway, however, achieves the opposite effect. Its riders inhabit a shared space, but never long enough to form bonds. Conversely, it packs these passengers together for brief periods of time, allowing quite literally no room for introversion or self-analysis. While the passive, pensive nature of traditional railways inspires both a public and private space amongst its occupants, the subway harshly violates both of these spaces.

The physicality of a subway when compared to a railway train must be noted. Gillette's observation that "the locomotive passenger unravels her thoughts through domestic, urban, and rural scenes"<sup>33</sup> cannot be applied to the subway; buried as it is underground for the majority of its track, its windows display no scenes of pastoral landscapes or even urban locales to jog the brain. Only the drab interior of a concrete tube and "rapid, regular alternation of lights, as the train sweeps by the lamps affixed to the walls,"<sup>34</sup> greet the passenger of the subway for most, if not all, of their commute. Potential thoughts spurred on by passing scenery are lost to the commuter, and the resulting introspection cannot hope to be unaffected by this impassive, stark reminder of the daily grind. Consequently, Rice's claustrophobic nightmare of a subway strangles any possibility for introspective thoughts. The subway allows for none of the joys Gillette attributes to aboveground railway systems. The beastly commuters stand, unable to do much but stare, as slack-jawed as the boy in the Chicago stockyard cannery:

Some try vainly to read tightly-folded newspapers. One or two shout inarticulately above the din. But for the most part, they stand silent, immobile, staring vacuously, imbecilely.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>34</sup> Rice, *The Subway*, 27.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

The overpowering noise of subway car rattling and loose chains drowns out all sound. But it is not only the interior of the car that overpowers its occupants. When the train comes to a halt, a crowd stands outside, invaders waiting to board. Rice's language here recalls images of wartime combat: "the anticipation of battle," "awaiting the onslaught," "men on the platform fight their way off," "the crowd outside hurls itself upon the train."<sup>36</sup> Passengers are crushed or swept away in the battle. Opposing factions, those longing to leave or enter the train, struggle to gain ground. Chaos rules the subway platform, leaving no room for introspective thought.

Despite its central importance in the play, this is the only scene in which the subway physically is shown onstage. In this short scene, the vast difference between aboveground and belowground public transportation is made apparent. Where a community is formed onboard trains, the subway fosters no such bonds. The overwhelming atmosphere of a crowded subway car and platform, then, is the ideal setting for expressionism. Forcing Sophie to descend to the depths of the subway effectively pits her against its other passengers. From there, it takes little to escalate an already uncomfortable subway ride into the traumatizing nightmare of scene two.

The subway is mentioned in two other sections of the text. First, it is featured as the subject and title of Eugene's story in scene six, transfigured into a hellish demon rivaling Moloch or Satan. The story within a story foretells that, in the times of mankind's industry-led dominion over land and sky, the "entrails of the city" belong to the subway-beast:

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

. . . a monster of steel with flaming eyes and gaping jaws . . . Moloch  
devouring his worshippers . . . Juggernaut crushing his tens of thousands . .  
. A subway train . . . down there under the ground . . . under the steel  
towers that scrape the skies . . . A subway train . . . roaring . . . roaring . . .  
the beast of the new Apocalypse . . . “And no man might buy or sell save  
that he had the mark of the beast.” . . .<sup>37</sup>

In its labyrinthian tunnels, the beast lurks, recalling the melodramatic demon trains of the mid-nineteenth century. The war comes and western civilization falls in a concrete heap. It is within the ruined tunnels of the long dead subway-beast, however, that the scientists from the Congo find the preserved corpse of eternal beauty, triumphant over the subway-beast whose tunnels have been made her resting place. Unknowingly, Eugene has written Sophie’s final fate; driven to desperation by the industrial society around her, she is destined to meet the subway head on and determine the fight between eternal beauty and mechanization.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the train is, of course, a phallic symbol. More than this, however, it is a Freudian symbol for the unconscious; it is ever-present, lurking just beneath the surface and presenting a danger which can never completely be ignored. Rice claimed heavy influence from Freud, having read the psychologist’s work since 1913. Rice summarized the effect of psychoanalysis on his writing: “The influence upon my thinking and outlook upon life has certainly been very great... I have never consciously set out to apply analytic theories, but the concepts of the unconscious, of childhood conditioning, of compensatory behavior, of the significance of dreams have unquestionably entered into the choice of subject and the treatment of character.”<sup>38</sup> The

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>38</sup> W. David Sievers, *Freud on Broadway*, (New York: Hermitage House, 1955), 146.

subway, carrying “Two Million, Three Hundred and Ninety-Seven Thousand, Four Hundred and Twelve”<sup>39</sup> in a day, is filled with stamina and drive, willing to devour. The embodiment of masculine mechanization, the subway signals Sophie’s impending expressionistic doom at the hands of an objectifying society. In the end, it could only be the subway, the stalking monster of subconscious fear that has sought to devour her from the beginning. In order to better examine this final conflict between masculine and feminine, it is important to investigate *The Subway* as a feminist work.

### *The Subway as Proto-Feminist*

Overall, much of Rice’s usage of expressionism in the play is intimately tied to Sophie’s womanhood. Her dress’ transparency is the result of male gaze; the subway’s nightmarish sequence stems from beastly men becoming literal beasts; and the disembodied voices of scene eight torture her with the thought of pregnancy out of wedlock. Even *The Subway*’s usage of a female protagonist is important. As it stands, only three major American expressionist plays feature a female protagonist: Susan Glaspell’s *The Verge*, *The Subway*, and Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal*. In order to gain a better understanding of feminism in American expressionism, the misogyny of its European counterpart must be examined.

The foundations of German expressionism lie within a double standard for men and women; the role of women within the movement was purely supplementary, guiding the man toward his ideal state. Its concept of the “Neuer Mensch” freed to pursue unique spirituality was just that: a new *man*. In her article “‘New Man,’ Eternal Woman: Expressionist Responses to German Feminism,” Barbara D. Wright clarifies this by

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 45.

explaining the significant difference between the roles of man and woman in German expressionist idealism:

Whereas man's whole *raison d'être* is to emancipate himself from all material being, woman's distinguishing characteristic is her identity with the world of nature and natural processes, particularly sexuality and reproduction; and it becomes her special responsibility to maintain this identity.

She continues that, through expressionism, “a harshly suspicious attitude toward the material world as a realm of mere appearance and delusion is transferred to woman.”<sup>40</sup>

Thus, where men conquer nature, women submit to it, liberated from anything that prevents her exclusive identity with sexuality. Della Pollock asserts that because of this preoccupation with womanly duty, women’s role in expressionistic drama can be thought of as a facilitator of the theme of pregnancy. The role of expressionist woman was strictly limited to Madonna or whore; she either facilitated or hindered the New Man.<sup>41</sup> New Men needed women for actualizing their liberation, while women needed New Men for self-realization. In short, both men and women were free to pursue a sexual and spiritual individuality as long as, for women, this individuality revolved around her womanly duties as a wife and mother to men.

Examples of this dichotomous ideal can be found throughout German expressionist texts. Perhaps the best example is found in Georg Kaiser’s quintessential *From Morning to Midnight*; in it, the supposed entices of a sexually intriguing Italian woman ignite the Cashier’s journey toward nihilistic release. While the woman is later

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<sup>40</sup> Barbara D. Wright, “‘New Man,’ Eternal Woman: Expressionist Responses to German Feminism,” *The German Quarterly* 60.4, 1987, 588.

<sup>41</sup> Delia Pollock, “New Man to New Woman: Women in Brecht and Expressionism.” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 4.1, 1989, 86.

revealed to be uninterested in the Cashier sexually, she has already, unintentionally, fulfilled her expressionistic purpose by aiding the hero in his quest toward the “new man.” Other women in the play, however, serve as distractions for the Cashier. The mother and daughters at home and the members of the brothel attempt to provide meaning for the Cashier, but his journey has already begun; it is the new man’s duty to remake himself.

Women of American expressionism, however, are overall more complex. While they are still more often used as a means of bringing a male expressionistic hero toward a new society, they are also the subjects of their own personal dilemmas. Toten-Beard, in her examination of experimentalism and the beginnings of American expressionism, states:

Louise in *Roger Bloomer* and Daisy in *The Adding Machine* each have their own crisis in the play, enabling the audience to consider the impact of modernization on female identity. Such considerations are brief, however, because these women are unable to exist independent of men.<sup>42</sup>

She also adds *The Hairy Ape*’s Mildred as an example of the other end of the spectrum: a non-subject whose only purpose is to enact change upon Yank. In fact, upon affecting him, she vanishes from the narrative entirely, and focus is given only to Yank. Here the woman once more serves as an aide or catalyst for the expressionistic hero. This, however, is the minority. Throughout most of American expressionism, the female role is expanded upon, though it still functions primarily as a support for men. However, there are those that overturn the latter half of this rule. Toten-Beard goes on to recognize two of the previously mentioned American expressionist plays as complications to gender

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<sup>42</sup> Toten-Beard, “American Experimentalism,” 66.

politics within the genre as a whole. Both written by major female playwrights, *The Verge* and *Machinal* feature strong female protagonists,<sup>43</sup> but further defy expectations in separate ways. Of the two, *The Verge* (1921) is the most wildly unique in its expressionism, differentiating itself greatly from the German strain in both its techniques and its treatment of women. First, the play, while not adhering completely to the style of expressionism, requires heavy nonrealism in both staging (particularly in Act II) and acting, as Claire's frequent monologues defy easy comprehension. Second, its protagonist, Claire, is unique in her complete overthrow of societal expectations. Her actions are not that of a caring mother and wife but of a man; she is completely invested in her work, obsessed with breaking through normality into otherness. This "unwomanly" selfishness unnerves her male companions but also disturbed male critics, who found the character hostile and confusing.<sup>44</sup>

*Machinal*, on the other hand, takes the opposite end of the spectrum; where Claire dominates the men around her by being masculine herself, the Young Woman is constantly subjugated to the will of the masculine; she is, at every turn, interrupted and ignored by men. Even her greatest act of defiance, the murder of her husband, only brings her under more scrutiny by the misogynistic court. This highlights her character description even more brilliantly: "an ordinary woman, any woman."<sup>45</sup> Unlike Claire, the Young Woman garnered sympathy with male critics. In fact, she was found more sympathetic, ironically, than the model upon which the character was based. *Machinal*

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Wainscott, "Vogue of Expressionism," 115.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 140.

serves as a retelling of the Ruth Snyder case, in which Snyder murdered her husband with her a lover and was summarily executed. Though evidence existed that Snyder was the victim of marital abuse, the all-male jury felt no sympathy for the killer. Treadwell's play serves as the defense Snyder never received, allowing for a female voice on the subject (this will be discussed in depth in the following chapter).

*The Subway* stands apart as the only American expressionist play written by a male playwright to feature a female protagonist. Written two years after *The Verge*, Rice's play conforms more than Glaspell's to the expressionist style in terms of staging. In regard to its heroine as well, *The Subway* is aligned closer with *Machinal*; Sophie, like the Young Woman, is more a feminine martyr than a dominant, masculine truth-seeker. She also forges a sympathetic connection with the audience. Nevertheless, Sophie contains elements of both women's tactics. As with the other two women, Sophie challenges the male-centric mindset of expressionism; while Claire nears belligerence in her obsessive pursuit of otherness and the Young Woman crumbles under the crushing power of a misogynistic society, Sophie begins mild but comes to face her oppression head on in the form of the subway-beast, embodying traits of both Claire and the Young Woman.

At the start, Sophie is too timid to encourage her love, George, to stay. Her hope for a pastoral life, which would naturally foster fertility and motherhood in a domestic setting, over an urban one is blotted out by the bureaucratic, mechanical, and masculine need to climb the corporate ladder. Sophie merely accepts this and George, the corporate stooge, leaves the narrative. Sophie is left to face the bestial subway men alone. The resulting trauma leaves her defenseless, allowing Eugene to rescue her. He manipulates

her, telling her that the panic was due merely to a lack of fresh air; “Fresh air. You should get more of it;”<sup>46</sup> and her fear of the monsters underground is forgotten, swept aside as merely hysteria.

