

**The Animal Within: The Conflicted Self in Yasmina
Reza's *The God of Carnage* (2006)**

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Abstract

This study attempts through the exploitation of the traditional psychoanalytic approach to critically understand the main causes that lie behind the atmosphere of violence, verbal and physical, that permeates Yasmina Reza's *The God of Carnage*. The researcher hypothesizes that a sound explanation for this phenomenon can be sought in Freud's instinct theory of aggression. In this theory, aggression is viewed as innate rather than acquired; each individual has a natural tendency to be aggressive either towards others or towards the self. Friendliness, thoughtfulness, and love, accordingly, are mere masks that people put on deliberately to hide their animalistic nature behind. The characters of *The God of Carnage* are an exemplar of humanity at large. They struggle throughout the drama to conceal their aggressiveness behind the masks of civility and good manners. Yet, in the meanwhile, they fall prey to a malignant conflict within their psyches between a demanding animalistic id that keeps nagging in search of gratification and a realistic ego that attempts to keep these destructive urges in check and adopt, instead, the ideals and standards of the human civilization as internalized by the superego. Yet, towards the end of the drama, under the nagging of the id from within and the pressure of frustration from outside, the ego finally surrenders and the id with its destructive impulses dominates; hence, defenses fail, masks are removed, and the savage animal within is set at large destroying through language and physical force whatever is human and civilizational, and the morale of the drama becomes "you cannot control the things that control you."

Key Words: *Yasmina Reza, The God of Carnage, Aggression, Instinct Theory, Id, Ego, Superego*

The winner of two prominent world awards in 2009, the Laurence Olivier Award for the Best New Comedy in Britain and the the Tony Award for the Best Play in America, Yasmina Reza's *The God of Carnage* presents a bleak vision of the human nature. It depicts this nature as apt to be aggressive and destructive in its very essence. As a result, a malignant conflict emerges between it and the human civilization that, otherwise, attempts to gather humans and reconcile their conflicting needs under its umbrella. This external conflict is but a reflection of a much deeper psychological one that takes place within the characters themselves between their ids, egos, and superegos. In her one-act drama, Reza bring to focus this internal side of the conflict as represented in man's earnest struggle to restrict his innate inclination to aggressiveness latent in his id in favour of the universal human civilizational values

cherished by his superego and how such a noble struggle is lost and the aggressive nature of man dominates at the expense of the values of civility. This nightmarish vision is dramatized in a dark comedy that makes the readers/spectators laugh tearfully at their own animalistic nature.

The objective of this research paper is to trace the overwhelming atmosphere of violence in *The God of Carnage* back to its psychological roots. The study aims to psychoanalytically prove that all sorts of verbal and physical violence in the play are the direct result of an instinctive desire to be aggressive rather than being a mere reaction to outside stimuli. This innate desire leads the characters to fall prey to a fierce conflict within the walls of their psyches between the three major parts of their personalities as stated in the traditional psychoanalytic theory, namely the id, the ego, and the superego