In scene five, Sophie’s resistance to the male ego begins to cement. Eugene’s thoughts dwell initially on Sophie’s naïveté, likening her to a child. Sophie, aware of his attention, attempts to distract herself with the film to avoid discomfort. Eugene’s aura of condescension dissipates as he realizes his own fascination for her and attempts to touch her. Sophie panics, continuing to quote the lines of the actors onscreen. His grip becomes paralyzing, and Sophie begins to feel dizzy. Instead of collapsing, as before, Sophie instead traverses the other direction, becoming aggressive, even masculine. She taunts him:

Sophie: “You’re a beast, Lord Orville—a vile beast.”...I can feel his nails.  
They’re digging into me. Go on! Hurt me some more.  
Eugene: I mustn’t lose my head. ...A child. ...A woman. ...What has she  
done to me?  
Sophie: “Your title means nothing to an American citizen, Lord Orville.  
It’s man to man between us, now.” ...Let me go. ...Let me go.  
...Squeeze me tighter!<sup>47</sup>

Sophie’s line here is reminiscent of critical response to Glaspell’s Claire Archer; by matching Eugene’s aggression with a greater sexual aggression, she becomes his equal. Eugene, now seeing her as a woman instead of a child, is forced to end the engagement prematurely. In the following scenes, the masculine attempts to reassert dominance. Eugene begins scene six by insisting she remove her hat and coat. As she does, he

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<sup>46</sup> Rice, *The Subway*, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 78.

questions her timidity until he suddenly proclaims his love for her, throwing her emotionally off-balance. She wavers, unsure whether to stay or flee, and Eugene invites her closer. She does so, but on her terms; “No. I want to put my head in your lap.”<sup>48</sup> He then woos her with a story of the triumph of beauty over mechanization and she consents to his advances. Anderson’s appearance in scene seven cripples Sophie; his manner is “direct and authoritative,”<sup>49</sup> and he casually rips apart Sophie’s defenses. At every turn, he condescends her, continuously reminding her of her age and the visibility of her relationship with Eugene. Though she fights for her own decisions, Anderson dismisses her, stating that she simply stands in Eugene’s way. It is this interaction that causes Sophie’s second scene of vulnerability.

In the darkness of scene eight, Sophie becomes defenseless once more. Bodiless voices pass judgment over her, sentencing her to a life without Eugene. Her future is laid out before her. Her artist flees, accepting Anderson’s deal, and their affair becomes public. Her family disowns her, the church denounces her, and a judge pronounces a prison sentence. The dream seems to end as Eugene’s reassuring voice returns but, as in life, his promises are hollow. The nightmare redoubles, and the voices offer two ways out; a botched abortion, which leaves Sophie dead on the operating table, or life as the disgraced, single mother of a bastard. Finally, at the climax, arms reach out of the darkness to point out the offender, and Sophie runs into the night to escape judgment.

In seeking to escape, however, she unwittingly runs to the dark depths of her subconscious, returning to the den of monsters: the subway. The lecherous Hurst

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 104.

reappears, glancing “quickly up and down the platform to make sure that they are alone,”<sup>50</sup> before approaching the disheveled Sophie. He belittles her, calling her “little girl” and “girlie,” before recognizing her. He tells her that the trains are rare in the night and attempts to coerce her into a taxi with him. She partakes of his alcohol and begins to give up hope. At the moment when she seems to consent, however, she becomes resistant once more. Turning from Hurst, she begins to romanticize the coming train. Finally, at the close, Sophie submits to it, allowing herself to be devoured by the beast of mechanization, the subway. She becomes the vision of eternal beauty, meeting the subway-beast of mechanization for a final conflict. By doing so, Sophie fulfills the role of the doomed expressionistic protagonist, destined to fall victim to the overwhelming society that has rejected her.<sup>51</sup> It cannot be overstated that this submission is not a rape, as first noted by Robert Hogan, nor a sacrifice to the God of the Machine, as posited by Gerald Rabkin, but is in fact Sophie’s choice; Mardi Valgamae claims that her words before committing the act are sensual, indicating arousal at the subway’s approach, while the train itself is, quite obviously, a phallic metaphor.<sup>52</sup> In his analysis of *The Subway*, Durham states, “Rather surprisingly, she goes into a lyrical speech in which she confuses Eugene’s amatory performances with the subway train and begs it to kiss and embrace her until she dies.”<sup>53</sup> This is a gross oversimplification of the action. Her final act of

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>51</sup> Sophie’s suicide in the path of an oncoming train is reminiscent of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, a separate instance of guilt over an affair. Further evidence could suggest a trope in modern literature of female suicide by railway and may be a worthy subject of further study.

<sup>52</sup> Mardi Valgamae, “Rice’s *The Subway*,” *The Explicator* 25, 1967, 8.

<sup>53</sup> Frank Durham, *Elmer Rice*, (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1970), 73.

defiance reveals the inevitable, that a society obsessed with the masculine and the mechanical can only serve to blot out sensitivity and femininity.

By taking her fate into her own hands and challenging the subway-beast in an act reminiscent of Freud's concept of "death drive," she denies both dishonorable options presented by the voices of judgment and chooses for herself what will result from her actions. No misogynistic court is allowed privy. It is, as well, a hearkening back to Sophie's taunts in scene five. Her last words of "Tighter! Tighter! Eugene!"<sup>54</sup> serve as a taunt against the monstrous subway; she has found where to hit the masculine where it hurts—the ego. Her suicide is simultaneously a literal escape from the mechanized world and a figurative squaring up to the massive symbol of unstoppable masculine force. Then, the curtain falls. Whether eternal feminine beauty subsequently wins out against the oppressive masculine mechanization is left to the viewer.

#### *Conception and Production History of The Subway*

Rice first wrote *The Subway* in 1923, shortly after the success of *The Adding Machine*. While Rice details nothing of the mindset that went into its conception, some of his motivation for the work can be inferred from his apparent preoccupation with the dehumanization of industrial workers in an increasingly mechanical society. *The Subway*'s creation mere months after *The Adding Machine*, which followed a similarly ill-fated worker in American industry, points to Rice's discontent with the treatment of laborers, imprinted there by earlier events.

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<sup>54</sup> Rice, *The Subway*, 153.

In *Elmer Rice, a Playwright's Vision of America*, theatre scholar Anthony Palmieri makes a connection to an anecdote from Rice's early years as a dramatist. In 1915, a company based in Chicago was formed to produce *On Trial*, and Rice had agreed to attend their rehearsals. When the group stopped in Detroit, Rice explored the city, having never ventured far outside of his native Baltimore. According to Palmieri, only two observations would stay with him from his time with the Chicago troupe, one while visiting a Ford plant in Detroit, the other at a stockyard in Chicago.<sup>55</sup> These two events occurred years before *The Adding Machine* and *The Subway*, but the effect on the budding playwright was powerful enough for him to recall them in his autobiography, *Minority Report*, almost fifty years later.

In the first encounter, as Rice watched "the cars moving along the belt, each worker performing the same operation over and over, the whole process struck me as inhuman and demoralizing." Worse, still, for Rice would be the second encounter in Chicago. After the initial success of *On Trial*, he continued his industrial ventures into the stockyards, "a revolting experience." He recalls the frightened animals hoisted by their back legs, stunned by a wooden mallet, and slashed across the throat. But more vivid still is the memory of a man in the canning section. "Open-eyed and open-mouthed, he watched for air bubbles, snatching out the imperfectly sealed cans, a horrible picture of imbecility." For Rice, this was the perfect, horrid image of man as a cog in the machine; "that moronic boy personified for me the evils of the machine age."<sup>56</sup> Palmieri asserts that these images must have gradually evolved and developed in the writer's mind

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<sup>55</sup> Anthony F.R. Palmieri, *Elmer Rice: A Playwright's Vision of America*, (Rutherford, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1980), 56-7.

<sup>56</sup> Rice, *Minority Report*, 127.

for years. He asks, “how else explain the rather miraculous genesis of Rice’s 1923 play, *The Adding Machine*?”<sup>57</sup>

Another circumstance to keep in consideration is Rice’s experience with the Commission on Industrial Relations, appointed to oversee the ethics of industrial tycoons. Rice, who was not directly affiliated with the commission, attended its session in 1915 and observed John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s testimony to the Ludlow massacre, a violent crushing of a worker’s strike at Rockefeller’s own Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. Though the writer believed Rockefeller himself was innocent in the massacre, the economic baron’s account was, nonetheless, revelatory to Rice; “the appalling thing about his testimony was the tacit admission that in the management of his financial interests the human factors were not even taken into account.”<sup>58</sup> Such ideas must have been stirring within the playwright’s mind while writing *The Adding Machine* and *The Subway*.

At *The Subway*’s conception, however, Rice felt hesitant to follow up his earlier work with a second expressionist piece. As well, he believed the play’s severely tragic tone would not appeal to audiences. Nonetheless, he insisted that the play be written:

But the thing has taken hold of me and I must do it. It’s full of emotion and much more personal than *The Adding Machine*. It answers my present need for some vivid, intense form of expression. It’s curious that although my mind runs so much to satire and so many of my ideas are satiric, I seem able to lose myself only in the things that are emotional and tragic. I suppose the reason is that my satiric, flippant manner is really a mask, an affectation – a defense mechanism to conceal my hyper-sensitiveness.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Palmieri, *Elmer Rice*, 56-7.

<sup>58</sup> Rice, *Minority Report*, 139.

<sup>59</sup> Letter to Frank Harris, “Rice, Elmer/Harris, Frank, 1923-1925/Letters,” 14 July 1923, G87-93 to G87-110, Box 59, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

Before it was completed, however, Phillip Goodman, an advertiser-turned-producer, approached Rice with an offer to collaborate with Algonquin Round Table writer Dorothy Parker. Rice stopped work on *The Subway* temporarily. This collaboration resulted in *Close Harmony* (1924), which, despite high hopes by Parker and Rice, closed after only twenty-four performances to mediocre reviews.

It was during this time that *The Subway*, now completed, was picked up by Sheldon Cheney of the Actors' Theatre, a creation of the Actors' Equity Association with the intended purpose of providing work for theatre artists while bettering the theatre as a whole. Unfortunately for Rice, the Actors' Theatre abandoned the project quickly after, citing casting difficulties and complexity of setting as its motives. Rice suspected, however, that the problem was financial, as the Actors' Theatre closed its doors shortly thereafter.<sup>60</sup> This abandonment of *The Subway*, combined with the failures of *Close Harmony* and another play (*The Blue Hawaii*), weighed heavily on Rice, and in 1925 he moved with his family to Paris in search of inspiration.

Several promising offers appeared in the coming years. First, Irma Kraft of The International Playhouse approached Rice with an offer to produce *The Subway*, proposing to meet him halfway in London. Rice professed some hesitation at selling the play to an unknown producing company (even mistaking its name in one letter, calling it "The World Theatre"<sup>61</sup>), but felt it unwise to pass up an opportunity for production. Rice

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<sup>60</sup> Rice, *Minority Report*, 207.

<sup>61</sup> Letter to Alice Kauser, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," 22 April 1925, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

accepted, receiving an advance payment of \$1,000, and Kraft contracted prolific Broadway set designer Mordecai Gorelik to begin preliminary sketches for the production, which was scheduled for October 12<sup>th</sup>.<sup>62</sup>

All was not as it seemed however. Frank Harris, Rice's attorney and lifelong personal friend, wrote to Rice in September, detailing that he had met with members of the International Playhouse, including Kraft, and had come away with the impression that the theatre was no longer interested. The chief reasons, according to Harris, were 1.) that the Playhouse did not believe *The Subway* could pull in the desired audience for what was apparently to be their maiden production and 2.) that they had no money with which to produce the show:

Some evening paper a few weeks ago savagely indicted [the International Playhouse]'s representations and absurdly ambitious pretensions. That haven't the money, they haven't the backing, they, or rather it, draws its chief inspiration from the gutsy enthusiasm (now waned pathetically in the case of "The Subway") of Irma Kraft, who, for all I know, is the International Playhouse herself.<sup>63</sup>

Harris continues, however, that a serendipitous second buyer had appeared. Kraft, having been turned down by her own directors, had turned to a Mr. Saunders, an agent of Hughes Massie and Co., to find a manager for the play.<sup>64</sup> Saunders, in turn, spoke with Charles Hopkins of the Punch and Judy Theatre, who became very interested in producing *The Subway* for his own theatre instead. Hopkins, thus, had offered to buy out

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<sup>62</sup> "Irma Kraft Sails Abroad for Plays," *Daily News*, 7 May 1925, 25.

<sup>63</sup> Letter from Frank Harris, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," 6 September 1925, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>64</sup> Letter from Saunders, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," 10 September 1925, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

The International Playhouse's contract entirely. Harris concludes the letter by urging Rice to accept the offer, as Hopkins stood to be a slightly more reputable producer than the unknown Kraft.<sup>65</sup> Despite qualms about Hopkins' theatre practices (in one letter to Harris, Rice refers to Hopkins as a "pig-headed bastard"<sup>66</sup>), Rice obliged, and received a second advance payment. The Punch and Judy production was scheduled for early January 1926, and all of The International Playhouse's plans for their production, including Gorelik's set design, were turned over to Hopkins. Kraft, who had now been cut out of the deal, was left embittered, angry at having to pay Saunders' expenses just to be removed from the production.

Unfortunately for Rice, the agreement with Hopkins fell through as well. The exact reason why, however, is impossible to know; little information regarding why Hopkins failed to produce *The Subway* can be found. In his autobiography, Rice simply states:

*The Subway*, dropped by the Kraft organization, was optioned by another producer, Charles Hopkins (not related to Arthur), who eventually dropped it, too. The flow of advance royalties was useful, but it was no compensation for my frustrated hopes.<sup>67</sup>

*Daily News* reported that Hopkins, who had by January renamed the Punch and Judy Theatre the Charles Hopkins Theatre, planned to include *The Subway* in his season.<sup>68</sup> By

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<sup>65</sup> Letter from Frank Harris, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," 6 September 1925, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>66</sup> Letter to Frank Harris, "Rice, Elmer/Harris, Frank, 1923-1925/Letters," 20 September 1925, G87-93 to G87-110, Box 59, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>67</sup> Rice, *Minority Report*, 223.

<sup>68</sup> "You Can't Tell, It Might Be a Sort of Hit," *Daily News*, 24 January 1926, 46.

late February, the play was slated for performance with a lead actress selected.<sup>69</sup> From Rice's letters to Harris, it seems that the planned production simply fizzled out. Two months after the lead actress had been announced, Rice wrote to Harris, claiming that he still did not know what had come of the matter.<sup>70</sup> By August, however, he was once more passing the play along to potential producers, indicating that the Hopkins contract had been broken by then.<sup>71</sup>

Two more years passed before another deal was struck, but this one finally resulted in the world's first production of *The Subway*. In July 1928, Terence Gray of the Cambridge Festival Theatre became interested in the play, having produced a highly regarded production of *The Adding Machine* several years prior. In September, an offer was made, and Rice consented to a production directed by Gray and produced by Peter Godfrey of London's Gate Theatre. The play received its world premiere November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1928. It ran for a week and received high praise despite a short rehearsal period and "lack of rehearsal of the complicated mechanical aspects."<sup>72</sup>

Simultaneously, an amateur American theatre group, the Lenox Hill players, approached Rice for rights to the play. The Players, while rather unknown in New York at the time, had reached moderate success with a Broadway revival of *Rutherford and*

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<sup>69</sup> "Hammerstein Buys Mary Ellis Drama," *Daily News*, 21 February 1926, 32.

<sup>70</sup> Letter to Frank Harris, "Rice, Elmer/Harris, Frank, 1926-1951/Letters," 20 April 1926, G87-111 to 140, Box 59, Folder 3, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>71</sup> Letter to Frank Harris, "Rice, Elmer/Harris, Frank, 1926-1951/Letters," 16 August 1926, G87-111 to 140, Box 59, Folder 3, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>72</sup> Letter from Terence Gray, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," 10 November 1928, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

*Son* two years prior and were led by a personal friend to Rice, Adele Nathan. Rice, believing that a professional American production was no longer possible for the play, agreed, expecting to take an active part in its production. This expectation was not fulfilled; Rice soon took over as director for *Street Scene*, which opened January 10<sup>th</sup>, and had to set *The Subway* aside.<sup>73</sup> The American debut of *The Subway* opened on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1929 at the Cherry Lane Theatre, which Rice was unable to attend due to illness. Also unfortunate was the apparent collapse of the set during the second scene, rendering the nightmarish subway ride unplayable for the opening night performance.<sup>74</sup> *The Subway* opened to mixed reviews, though Rice himself relates that they were “surprisingly good,”<sup>75</sup> and ran only 24 performances. The general consensus seemed to agree that, “though ‘The Subway’ is by Elmer Rice, it is a play of no great weight,”<sup>76</sup> and the play was quickly dismissed. Despite this, *The Subway* attracted the attention of Broadway producer William A. Brady, who had already been producing Rice’s *Street Scene* at the time. Rice writes of the incident:

Brady, whose feet had not yet returned to their earthly anchorage, gave me an advance—the fourth I had received for the play—and moved the production to Broadway. But its run was short.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Rice, *Minority Report*, 248.

<sup>74</sup> Letter from Elmer Rice, “Business Correspondence, *The Subway*,” 26 January 1929, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>75</sup> Rice, *Minority Report*, 257.

<sup>76</sup> Arthur Pollock, “‘The Subway,’ a Play by Elmer Rice, Is Offered Wistfully at the Cherry Lane Theater,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 26 January 1929, 12.

<sup>77</sup> Rice, *Minority Report*, 257-58.

While Brady may have seen merit in the play, this move was more likely an attempt to capitalize on Rice's recent Broadway success with *Street Scene*.<sup>78</sup> On February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1929, *The Subway* opened on Broadway at the Masque Theater. The move, unfortunately for Rice, only highlighted the production's amateur quality by placing it in direct competition to fully realized Broadway shows like Philip Barry's *Holiday*, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *The Front Page*, and *Street Scene* itself. *The Subway*, thus, underwhelmed Broadway audiences with poor production quality, the Lenox Hill Players' lackluster acting, and the overall hasty transition to Broadway. Further, audiences were already familiar with Treadwell's *Machinal*, a similar play that had received its Broadway debut months prior.<sup>79</sup> Collapsing under this weight, *The Subway* closed after a mere seven performances. It was, however, the Lenox Hill Players' most successful play of the season.<sup>80</sup>

These poor opening productions, *Street Scene*'s overshadowing win of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama that year, and Rice's own bitterness in regards to *The Subway* ensured the play would be all but forgotten in America until a professional production in 1985, as performed by the Blind Parrot troupe in the ARC Gallery of Chicago, Illinois. Created two years prior, the troupe, advertising itself as "Theatrical exotica...especially ingenious,"<sup>81</sup> specialized in avant-garde theatre, performing original work alongside experimental texts such as Maria Irene Fornés' *Fefu and Her Friends*. Unfortunately,

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<sup>78</sup> Cynthia McCown. "The Subway: Sophie as Elmer Rice's Ms Zero." *Art, Glitter, and Glitz: Mainstream Playwrights and Popular Theatre in 1920s America*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 61.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> "Invitation," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 16 July 1929, 21.

<sup>81</sup> "Blind Parrot Productions at ARC Gallery," *Chicago Tribune*, 20 December 1985, 22.

their insufficient technical capability, brought on by limited resources and poor staging, often hindered the troupe, and it became known for its “imaginative selection and often flawed staging of its experimental material.”<sup>82</sup> Their production of *The Subway* was no exception. Debuting Blind Parrot Productions’ third season, the show, which ran November 22 through December 22, received mixed reviews and the play has since only fallen further into obscurity.

Interestingly, the play seemed to fare significantly better outside of America. After its successful world premiere at the Cambridge Festival Theater, it received a second production by the Lyceum Theatre Club at the Garrick Theatre in London, produced by Robert Atkins and starring English actress and playwright Beatrix Thomson as Sophie. The play, which opened July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1929, was hailed as a success with Thomson lauded as especially brilliant.

Thomson thereafter became fascinated with the play; after acquiring the Grafton Theatre in 1931, she wrote to Rice, asking for the performance rights.<sup>83</sup> Advertising itself as producing “London’s Most Intimate Shows,” the proto-feminist Grafton Theatre focused predominantly on the production of plays that highlighted women in acting, writing, and directing roles. It is unlikely any production of *The Subway* took place, however, as Thomson wrote to Rice in 1934 asking for another copy, for Atkins had

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<sup>82</sup> Richard Christiansen, “Blind Parrot’s new effort stumbles en route to a hit,” *Chicago Tribune*, 15 August 1985, 10.

<sup>83</sup> Letter from Beatrix Thomson “Business Correspondence, *The Subway*,” Undated, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

taken the previous one.<sup>84</sup> Thomson continued to shop the play around to business associates for more than thirty years afterward, even attempting to negotiate film rights with surrealist photographers.<sup>85</sup> In 1966, Thomson adapted the play into a musical, *Rush Hour*.<sup>86</sup> Despite Thomson's efforts, however, the play fell into obscurity in the English-speaking world shortly after its seemingly favorable opening.

Beyond these productions, there have been a small number of attempts at translation and performance in other languages. First, in 1931, Japanese translator Sugiki Takashi approached Rice with an offer to translate the work.<sup>87</sup> Though Rice agreed to the offer and Sugiki commenced with the translation, it is unknown whether the work was completed (however, Sugiki would publish a translation of Rice's *Street Scene* five years later).<sup>88</sup> In 1936, a Hungarian theatre group, New Thalia, asked Rice for the rights to perform the subway in Budapest, which Rice granted.<sup>89</sup> Four years later, a request was made for a Hungarian translation. Finally, in 1950, an amateur group, Teatro de la

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<sup>84</sup> Letter from Beatrix Thomson, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," 17 January 1934, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Monica McCall, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," 04 March 1937, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>86</sup> Michael W. Brooks, *Subway City: Riding the Trains, Reading New York*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 131.

<sup>87</sup> Letter to T. Sugiki, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," 17 October 1931, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>88</sup> Elmer Rice エルマー ライス, *City Landscape 街の風景*, trans. by Sugiki Takashi 杉木 喬, (Tokyo 東京都: Kenbunsha 健文社, 1936).

<sup>89</sup> Letter from George Balint, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," 03 March 1936, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

Facultad de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, requested a Spanish production of *The Subway*. As no Spanish translation of the work had been officially undertaken and therefore any production would be based on an unofficial translation, Rice denied the rights.<sup>90</sup>

### *Critical Reception*

Critical reception must be accounted for in an analysis of *The Subway*. It is one of the few extant ways to examine initial reactions to the script and performance. While critical reviews cannot account entirely for the play's impact on audiences, such reviews can influence expectations for theatre-goers, altering the play's subsequent success or failure. Therefore, critical reviews of *The Subway*'s major productions, professional and amateur, must be analyzed. Both Heuvel's sourcebook, containing production dates and critical reviews, and Rice's copies of newspaper critiques at the Harry Ransom Center were vital in this analysis, establishing a sense of the play's reception in numerous productions.

Reviews for the original Cherry Hill Theatre production were largely mixed. While critics seemed to agree on most aspects of the production, their responses to the script itself ranged wildly; one reviewer praised *The Subway* as a "fuming, eruptive interpretation of the city's fierce pace,"<sup>91</sup> while another felt so strongly as to say "[*The Subway*] pales in comparison to *Street Scene* and should have remained at the bottom of

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<sup>90</sup> Letter from M. Abbott Van Nostrand, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," 06 September 1950, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>91</sup> From the Reviews of the Subway, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

Rice's storage trunk. Sophie never comes across as anything more than a sentimental abstraction."<sup>92</sup> The most universally praised aspect of the script was the embodiment of social criticism. Burns Mantle of *Daily News* praised Rice as an "imaginative and distressed observer of the tragedies of humanity."<sup>93</sup> The *Evening Graphic* reported a profoundly sobering effect on the audience after the performance; "...The action of the play and the manner of production leave a startling and telling effect. Out of it comes a feeling of the mass brutality of modern life and the roar of underground civilization."<sup>94</sup>

In regard to the production itself, Jane Hamilton's performance as Sophie was singled out as a highlight. Pleased with the previously unknown actress, critics lauded her "untheatrical" innocence and deep understanding of the character. Robert Littell, in the *Evening Post*, wrote that her natural performance contained "a childlike radiance and simplicity which fairly took your breath away."<sup>95</sup> *Variety* went even further, claiming Hamilton's performance as the makings of a Broadway actress. The remainder of the cast, along with the overall quality of the production, did not fare as well. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*'s critic Arthur Pollock blamed the amateurishness of the troupe over the quality of the script, suggesting that "perhaps no judgment should be passed on it [the script] in its present production, for it is crudely done, left lifeless on the stage by the eager Lenox Hill Players..."<sup>96</sup> This sentiment was also reflected in Burns Mantle's review, who, despite

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<sup>92</sup> Barrett Clark, "The Subway," *Drama Magazine* 19, March 1929, 171.

<sup>93</sup> From the Reviews of the Subway, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Pollock, "The Subway," 12.

his regard for Rice's script, had little praise for the cast. He offered one scene as effectively portrayed, and that "for the rest, the Lenox Hill amateurs do their best with credible results." Mantle further noted the flimsy set's collapse during the second scene of opening night, remarking that it prevented the establishment of *The Subway*'s theme of tragedy.<sup>97</sup> Kelcey Allen, in his review for *Women's Wear Daily* summarizes his review, and indeed the majority of reviews for the Cherry Hill production, by saying that, while Hamilton's performance was thoroughly enjoyable, "the limited facilities of the theatre and the rather ordinary character of the direction of the play itself did not enhance the effectiveness of the play as a whole."<sup>98</sup> Reviews of the Lenox Hill Players' subsequent Broadway production at the Masque Theatre were significantly more negative. Of these, nearly all were unable to overlook the poor production quality. *The New York Times*, while simultaneously reporting a special cable from London that praised the Lyceum Club performance, had little to say of the Cherry Lane version. Of the production itself, the article merely states, "Written as episodic tragedy of the machine age, its performance here suffered from admittedly inadequate staging."<sup>99</sup> The Broadway stage served only to highlight the mediocre quality of the set, originally intended for the Cherry Lane Theatre.

Several critiques, both positive and negative, primarily targeted Rice's script in relation to his other works, particularly *Street Scene* and *The Adding Machine*; this could not be helped, as the choice to place *The Subway* on Broadway where it ran directly against *Street Scene*, in conjunction with the fact that *The Adding Machine* gained Rice

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<sup>97</sup> Burns Mantle, "'The Subway' a Tragic Drama," *Daily News*, 26 January 1929, 21.

<sup>98</sup> Kelcey Allen, "Familiar Story Told in Revival of 'The Subway,'" *Women's Wear Daily*; *New York* 38.19, 28 January 1929, 11.

<sup>99</sup> "Elmer Rice Play in London." *New York Times*, 15 July 1929.

nationwide prominence as a playwright, only served to attract comparison between the two more successful plays and *The Subway*. As such, many reviews discussed *The Subway*'s transitional place between the two, but seemed too preoccupied with comparing the work to the other plays to see any merit in the piece itself; "The production of *The Subway* at the Cherry Lane Theatre on 25 January looks as if it transplants two characters from *Street Scene*, even though it was written in 1923."<sup>100</sup> Another play also found itself frequently mentioned in comparisons to *The Subway* alongside *Street Scene* and *The Adding Machine*. Critical reviews were eager to point out *The Subway*'s many similarities to Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, which had seen its first production in 1928. These ranged from labeling the play as "reminiscent of Arthur Hopkins' recent *Machinal*"<sup>101</sup> to "an earlier *Machinal*."<sup>102</sup>

*The Chicago Tribune*'s review of the 1985 Blind Parrot production was mixed. Critic Richard Christiansen lamented the "wheezing melodrama" of the script and director Scott Grannan's lack of voice within the direction. He held the technical design to be the best aspect of the production, but praised the actors for their "good, naturalistic performances" within the expressionist piece, particularly pointing out the actress playing Sophie's automaton-sister.<sup>103</sup> Nonetheless, Christiansen regarded the production as living up to the standards set by the Blind Parrot troupe: experimental, but deeply flawed.

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<sup>100</sup> "The Editor Goes to the Play," *Theatre Magazine* 49, April 1929, 47.

<sup>101</sup> From the Reviews of the Subway, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Richard Christiansen, "Blind Parrot's 'Subway' Provides A Bumpy Ride," *Chicago Tribune*, 25 November 1985, 4.

Reviews of the original English performances were more encouraging, particularly the 1928 Cambridge Festival Theatre world premiere. As the theatre had done *The Adding Machine* several years before, critics were eager to compare the pieces. These comparisons, however, favored *The Subway*, with one reviewer for *The Cambridge Review* going so far as to say:

Mr. Peter Godfrey produced *The Subway* as well as, and perhaps better than, Mr. Marshall produced *The Adding Machine*. In view of the fact that the latter may have been the best production which The Festival has seen, this is high praise...<sup>104</sup>

*The Gownsmen* agreed, remarking that both *The Subway* and *The Adding Machine* make for a stimulating attack on a grinding, soul-crushing civilization.<sup>105</sup> *The New Cambridge* found *The Subway* to be the model for expressionism rightly applied, citing scenes four and eight, in which Sophie and Eugene are at the cinema and Sophie is tortured by disembodied voices respectively, as particularly powerful.<sup>106</sup>

The 1929 Lyceum Club performance was also held in significant regard. The aforementioned special cable to the *New York Times* reported the play to be well received, appraising Thomson's performance as particularly brilliant. Similar to the Cambridge Festival Theatre's production, New York's *Daily News* reported, "'The Subway' is regarded in London as a better play than 'The Adding Machine.'"<sup>107</sup> London's *The Stage* gave a lukewarm review, simply deeming the play "less exasperating

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<sup>104</sup> From the Reviews of the Subway, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> "Chas L. Wagner Seeks Play for Madge Kennedy," *Daily News*, 4 August 1929, 51.

and irritating an example of expressionism run mad than Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*." While praising the direction of Atkins and the efforts of the cast, the review sums up *The Subway* as merely "more acceptable on the whole than was *The Adding Machine*."<sup>108</sup> Despite this warmer reception of *The Subway*, no subsequent productions have been staged.

*The Subway* remains as Rice's most thoroughly expressionistic venture. His treatment of a female protagonist also highlights serious concerns of feminism at the time. Thus, the piece stands as a relatively unknown text of social activism. Its problematic production history has earned it a lowered status amongst his plays, but its similarity to Treadwell's *Machinal*, is too troubling to ignore. Produced only four months prior, Treadwell's play shares remarkably similar themes, imagery, and even plot points with *The Subway*. Thus, upon the latter's release, critics were quick to point out these similarities while audiences were unimpressed. Therefore, in the following chapter, I will examine the similarities between the two plays to suggest that *Machinal* must have drawn inspiration, conscious or unconscious, from *The Subway*. To establish this, I will investigate the origins of *Machinal*, taking care to note *The Subway*'s influence, before analyzing the scripts of both to present their undeniable resemblance in plot and form.

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<sup>108</sup> "Lyceum Club," *The Stage*, 18 July 1929, 15.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Problem of *Machinal*

*Sophie Treadwell*

Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* is a staple of American expressionism. First performed in 1929, it stands as one of the last plays written in the genre, which would end shortly thereafter. In recent years, the play has received renewed interest not only as an exponent of American expressionism, but as a feminist piece. Therefore, its similarity to *The Subway* is troubling.

*Machinal*'s potential inspiration by Rice's play has not been investigated by any scholarly source to date. As a thorough appraisal of *The Subway*'s importance within the genre of American expressionism must include documentation of such a potentially impactful influence, it is the purpose of this chapter to explain and investigate Rice's claim that Treadwell had drawn either conscious or unconscious inspiration for *Machinal*. In this chapter I give a brief summary of *Machinal*, analyze its text in order to investigate the similarities between it and *The Subway*, and discuss its production history and reception before presenting Rice's theory and response. This presents both the historical possibility that Treadwell came into contact with *The Subway* and the textual similarities that point to a probable connection.

Treadwell's life has not been compiled into a published biography currently, and certain details of her employment are unknown; there are sizable gaps in her professional career in the 1920s. Raised in California, Treadwell pursued journalism at the University

of California at Berkeley, becoming *The San Francisco Examiner*'s correspondent for the university. After moving to Los Angeles to pursue acting, Treadwell worked briefly with renowned Polish actress Helene Modjeska. Treadwell was tasked with penning the star's memoirs, but the pair became close, with the elder actress instilling a strong sense of artistic control in the young writer. This sense of authorial control would deeply impact the remainder of Treadwell's career.

Treadwell then married William O. McGeehan, a sports writer for the *San Francisco Bulletin*. His work required the pair to move cross-country to New York, where Treadwell continued to write as both journalist and playwright. Here, she became familiar with the commercial system of play production but expressed distaste for it. For Treadwell, commercial theatre "discouraged artistic experimentation, limited actors to a small range of roles based solely on their physical type, and blunted the creative imaginations of dramatists..."<sup>1</sup> She received her first Broadway production, *Gringo*, in 1922, but her subsequent work failed to garner the attention of producers. Frustrated, she began to self-produce her work instead, allowing her to retain full artistic control of her creative property.

Her biggest conflict over authorial control occurred in October of 1924, when Treadwell filed an infringement suit against famed actor John Barrymore. Treadwell had sent Barrymore her manuscript for *Poe*, a biographical work about the life of Edgar Allen Poe, three years previously. The actor had expressed his interest in playing the lead role, and Treadwell continued to pass the play along. When no producer seemed interested,

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry Dickey, "The Expressionist Moment: Sophie Treadwell," *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*, edited by Brenda Murphy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 69.

Treadwell decided to try to contact Barrymore again but received no response. Then, three years later, the production of a new play, *Dark Crown*, was announced. The play detailed the life of Edgar Allen Poe and had been written by Barrymore's wife, Michael Strange.<sup>2</sup> Alarmed, Treadwell met with Barrymore to discuss the similarities between the works, but the actor dismissed them as coincidental, reading the entirety of *Dark Crown* to her in an effort to prove it. Three weeks later, Treadwell filed a lawsuit. In the ensuing case, the press blamed Treadwell while Barrymore filed a large countersuit, meant largely as a distraction from his quiet return of Treadwell's manuscript. This countersuit, while eventually abandoned by the Barrymores, was enough to sway public opinion against Treadwell, whose case was completed with the return of *Poe's* manuscript. Barrymore subsequently took a hiatus from the theatre. This lawsuit, alongside Treadwell's dissatisfaction with the commercial system of play production, her foray into self-production, and the earlier impact of Modjeska's tutelage, gradually shaped the burgeoning playwright into a firm advocate for authors rights.<sup>3</sup>

Having established her control over her creative property, Treadwell began to steer her work toward a more nonrealistic style. American expressionists like Glaspell, O'Neill, and Rice had already popularized the movement away from realism in the New York theatre scene. While Treadwell's papers do not detail her interest in American expressionism, Treadwell expert and theatre scholar Jerry Dickey points to her guest review for the *New York Tribune* on O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* as an indication of

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<sup>2</sup> "Michael Strange" was the pen name of Blanche Marie Louise Oelrichs. Oelrichs intended the alias as a method of distancing her societal position from the often-erotic content of her poems, but eventually assumed the name in every aspect of her life.

<sup>3</sup> Jerry Dickey, "Sophie Treadwell vs. John Barrymore: Playwrights, Plagiarism and Power in the Broadway Theatre of the 1920s," *Theatre History Studies* 15, 1995, 68.

her familiarity with the genre; while she suggested that O'Neill's success in youth may have caused him to peak early, "she nevertheless admired the 'depth and truth' of the play, as well as its expressionist staging by Robert Edmond Jones."<sup>4</sup> Here, Treadwell acknowledges the power of expressionism in the theatre. Soon after, she found inspiration for her own contribution to the genre, *Machinal*, in another sensationalized court case.

In 1927, Ruth Snyder, a seemingly innocent housewife, was arrested along with her lover on charges of murdering her husband. The trial became a media-fueled circus; tickets to the court were sold, speakers projected the words of the defendants, and 180 reporters documented the proceedings. Fueled by the theatrics, spectators rallied to the dead man's defense, convinced of Snyder's cold-heartedness and conniving psychopathy. The Governor even denied Snyder the right to an examination by alienist (psychiatrist). Certain facts of the case were even overlooked; Snyder's own lawyer failed to mention that her husband regularly beat her and her nine-year-old daughter. Her lover, Henry Gray, testified against her and the jury, comprised of all men, did not sympathize with the husband-murdering Snyder.<sup>5</sup> Finally, she was convicted and executed via electric chair. Her death was captured by a reporter's hidden camera and published in the following day's *New York Daily News*. It was the first case in which a woman was publicly executed by electrocution.

While she did attend the proceedings, Treadwell did not cover the trial as a journalist. Instead, influenced by the court's overwhelming condemnation of Snyder, Treadwell created *Machinal* as a feminine account of Snyder's actions; it is an

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<sup>4</sup> Dickey, "Expressionist Moment," 71.

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Jones. "In Defense of the Woman," *Modern Drama* 37.3, 1994, 485.

examination of the suffocating environment surrounding an adulteress and murderer. Through it, Treadwell sought to humanize her by shedding light on certain facts left untouched in the trial, such as Snyder's unhappiness in her marriage. Jennifer Jones, in her article "In Defense of the Woman: Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*," acknowledges Treadwell's part in disclosing Snyder's sexual unhappiness and degradation, which the jury overlooked:

The experience of having one's body used by a man one does not love was probably not one that the male jury could sympathize with or understand. Ruth's attorneys never used this line of reasoning in her defense, but in *Machinal*, Treadwell makes the Young Woman's sexual degradation a central part of her testimony against the system that convicted Ruth Snyder.<sup>6</sup>

Humanizing Snyder was just one of Treadwell's goals. In a 2013 interview with the Roundabout Theatre Company, Dr. Dickey spoke of her deliberate use of the expressionistic genre in the hopes of reaching female theatre-goers. According to Dickey, Treadwell hoped the "inner monologues, an expressionistic soundscape..., and the quieter moments of intimacy" in the play would weave an atmosphere that would encourage the audience to complete the narrative for themselves. "As Treadwell wrote, she hoped these effects would quicken 'still secret places in the consciousness of the audience, especially of women.'" <sup>7</sup> By creating a female account of Snyder's actions onstage, Treadwell hoped to empower women as well as humanize them to men.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 489.

<sup>7</sup> Ted Sod, "Interview with Jerry Dickey, Sophie Treadwell Expert," *Broadway World*, 17 Dec. 2013, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Interview-with-Jerry-Dickey-Sophie-Treadwell-Expert-20131217>.

### *Plot Summary of Machinal*

*Machinal* follows a character called the Young Woman (whose name we learn is Helen), employed in the office of Mr. George H. Jones. She is initially absent and her coworkers gossip about her. Machine-like, these employees chatter mindlessly, mixing their own automated work with snippets of Helen's life. Helen arrives late having suffered an anxiety attack during the subway ride to work. When George expresses his infatuation with Helen, as predicted by her fellow employees, she is initially repulsed by the thought of marriage, despite the prospects of a financially secure future. She closes the scene in a fretful, stilted monologue, revealing her scattered thoughts and paranoiac fears. Episode two features Helen's mother, too preoccupied with her own chores to listen to her daughter. As she bickers, pieces of conversation from outside influence Helen's thoughts, forcing her to consider marriage as an escape from her stifling home life. As, the mother's incessant chatter and noises from the street overwhelm her, she finally snaps and threatens her mother's life. Guilty, she comforts the older woman before deciding to marry George, unable to continue this oppressive life.

Helen marries George but, in episode three, avoids interaction with the man on their honeymoon, as he continues to repulse her. She replies stiffly to his jokes, locks herself in the bathroom to change alone, and finally breaks down into emotional sobs at the thought of sharing a bed with him. Episode four occurs shortly after she gives birth to their first child. Helen rejects the nurses' attempts to comfort her, and it becomes obvious that she feels suffocated. Despite the doctor's insistence that she meet the baby, Helen feels no attachment to the child, conveying her frantic thoughts through a second, terrified monologue.

Let me rest— now I can rest— the weight is gone— inside the weight is gone— it's only outside— outside— all around— weight— I'm under it— Vixen crawled under the bed— there were eight— I'll not submit anymore— I'll not submit— I'll not submit—<sup>8</sup>

In episode five, Helen and a friend meet two men in a bar. When the friend leaves to have sex with one of the men, Helen begins to talk with the other, Mr. Roe. Voices from two outside conversations, in which a man convinces his lover to abort her pregnancy and another man seduces a boy with alcohol, permeate the scene's atmosphere and hint at the events to come. She gradually learns that he is an artist who once evaded capture in Mexico by killing a man. They leave to have an affair. In episode six, which occurs in the man's room, Helen feels comfortable for the first time. Roe and Helen talk freely and discuss travelling the world together. In the next scene, however, Helen returns to George and becomes aware of the suffocating atmosphere of her marriage once more. Their conversation touches on death, imprisonment, and stones. George shrugs off these topics, but Helen begins to hear disembodied voices recanting Mr. Roe's tale of murder and escape. In a fit of passion accompanied by the disembodied voices cheering her on, she murders her husband with the bottle of stones given to her by Mr. Roe.

Scene eight details the murder trial. Helen initially denies killing George, blaming the murder on two "big dark-looking men" that entered the house. The prosecutor then tears apart the story. He first questions the varying amount of light she describes then points to her suspicious cleaning of the crime scene before producing an affidavit of confession from Mr. Roe of the affair. Humiliated, Helen confesses, explaining the murder was born from her need to be free. In the last scene, she is brought to the electric chair. As a priest prays for her soul, she states a preference for the singing of a

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<sup>8</sup> Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal*, (London: Nick Hern Books, 1993), 31.

condemned black man nearby. She is shaved, despite her refusal to submit, and she realizes her two moments of freedom on earth were her greatest sins: the affair and the murder. She embraces her mother one last time and, before a crowd of reporters, is electrocuted.

### *Critical Reception*

*Machinal* debuted on Broadway Sept. 7, 1928, only eight months after Snyder's death. Directed by Arthur Hopkins, the production was highly praised. Brooks Atkinson wrote in the *New York Times*, "From the sordid mess of a brutal murder the author, actors and producer of *Machinal*... have with great skill managed to retrieve a frail and sombre beauty of character."<sup>9</sup> Oliver M. Sayler, writing in *Footlights and Lamplights*, called the play "one of the first by an American dramatist successfully to merge expressionist form and expressionist content."<sup>10</sup> Theatre critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Percy Hammond admired Treadwell's worldliness, saying of the play, "Miss Treadwell's 'Machinal' is the most honest compromise of adventure with prudence that the recent drama has known."<sup>11</sup> Though *Machinal* was lauded by the press, Dickey makes an interesting observation regarding its critical response; there was little to no discussion of Treadwell's social critique:

Instead, critics remained preoccupied either with what they believed to be a new theatrical style of production and writing or with the play's supposed basis in the Snyder murder trial, the latter point being debated almost equally among those who saw in the Young Woman a personification of Snyder and those who did not.

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<sup>9</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "The Play," *New York Times*, 8 September 1928, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Oliver M. Sayler, "Review of *Machinal*," *Footlights and Lamplights*, 17 September 1928.

<sup>11</sup> Percy Hammond, "The Theater – 'Machinal' Gratifying. The Woman Who Wrote It. Straight, Sturdy Story. 'The High Road,'" *The Pittsburgh Press*, 23 September 1928, 64.

Instead, reviewers praised the “lyrical beauty and subtlety”<sup>12</sup> of the lovers’ intimate scene. Treadwell’s intelligent observations of society were entirely ignored in favor of the style in which she staged them.

Ironically, though *Machinal* was meant as a defense of Ruth Snyder, Helen became so sympathetic as a character that some male reviewers actually denied any real connection between the trial and the drama. One such critic, Robert Littell, went as far as to denounce Snyder as a monster while stating, “I cannot help feeling that [Miss Treadwell] would have been artistically more successful if she had stopped short of the end,”<sup>13</sup> simultaneously condemning the person while acquitting the character.

Despite glowing reviews, however, the play ran only 91 performances and was considered a box office failure. Following this, *Machinal* faded from the public eye until over thirty years later when it was revived at the Gate Theatre in 1960. Interestingly, Atkinson also reviewed this revival, calling it, “one of Off-Broadway’s most vibrant performances.”<sup>14</sup> *Machinal* has received numerous revivals since then including a 1990 production at the Public Theatre which won three Obie Awards, a 1993 production with the Royal National Theatre in London, a 2014 Broadway revival at the American Airlines Theatre, and a 2018 production at London’s Almeida Theatre.

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<sup>12</sup> Dickey, “The Expressionist Moment,” 78.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Littell, “Chiefly about Machinal,” *Theatre Arts Monthly* 12.2, 1928, 775.

<sup>14</sup> Brooks Atkinson, “Theatre: ‘Machinal’ Revived at Gate; Sophie Treadwell Play Opens Downtown,” *New York Times*, 8 April 1960, 27.

### *Connection to The Subway*

Reviews of *The Subway*, as mentioned in the previous chapter, drew a connection between Rice's play and *Machinal*. Many of these references were little more than comparison. For example, *The New York Times* stated, "Like the young woman of *Machinal*, earlier in the season, she is seeking happiness as well as liberation..."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, *New York American* reported, "It is the history of a N.Y. Louise, an earlier *Machinal*."<sup>16</sup> These seemed to merely categorize the plays similarly, likening the expressionistic struggles of their young heroines. Some critical reviews seemed more suspicious of the connection, such as *Variety*: "The nature of Sophie Smith's home life, the machine-like aura of her business life—strongly reminiscent of Arthur Hopkins' recent *Machinal*"<sup>17</sup>; and *The New York Evening Journal*: "Here is the mechanical drudgery which gave *Machinal* its strange clangor of irony."<sup>18</sup> However, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* was by far the most intrigued with the connection, even making mention of *The Subway*'s earlier conception:

*The Subway*, though produced at last only now, was written in 1923, shortly after Mr. Rice's *The Adding Machine* came to light in the theatre. Pretty nearly all it has to say Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* has said since. Most of the producers in New York were shown it, M. Rice says in a program note. It is unfortunate that Miss Treadwell was privileged to have her say first.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> From the Reviews of the Subway, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

It is worth noting here that, out of *The Subway*'s press comments gathered at the Harry Ransom Center, these five reviews mentioning Treadwell's play were reprinted together on the same paper. The idea that these reviews were gathered and kept in Rice's personal files throughout his life strongly emphasizes the author's certainty regarding the similarity of the two works.

There is a remarkably strong resemblance between *Machinal* and *The Subway*. Both plays feature a nine scene episodic structure which begins at the heroine's place of work. The plight of the female protagonist in both plays involves a desperate need to escape the trappings of a neglectful home life, an objectifying and mechanized workplace, and the maddeningly stifling commute via subway which connects the two. Like Sophie, Helen suffers a breakdown on the train to work, where she is subjected to mistreatment at the hands of her coworkers. The toll of the suffocating atmosphere is made evident through both protagonists' stilted, stream-of-consciousness monologues, which detail their hidden fears and desires. Even the texts of these monologues are similar, touching on religious love and the wandering hands of the subway passengers. After a brief glimpse of her family, both narratives focus on her relationship with an artist, with particular emphasis on a scene in which the lovers meet in the dark and share a story. For Sophie, this is Eugene, with his tale of the subway-beast and the eternal beauty. For Helen, this is Mr. Roe, and his stories of the lands below the Rio Grande. Additionally, each heroine's only means of escaping her toxic environment is in this affair. However, it is this affair, ended by the artist's departure on business, which forces the heroine back into to society, and causes her subsequent downfall and eventual death by a machine. Both Sophie and Helen are interrogated for their actions and are killed.

In order to answer the question of whether *Machinal* was inspired or at least influenced by *The Subway*, the content of both plays must be examined thoroughly. *The Subway* and *Machinal* have corresponding scenes which perform similar functions. Their usages of American expressionism are unique from other plays within the genre. Through a comparison of these scenes and their identical functions within their respective narratives, the validity of Rice's claim becomes more apparent.

In *The Subway*, the action commences with a scene at work, in which automaton-like workers carry in envelopes for Sophie to sort into cabinets. She seems to find a perfect means of escape from this mechanization through George, but her dreams are shattered when he announces his departure from New York. After his exit, Eugene and Hurst, while writing a piece on the company, ogle Sophie. The scene ends with their exit. *Machinal* begins similarly as Helen's place of work is established to be similarly mechanical, including instances of watching associates. Helen's co-workers gossip about her love life and the possibility of a marriage proposal from the boss, George H. Jones. When this is proven true, the proposal seems overwhelming to Helen; it could solve her financial burdens, but George himself is unappealing.

Both scenes propose an idealized marriage which could theoretically offer escape from suffocation, while also introducing the male character whose eventual relationship with the protagonist, while appearing as a solution to her predicament, will ultimately prove to be her demise. There are differences, too. In *The Subway* the idealized marriage and the male lead's entrance are separate incidents, George and Eugene respectively, while *Machinal* unites them into one event: George H. Jones' proposal. As well, Sophie

is eager for the chance to marry George<sup>20</sup> and his announcement leaves her anxious.

Helen, on the other hand, is left overwhelmed because of the marriage proposal itself, rather than the lack thereof.

The next scene in *The Subway* is Sophie's encounter in the subway, for which there is no equivalent scene in Treadwell's play. In *Machinal*, this corresponding attack is reduced, and moved into the first scene. In it, Helen does mention suffering an anxiety attack on the subway which causes her to be late for work. She defends herself meekly to her coworkers; "I thought I would faint! I had to get out in the air!"<sup>21</sup> This is distinctly similar to Sophie's own defense to her family; "Everything seemed like it was going around. I guess I must have fainted. Maybe it was the air, or I don't know what."<sup>22</sup> While Helen's attack is not shown onstage as Sophie's is in *The Subway*, it is just as devastating. She mentions it in her stilted monologue at the end of the episode, equivalating the thought of marrying George with the suffocation of the train. In both plays, the attack sets into motion the fear of society which compels both Sophie and Helen to seek escape from society.

*The Subway*'s scene three is a glimpse into Sophie's home life. Her family does not interact with her directly, instead chattering incessantly while performing mindless tasks. This neglect gives Sophie only Eugene for conversation, developing the beginnings of their doomed affair through disjointed talk; "He talked so nice, too. He said-he said

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<sup>20</sup> The usage of the name George for the idealized partner in the first scene of both plays could be considered a notable similarity; due to its lack of significance on the plot, this is more likely coincidence, however.

<sup>21</sup> Treadwell, *Machinal*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Rice, *The Subway*, 44.

he'd come and see me some time."<sup>23</sup> *Machinal*'s scene two performs the same function, introducing the audience to the protagonist's neglectful family. Helen's mother ignores her, prescribing her own views on the young woman's life. At her mother's insistence, Helen agrees to marry George; "It's my hands got me a husband."<sup>24</sup> In both, the heroine's family, indirectly or directly, causes her to enter into the central relationship in the plot.

For Sophie, this relationship is the affair with Eugene, which is developed over the course of the rest of the play. Scene four establishes her guilt over the affair in a stilted, halting monologue. Following this is the scene in a movie theater, in which Eugene pressures Sophie into sex. Scenes three and four of *Machinal* provide the same ideas, but in reverse. In scene four, Helen voices a stilted, halting speech regarding her own guilt about having children with George. This occurs after the birth of their child, George having already attempted to pressure her into sex in scene three.

Here, the most impactful difference between the plays occurs; Eugene's counterpart in *Machinal* is divided between two men. While *The Subway*'s Eugene offers a means of escape from ordinary life through an affair, *Machinal*'s George offers escape through marriage, but Helen has the affair with Mr. Roe. Eugene is both the impetus for the action and the cause of Sophie's eventual downfall, while George is the impetus and Mr. Roe causes the downfall. This split allows George to remain consistently antagonistic over the course of the show, whereas Eugene does not initially appear as such. This difference impacts the remainder of both plays.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Treadwell, *Machinal*, 20.

In scene six of *The Subway* and *Machinal*, the heroine is given a brief reprieve from society through an affair. This release comes through an extramarital relationship with an artist: Eugene and Mr. Roe, respectively. Further, this scene happens in near darkness onstage, with the artist recounting stories of foreign lands. For Eugene, this is the story of the subway-beast. For Roe, the discussion touches on Spain, the lands “below the Rio Grande,” and Frisco. Sophie and Helen are both comforted by these stories, forgetting the outside world and its responsibilities for the length of the scene.

In both, the final scenes depict the downfall of the protagonist, as is frequent in expressionism. This downfall is the result of both the fear of returning to her former role in society and the betrayal of a lover. For Sophie, this is Eugene’s job offer in Europe, which threatens to leave her a single mother. For Helen, this is the reality of living with George after her affair and her betrayal by Mr. Roe in court. Mr. Roe, like Eugene, leaves the heroine defenseless, open to scorn from her peers. In both, the oppressive society judges the heroine, scrutinizing her actions and ultimately condemning her as a failed mother. At the close of the play, she is killed by a machine.

Numerous linguistic similarities are also apparent. Both heroines are given to disjointed speeches which highlight their anxious, paranoiac train of thought. The greatest example of these occurs in scene four of both plays. In *The Subway*, Sophie expresses her anxiety over losing George and longs for an end to her loneliness. Her speech is fragmented and her thoughts at odds with each other. At the end, she prays to heaven, asking Jesus to love her:

I’m always thinking about boys... but I won’t anymore... And those other things I think of sometimes... where do my other bad thoughts come from? ... Forgive me, dear Jesus... Comfort me... I love you so... Make me like you... make my heart as clean as yours... I’m all alone... Love

me, dear Jesus... Take me to your heart... Love me... Love me... I'm so lonesome... so lonesome...<sup>25</sup>

Correspondingly, Helen's stilted monologue in *Machinal*'s scene four seems almost an answer to Sophie's; similarly disjointed and anxious, it confronts the belief of God as love instead of embracing it: "everybody loves God—they've got to—got to—got to love God—God is love—even if he's bad they got to love him..."<sup>26</sup> These staccato speeches, peppered with fretful anxiety, provide the same function for their respective protagonists, a means of expressing thought in a suffocating environment. The halting pace reflects a disjointed mindset, which both protagonists share.

Further, these linguistic similarities even carry over into word usage and topic. In some cases, these staccato monologues are almost identical. In the best example of this, both plays have their heroine speak of the ominous dread which accompanies riding the subway. In her first monologue in *Machinal*, Helen speaks aloud her fears of men touching her while riding the train:

...Fat hands— flabby hands— don't touch me— please— fat hands are never weary— please don't... don't touch me— please— no— can't— must— somebody— something— no rest— must rest— no rest— must rest— no rest— late today— yesterday— before— late— subway— air— pressing— bodies pressing— bodies— trembling...<sup>27</sup>

Here, the subway is given as a place of oppression, where the stifling air crowds its passengers. This claustrophobia is shared in Sophie. In *The Subway*'s scene four, Sophie voices her own fears:

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 55-6.

<sup>26</sup> Treadwell, *Machinal*, 30.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 12.

. . . Oh, dear Jesus, why do you make me ride in the subway? . . . I hate it, hate it, hate it . . . They put their hands on you . . . all over you . . . But I'm too scared to say anything . . . I don't know what to say . . . Oh, my sweet Jesus, don't let them touch me like that . . .<sup>28</sup>

In both monologues, the heroine specifically mentions the touching of strangers on the subway. In scene two of *Machinal*, Helen even tells her mother her fear of dying on the train. The subway's specific usage within these plays is significant, indicating that both works utilize the same tool for the same purpose; the subway becomes a focal point of unconscious fear, which plagues both Sophie and Helen.

The subway in both plays is a symbol not only for the mechanization of society, but for the ambivalence of the people to this mechanization. Both heroines specifically address their horror at the willingness of people to pack themselves so tightly onto the train, mentioning the pressing of bodies against them. In *The Subway*, each stop is a battlefield of passengers forcing themselves through each other; "The faces on the platform grow tense, muscles taut with the anticipation of battle. The readers lower their newspapers. Sophie closes her book. Her lips are drawn, her eyes a little terrified."<sup>29</sup> Helen doesn't directly describe the passengers of the subway, but does mention their proximity to her; "All those bodies pressing."<sup>30</sup> These passengers, however, do not seem to notice. In *The Subway*, they are merely "staring vacuously, imbecilely."<sup>31</sup> The subway is a necessary evil and its riders have become desensitized to its barbarity.

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<sup>28</sup> Rice, *The Subway*, 52.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>30</sup> Treadwell, *Machinal*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Rice, *The Subway*, 27.

The usage of a female protagonist is also significant. As mentioned in the previous chapter, *The Subway* and *Machinal* are two of only three major expressionist works with a female lead. This fact in itself creates a similarity between the works and is highlighted when considering the third, *The Verge*, holds almost nothing else in common with them. The mechanical themes of *The Subway* and *Machinal* are completely absent in *The Verge*, which in fact deals with the reverse in botany and biology. Further, the former two plays deal primarily with a protagonist forcibly isolated from society and longing to regress to a simpler time. *The Verge*'s Claire Archer is isolated from her peers, but only through her own desire to press forward into abstraction and "the beyond." The similarities between *The Subway* and *Machinal* are much more evident when considering the third female-driven expressionist play.<sup>32</sup>

A final note worth mentioning is the similarity in title. Both *Machinal* and *The Subway* as titles are evocative of the mechanical aspects of their plays, underscoring their central themes. While this may seem coincidental, few other American expressionist plays, save Rice's *The Adding Machine*, represented their mechanical subject matter directly in their title. In fact, by and large, most plays of the genre dealt with the biological in their title – Susan Glaspell's *The Verge*; Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*; George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly's *Beggar on Horseback*; and John Howard Lawson's *Roger Bloomer*.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> In regard to minor American expressionist plays, Hungarian-American playwright Francis Faragoh's *Pinwheel* also deals with a young, female office worker who, after developing an affair, kills her lover. For more information on how this play compares to *Machinal*, *The Subway*, and Maurine Watkins' *Chicago*, please refer to Jerry Dickey's article, "Working Women and Violence in Jazz Era American Drama."

<sup>33</sup> An exception could be argued for Hungarian-American playwright Lajos Egri's *Rapid Transit*, a little known 1927 expressionist play which deals with the rapidity of human life in the industrial age. This

This, however, speaks to a deeper connection. While the mechanization of society is a distinct hallmark of American expressionism, it rarely becomes the overarching theme of the piece. In both *Machinal* and *The Subway*, a criticism of America's mechanically-obsessed culture is inseparable from the plot. The death of the heroine at the hands of a machine is not insignificant; both women seek escape into a pastoral, idyllic world through their respective artists, but are forced to face a masculine-driven, mechanical society. In few other plays are the protagonists persecuted directly by the mechanical nature of society. For example, *The Hairy Ape*'s Yank is accosted by automaton-like people in multiple scenes; the laughs of the other sailors in scene four have "a brazen, metallic quality as if their throats were phonograph horns"<sup>34</sup> while the businessmen of scene five exhibit "something of the relentless horror of Franksteins in their detached, mechanical unawareness."<sup>35</sup> Yank believes himself to be part of this pure, mechanized society, but in reality this mechanization is nothing more than a facet of a larger capitalist system. O'Neill, cynical in his views of labor, utilizes mechanization as a tool of the larger corporate powers at work, through which Yank is persecuted. Similarly, *Beggar on Horseback* deals with wealth from industry than with the technology itself. In both *The Subway* and *Machinal*, however, this theme of mechanization is tied more closely to masculinity than capitalism. This mechanical masculinity, unique within the genre, centers the expressionist journey on the heroine's femininity through direct and overwhelming opposition to it.

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play, however, is starkly different from both *The Subway* and *Machinal*, imagining the compression of its characters' entire lives into the span of 24 hours.

<sup>34</sup> Eugene O'Neill, *The Hairy Ape*, (New York: The Modern Library, 1949), 210.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 225.

Not all of *Machinal* is reminiscent of *The Subway*. In fact, it is the aspects of the play that resemble the Snyder trial that differentiate it from Rice's work; the latter half of *Machinal* is a direct reference to the trial and is, admittedly, where the similarities to *The Subway* begin to weaken. Even Rice conceded that the strongest indicators of influence occurred in the first half; "I shall not at this time enumerate all the points of similarity, but I assure you that they are numerous, especially in the earlier scenes of *Machinal*."<sup>36</sup> This departure begins in scene seven, where the impact of the male character split becomes more apparent. While Sophie initially turns to despair and refuses to respond to Eugene's impending abandonment, Helen turns on her husband and kills him. These both end in the protagonist judged and sentenced, but both occur in different ways. During these last three scenes, *Machinal* takes the form of a literal courtroom drama while *The Subway* becomes a figurative one. This split is important, however, as it indicates a shift in influence on Treadwell's part. While the first six scenes heavily resemble *The Subway*, the last three scenes bear a less noticeable similarity, with *Machinal* more closely resembling the Ruth Snyder trial. The scenes which resemble *The Subway* set the stage for those which resemble the trial, effectively allowing the trial to take place and lending credit to the idea that its inspiration is shared in both. *The Subway*'s presence as a setup for the trial within the play furthers this idea; the trial remains the central concept of *Machinal*. When Treadwell became inspired to write a play to defend Ruth Snyder, she likely drew upon ideas she believed to be her own, predominantly *The Subway*, in order to set it into motion.

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<sup>36</sup> Letter to Arthur Hopkins, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," 22 November 1928, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

## *Rice and Machinal*

These similarities between *The Subway* and *Machinal* were not lost on Rice, who came to believe that the textual parallels of the plays could not be coincidental. Believing the matter to be suspicious, Rice wrote to Arthur Hopkins, producer of both *Machinal* and *The Adding Machine*, on November 22, 1928. In the letter, Rice explained his suspicion; Treadwell, before the recent success of *Machinal*, worked as a play-reader for Broadway producers. In the six years before, Rice claimed to have sent *The Subway* to “every producer’s office in New York,” likely ensuring Treadwell read the play for her producer. While he did not enumerate on the similarities between the plays, he did call attention to the titles of both plays as an indication of the similarity, saying of *Machinal*: “Even the title, underscores the theme and emphasizes the mechanical background of the play in almost the same way that *The Subway* does.”<sup>37</sup> He also mentioned that several of his friends, upon seeing *Machinal*, also thought the plays to be too similar for coincidence:

Since then, numerous acquaintances who have read *The Subway*, have told me, of their own accord, that they too were struck by the numerous similarities between the two plays. So that I feel that I am not voicing the biased opinion of an author, jealous of his own rights, but am expressing the impartial judgement of a number of disinterested persons.<sup>38</sup>

He then explained that he did not believe Treadwell “deliberately borrowed from *The Subway*. But I do feel that the conclusion that she read the play and was influenced by it—consciously or unconsciously—is an inescapable one.”<sup>39</sup> He reiterated that the

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<sup>37</sup> Letter to Arthur Hopkins, “Business Correspondence, *The Subway*,” 22 November 1928, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

situation seemed more accidental than intentional, removing the blame from Hopkins as well. However, Rice added that *The Subway* was about to be produced at the Cherry Lane Theatre and that, if it appeared that *Machinal* significantly damaged its opening, he would take action. He finished the letter by stating that he was anxious to avoid embarrassing or inconveniencing Hopkins and that, above all, he intended to preserve their friendship.

Hopkins, however, never replied,<sup>40</sup> and it seems in response to this that, in January of 1929, Rice attempted to file an infringement suit against Treadwell with *The Billboard*, a theatre digest.<sup>41</sup> Rice's original suit cannot be found, but a response from M.P. Gudebrod of *The Billboard*'s editorial department is still extant. Gudebrod's letter does not enumerate a result of the suit, simply stating:

I would appreciate an appointment with you, at your convenience, regarding your proposed suit for infringement against Miss Sophie Treadwell. I shall be glad to call at any time you set, and trust you can find time for this interview within the next few days.<sup>42</sup>

Oddly, the theatre digest's response is dated January 31, 1928. This must be an error as *Machinal* was not copyrighted until April 21 of that year<sup>43</sup> and Rice himself did not see it until November. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that the claim was ever followed up

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<sup>40</sup> Letter to Brooks Atkinson, "'--Miscellaneous' 1936-1965," 9 April 1960, E76-154 to E76-215, Box 46, Folder 3, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>41</sup> It is important to keep in mind that copyright law was difficult to prove in court during this era. Rice's attempt to file a claim through a theatre digest such as *The Billboard* is more akin to filing a grievance within the theatrical community than a modern copyright infringement suit.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from M.P. Gudebrod, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," 31 January 1928, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>43</sup> Dickey, "The Expressionist Moment," 72.

nor is there any information on the content of the interview. Allegedly, a program note was included for attendees of the Broadway performance of *The Subway*, which detailed Rice's previous attempts to have it published.<sup>44</sup> The play performed poorly, but Rice's mind was elsewhere, as *Street Scene* had just won the Pulitzer Prize in Drama. Rice subsequently abandoned any further attempts at pursuing his suspicions.

With this history in mind, *The Subway*'s noticable lack of mention in Rice's later documents, particularly his autobiography, becomes clearer; he believed that *The Subway*'s failure and *Machinal*'s success were linked. Rice seemed convinced that *The Subway* was a lost cause, or even a poorly written show, glossing over it in subsequent mentions. Despite this, Rice never forgot this incident; in the following years, he instituted new personal rules to avoid unintentional influence. In one such response to an aspiring playwright's request for a reading, Rice informed him that "because of the frequency of literary coincidence and of the unfortunate misunderstandings which sometimes arise, I have had to make it an inflexible rule not to read the scripts of authors whom I do not know personally."<sup>45</sup> He replied similarly to another playwright, "because of the danger of plagiarism suits....,"<sup>46</sup> only relenting because the play's Russian subject matter interested him. This remark about infringements could be a reference to the many accounts of theatrical plagiarism at the time, but may also have personal significance.

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<sup>44</sup> From the Reviews of the Subway, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>45</sup> Letter to Mr. Sprague, "Plays Read," 3 March 1933, B54-220 to B54-243, Box 67, Folder 6, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>46</sup> Letter to Mr. Makaroff, "Plays Read," 13 September 1932, B54-220 to B54-243, Box 67, Folder 6, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

Further evidence of the impact of this suspicion on Rice is found in his letter to Brooks Atkinson on April 9, 1960, over thirty years later. In it, Rice explains the entirety of his suspicion:

I think Miss Treadwell must have seen my play, *The Subway*, too. Or read it, rather, for it was not produced until sometime after *Machinal*. However, it had been going the rounds of Broadway producers for years, and I actually sold it four times. Those were lean years for me, and the advance royalties enabled me and my family to live pleasantly in Paris and other delectable locales. During those years, Miss Treadwell was a play-reader for some Broadway producer – Crosby Gaige, I think – and while I do not suggest she was guilty of deliberate plagiarism, I assume that she could not help being influenced, unconsciously perhaps, by what she read.

He continues, explaining his letter to Hopkins, but omitting his attempt to file an infringement claim:

Anyhow, there are striking similarities between the two plays. I wrote to Arthur Hopkins, who produced *Machinal*, a discreet letter about it; but that man of silence, of course, never answered it.

He then describes the run of the show and subsequent Broadway failure:

*The Subway* was finally done by an amateur group at the Cherry Lane Theatre, which was off-Broadway even then (1929), though not so designated. Brady, intoxicated by the success of *Street Scene* (and perhaps by spiritous beverages) brought the production up to Broadway, where its amateurishness was fatally apparent. Not a very important bit of theatrical history, but I thought it might interest you.<sup>47</sup>

The letter concludes with Rice wishing Atkinson well in his retirement from the *New York Times*. Interestingly, this letter was written only one day after Atkinson's review of *Machinal*'s revival was published in the *Times*, suggesting the letter as a response to the revival and review. This implies that, years later, Rice still harbored ill feelings regarding *Machinal*'s success or in the very least indicates how deeply this experience affected him.

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<sup>47</sup> Letter to Brooks Atkinson, "'--Miscellaneous' 1936-1965," 9 April 1960, E76-154 to E76-215, Box 46, Folder 3, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

While scholarship on Treadwell's life has not validated Rice's claim that Treadwell worked as a Broadway play-reader, this fact is confirmed in multiple reviews of *Machinal*. One such review by Percy Hammond for the *Pittsburgh Press* states:

...and her [Treadwell's] favorite heroes are her husband, Mr. McGeehan, the acid sports critic of The New York Herald Tribune; Mr. Crosby Gaige, for whom she reads play manuscripts, and Mr. Arthur Hopkins, the producer of "Machinal."<sup>48</sup>

It is further confirmed in an article with *Vassar Miscellany News*, which gives Treadwell as Gaige's chief playreader.<sup>49</sup> It is unknown whether Treadwell read *The Subway*, but in a personal interview, Dr. Dickey spoke of an interesting connection between Rice's play and a remark from a 1925 lecture. In it, Treadwell gives "a passing example of a situation that can spark a dramatist's imagination to write a play: riding a subway."<sup>50</sup> This seems to imply Treadwell's preoccupation with the setting, particularly for dramatic purposes. However, Dickey also conceded the possibility that "the idea was 'in the air' at the time."<sup>51</sup> While it cannot be established whether or not this points to a direct connection between the plays, it is a remarkably unique coincidence.

There is no further mention of Rice's proposed suit in his writings, whether in regard to its filing or its eventual dissolution. The author surely thought to take "such remedial measures as may seem advisable"<sup>52</sup> against feared financial damage from

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<sup>48</sup> Hammond, "The Theater – 'Machinal' Gratifying," 64.

<sup>49</sup> "Community Theatre Production Attracts First Nighters," *Vassar Miscellany News* 8.3, 6 October 1928, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Jerry Dickey, in discussion with the author. February 2019.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Letter to Arthur Hopkins, "Business Correspondence, *The Subway*," 22 November 1928, B58-654 to B58-718, Box 75, Folder 5, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

*Machinal*. He had already been burned by Broadway once; *The Adding Machine* famously drew in no money for its author. Further, none of the plays that followed *The Adding Machine* had been successful, and Rice had relied heavily on *The Subway*'s advance payments as he presented it to potential producers. *Machinal*'s popularity threatened to damage the profit margin he had fought to earn for six years, and an infringement claim must have seemed the logical solution.

Unfortunately, there is no record of why Rice dropped the intended suit, nor is there anything in Treadwell's surviving papers that indicate her awareness of Rice's concerns. It's likely that *The Subway*'s time on Broadway influenced the decision. In his letter to Hopkins, he promised that "if the damage appears to be negligible, I shall, of course, take no action."<sup>53</sup> With the move of *The Subway* to Broadway only twelve days after its opening, Rice may have believed the damage by *Machinal* was not as serious as he had anticipated and turned his attention back to the critically acclaimed *Street Scene*. Thus, by the time the Broadway production of *The Subway* failed, Rice simply decided it was not worth fighting for; having struggled for six years to produce the still-failing play and having other work perform significantly better, Rice likely thought he was cutting his losses by dropping the suit.

Additionally, Rice may have feared spiting Hopkins, whose influence on Broadway as producer and director was far reaching. Rice had told Hopkins that he held "no obligation to Miss Treadwell, but I do to you," promising that he was "very anxious to avoid any action which would inconvenience or embarrass you"<sup>54</sup> and that he would

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

not take action without first consulting Hopkins. In deciding not to pursue the claim, Rice may have sought to preserve a working relationship with Hopkins.

The prevalence of infringement claims in the early twentieth century must also be taken into account when examining why it was dropped. Treadwell's own case against Barrymore was one of many infringement cases filed at the time. In "Sophie Treadwell vs. John Barrymore: Playwrights, Plagiarism and Power in the Broadway Theatre of the 1920s," Dickey discusses this sudden upsurge of accusations:

The decade of the 1920s in America saw an unprecedented number of punitive actions taken against theatrical plagiarists. These assertions included over twenty court suits, some against such well-known figures as Guy Bolton, George M. Cohan Channing Pollock, Sidney Howard, David Belasco, and R.C. Sherriff.<sup>55</sup>

This notorious upsurge coincided with a general suspicion of the writers who voiced their concerns. The press and public typically dismissed these artists as blackmailers looking for easy money. Plagiarism was simply too difficult to prove. This helps explain the backlash against Treadwell in her suit against Barrymore but also helps to understand why Rice ultimately decided against filing a suit; Rice risked much with this claim. Dickey states that most suits in the 1920s "came from unproduced dramatists who knew their suit would probably end any chance of their being accepted in the theatrical profession."<sup>56</sup> Rice had already made a national impact with the Broadway debut of *The Adding Machine* and risked damaging his future career on Broadway. More than that, *Street Scene* opened the same month he attempted the claim. By preparing such an accusation in the midst of a Broadway debut, he risked swaying public favor against him

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<sup>55</sup> Dickey, "Sophie Treadwell vs. John Barrymore," 68.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 75.

at a crucial moment in his career. Regardless of the reason, the matter was simply dropped without resolution. Rice continued working, albeit with hesitancy in reading new works, and Treadwell remained ignorant of the entire ordeal.

Thus, *The Subway* becomes as impactful an influence on *Machinal* as the Ruth Snyder trial. However, this creates a problem in how *Machinal* should be treated as an independent work and asks for a clear definition of its relation to *The Subway*. In the final chapter of this thesis, I expound upon several areas for further study, including the relations between playwrights and play-readers in the 1920s American theatre, and call for a reexamination of both texts in order to better judge their influence on American expressionism.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion and Future Studies

Soon after the seeming disappearance of American expressionism from the Broadway stage in the 1930s, criticism rose that the genre had failed or had been a passing phase inspired by European counterparts. For years after its apparent end, the American strain of expressionism was written off as a cheap copy of the German style, labelled a springboard movement for great American dramatists who deviated from it shortly thereafter. In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, this criticism has been proven false. In actuality, the sudden popularity of American expressionism in the 1920s served to cement the American theatre's turn from the realism and usher in theatrical modernism on the American stage. Norbert Hruby, in his 1941 dissertation, "Expressionism in the Twentieth Century American Drama," anticipated these reappraisals, stating that while "American expressionism as such is virtually dead on the American stage," its subjectivity of expression was already becoming essential to both stage and screen.<sup>1</sup> The genre's sudden disappearance from the stage does not indicate failure as a form, as it developed landmark modernist techniques; by situating the dramatic conflict within the individual as opposed to in an objectively realistic setting, expressionism became both the dismantlement of past traditional, realistic forms and the

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<sup>1</sup> Norbert Hruby, "Expressionism in the Twentieth Century American Drama," (Ph.D. dissertation, Loyola University, 1941), 159.

natural progression of them into more abstract forms such as Surrealism and the Theatre of the Absurd.

While the genre is extensively covered in other work, the focus of this thesis presents several topics for future examination of American expressionism and its works. *The Subway*'s undeniable connection to both *The Adding Machine* and *Machinal*, particularly in its influence on *Machinal*'s inception, posits the overlooked play as equally important. Its neglected status amongst the American expressionist canon has only served to divert scholarly attention elsewhere, leaving its probable influence on *Machinal* heretofore undiscovered. Its resemblance to the first half of Treadwell's work is unmistakable, and this theory is supported by historical evidence.

In suggesting that there is probability of this influence, this thesis encourages a reexamination of the relationships between Broadway producers, their play-readers, and the playwrights they produce, specifically in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Further, it calls for a reexamination of both *Machinal* and *The Subway*. First, by positing Rice's play as one of two sources of inspiration for Treadwell, this thesis encourages a more definitive analysis of this split influence in *Machinal*. Then, in regard to *The Subway*, it establishes the play's importance within American expressionism and presents it as a work as worthy of scrutinization as *The Adding Machine* or *Machinal*.

First, this theory of *Machinal*'s inspiration provides an opportunity to more closely examine the impact of playreaders on 1920s Broadway theatre. In fact, for a role so influential in the theatre, there is little available information on playreaders of the time. All new plays for Broadway passed through their hands. While the producer inevitably had the final say and could read scripts which did not interest the playreader, the threat of

dishonest playreaders was viable. In fact, there is evidence that, at the time, they were met with suspicion. One such article published in *Theatre Magazine* in 1904 presents the playreader as an aspiring dramatist but warns that “there is something lacking in his mental organization which prevents him from giving birth to a play that the dramatic public wants.” It then suggests not only that playreaders could be guilty of rejecting plays better written than their own, but that if they were truly dishonest, “[*the play*]’s situations would be carefully memorized for use the next time he (the play-reader) essayed to write a play.”<sup>2</sup> According to this unnamed author, it was certainly possible, if not probable, that an ambitious playreader would take advantage of naïve playwrights in order to further his own career, encouraging a wariness of the role; “the temptation to steal plots, stories, characters, and situations, is so great, and the opportunities so numerous, that the play-reader who resists deserves canonization.”<sup>3</sup>

In his 1922 book *The Exemplary Theatre*, Harley Granville-Barker voices a similar idea. While not directly questioning the playreader’s integrity, he does place the playreader as the ultimate judge of dramatic value for burgeoning dramatists. As this is no small task, he proceeds to list the ideal traits for playreaders. While not unkind in his appraisal, he stresses overall that the exemplary playreader be of a milder personality than the typical playwright:

Theirs are not very dynamic natures, perhaps, but they are receptive and sympathetic. They have dropped the burden of their egoism, have broken the many mirrors of their youthful minds. If ill-luck has left them disappointed that trait may yet be sweetened with humour. They look now to find their account in the passing of the torch to swifter runners.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “The Professional Play-Reader and His Uses,” *Theatre Magazine* 4, 31 December 1904, 257.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>4</sup> Harley Granville-Barker, *The Exemplary Theatre*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1922), 188.

It would seem that the playreader has no room to be a playwright as well, as unchecked egoism would drive the playreader towards the dishonesty described in the previous article. The playreader must be content with passing the torch to a younger, more capable generation of playwright.

These suspicions reveal a certain stigma against the role of playreaders in the theatre of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. An ambitious playreader was seen as dangerous, capable of doing serious harm to the integrity of the theater. Rice's claim, in light of this stigma, suggests that playreaders had a potentially darker influence on the development of the modern American theatre; Treadwell's time in the position significantly influenced her creation of an American expressionist staple. As such, scholarship on American expressionism would benefit from closer inspection of the playreader's impact on Broadway and what works may have been affected by these playreaders.

The Broadway producer must also be included in these further studies. While the role of the 1920s producer is better documented than that of the playreader, its relation to the mountain of infringement claims of the time is not. The incident of *Machinal's* influence begs the question; what role should the producer take in such a situation? Douglass Nevin, in "No Business Like Show Business: Copyright Law, the Theatre Industry, and the Dilemma of Rewarding Collaboration," reasons that the producer should act as copyright protector of all aspects of the production:

In many ways the "author" of the production or initiator of the collaboration, the producer may in fact be the person most responsible for a property's ultimate value. Defining the producer as such may bring to mind the "work-for-hire doctrine" so vehemently criticized by many in the arts, but there is some truth to that characterization. Aside from the aforementioned financial risk, the lead producer is also usually the

individual responsible for selecting the collaborators and bringing them together to create the production.<sup>5</sup>

If any aspect of the production is compromised or found to be “inspired,” the producer would be tasked with any decisions over the matter.

In the case of *The Subway*, two producers had significant impact on *The Subway*’s history: Crosby Gaige and Arthur Hopkins. Treadwell’s playreading under Gaige influenced *Machinal* while Hopkins produced the work. It is unknown to what extent either were aware of the similarity between the scripts. While it is safe to assume Gaige had no knowledge, Hopkins’ silence when pressed by Rice is troubling, neither confirming nor denying awareness of the similarity. As producer of *The Adding Machine*’s 1923 Broadway debut, he was almost certainly sent *The Subway* as well. Despite this, he made no attempt to answer Rice’s inquiry, spurring Rice to attempt filing an infringement claim.

To what extent, then, were producers involved in the flurry of plagiarism suits issued in the 1920s? Hopkins’ role within this incident cannot be singular. How did Broadway producers impact the originality of the works they presented? Overall, the involvement of the producer in issues of copyright, particularly in the 1920s, remains murky. For further reading on the massive amount of plagiarism suits which littered this era, Jerry Dickey’s *Sophie Treadwell vs. John Barrymore: Playwrights, Plagiarism and Power in the Broadway Theatre of the 1920s* gives great detail into the attitudes of the populace on plagiarism and the general suspicion levelled at playwright-plaintiffs. In addition, Thomas Mallon’s *Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of*

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<sup>5</sup> Douglass M. Nevin, “No Business Like Show Business: Copyright Law, the Theatre Industry, and the Dilemma of Rewarding Collaboration,” *Emory Law Journal* 53, (2004), 1568-69.

*Plagiarism* is a valuable resource for future examinations of literary and theatrical infringement.

Further, this thesis also calls for closer inspection of *The Subway* and *Machinal* and reconsideration of their respective impacts on the American theatre. *Machinal*'s potential dual influences in *The Subway* and the Ruth Snyder trial alters our understanding of both plays, and a greater examination of *Machinal*'s complicated status in relation to *The Subway* is needed. To clarify, what is *Machinal* when compared to *The Subway*? How do we classify a work which is unintentionally based on the ideas of another work? With the knowledge that it was potentially based on *The Subway*, does it become an adaptation of the work? Scholar Linda Hutcheon, in her book *A Theory of Adaptation*, defines adaption as “a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing.”<sup>6</sup> This is seemingly fitting. While Hutcheon adamantly refuses the term adaptation be applied to intentionally plagiarized works, Treadwell's ignorance of her taking inspiration from *The Subway* would ignore this. However, Hutcheon's three-pronged definition of adaptation, as stated in *A Theory of Adaptation*, offers a complication:

1. An *acknowledged* transposition of a recognizable other work or works [Emphasis Added]
2. A creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging
3. An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work<sup>7</sup>

Hutcheon's first definition of adaptation, as it applies to a work and not a process, confirms that a work's existence as an adaptation must be acknowledged by its author.

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<sup>6</sup> Linda Hutcheon, with Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed., (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

*Machinal*, written as a separate piece from *The Subway*, cannot fit this definition by Hutcheon's standards. As well, questions of adaptation must take Treadwell's intention in writing *Machinal* into account. However it is to be classified, the discussion of *Machinal*'s relation to *The Subway* escapes the focus of this thesis and must be examined in future study.

*Machinal*'s proposed split influence between *The Subway* and the Ruth Snyder trial also merits its own study. There is a near-clean separation between the two; upon Helen's murder of her husband, the play departs almost entirely from the former to resemble the latter. Until then, the plot of a young, overworked woman pressured into a relationship is clearly reminiscent of *The Subway*. On the other hand, for the last two scenes, *Machinal* becomes a court case, identical in subject and tone to the Ruth Snyder trial. While Sophie is judged by disembodied voices and sent to the subway platform for execution, it more accurately reflects the trial, lending credit to the idea that its inspiration is shared in both. Thus, where *The Subway* serves as inspiration for the rising action, the climax of the play (in which a woman murders her husband, is testified against by her lover, and is executed via electric chair) is nearly identical to Snyder's trial and execution. This opens *Machinal* to reexamination, particularly in the exact interaction between these influences.

This thesis also encourages further study into the life of Sophie Treadwell. *Machinal*'s revival in popularity in the last twenty years, due in large part to Jerry Dickey's discovery of her documents at the University of Arizona, indicates a renewed interest in Treadwell as an artist. Despite this, no complete biography of Treadwell's life has been published and details of her life remain unknown; in fact, though Treadwell

filled the roles of playwright, producer, and playreader at various points in her career, her brief time as chief playreader under Crosby Gaige has not been recorded in previous scholarship. Rice's theory sheds new light on Treadwell and encourages a more complete study of her early career.

In light of its unique expressionism and link to *Machinal*, *The Subway* stands as a potentially landmark American expressionist piece. With its major impact on *Machinal*, the play becomes worthy of examination in further detail. One such area of study is the apparent melodrama within *The Subway*. Upon its Broadway premiere, many critics dismissively pointed to Sophie's affair with Eugene as elements of a melodrama. Critic R.L. Collins voices that *The Subway* misleads the reader into expecting an expressionistic play, only to reveal itself as melodramatic instead.<sup>8</sup> Rice admitted a similar sentiment, writing to Frank Harris, "It's full of emotion and much more personal than *The Adding Machine*."<sup>9</sup> Cynthia McCown speaks to this change of focus in her "*The Subway*; Sophie as Elmer Rice's *Ms. Zero*," but adds:

Sophie's seduction by an upper-class cad, her pregnancy, and her subsequent suicide give the play an almost Victorian melodramatic twist. Yet Sophie's death, though undeniably connected with her sexual shame, is nevertheless as much a reaction to her proletarian as to her pregnant condition.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, while the play does contain melodramatic elements, this does not downplay its significance as an expressionistic condemnation of bureaucratic America. Conversely, it

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<sup>8</sup> R.L. Collins, "The Playwright and the Press: Elmer Rice and His Critics" *The Theatre Annual: 1948-49*, (New York: The Theatre Library Association, 1949), 85.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Frank Harris, "Rice, Elmer/Harris, Frank, 1923-1925/Letters," 14 July 1923, G87-93 to G87-110, Box 59, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>10</sup> Cynthia McCown, "*The Subway*; Sophie as Elmer Rice's *Ms. Zero*," 61.

creates a sympathetic character quite unlike *The Adding Machine*'s Mr. Zero, an emotionally distant protagonist. However, these melodramatic tendencies lie outside of the range of this thesis and should be discussed in more detail than is available here.

Through expressionism, American playwrights became interested in the symbolism and magic realism that would dominate the 20<sup>th</sup> century American stage. In his 1944 production notes for *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams, who had been heavily influenced by the movement in his own work, wrote that "Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to the truth." He continues, "truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance."<sup>11</sup> This transformation of the real into the personal is at the heart of American expressionism.

*The Subway*'s usage of expressionism realizes this transformation in unique forms. Taking its lead from *The Adding Machine*, *The Subway* produces Rice's vision of a mechanically-obsessed society by creating a direct environment of oppression in the titular subway, a place never shown in Treadwell's *Machinal*. The presence of the subway in Rice's work is important. It becomes a real, tangible fear. Acting as Sophie's opposite, the subway embodies the mechanical evils of society in the text, becoming a veritable Moloch. In scene two, however, it does more than simply symbolize these evils; it infuses the scenery with them. By setting the action within the symbolic monster-machine, Rice traps Sophie literally within the belly of the beast. The specific choice of

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<sup>11</sup> Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, (Cambridge: New Directions Publishing, 1999), xix.

the subterranean, claustrophobic subway only adds to the suffocating atmosphere. Societal expectations require the unmarried young woman to work hard for her family, requiring Sophie to be consumed by the subway-beast daily. She is forced to endure the ever-present dread of the next ride; her fears are realized in a physical location, to which she must daily return. *The Subway*'s titular fusion of symbol and environment is a unique usage of American expressionism, matched perhaps by the Great Forest of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*.

Unfortunately, its innovation would remain unrecognized as six years passed. Then, upon opening, the play was immediately written off, shelved, and forgotten. In light of Rice's unfiled claim, *The Subway* gains new prominence not only as a work of its own innovation and merit, but as an influential factor on a staple of the American expressionist theatre, *Machinal*. Their shared themes, usages of expressionism, and plot lines are too coincidental and indicate Treadwell's prior familiarity with the script. These similarities, which became evident even to theatre-goers and critics, contributed to *The Subway*'s failed opening and its subsequent status as a footnote within the influential genre. As well, historical evidence points to Treadwell's role as a playreader during the six years Rice attempted to have *The Subway* produced. Therefore, it is the probability of *The Subway*'s influence on *Machinal* which calls for further study into both plays and positions Rice's work as crucial within the American expressionist canon. Serious scrutinization of *The Subway* and its influence is vital to a more complete understanding of American expressionism.

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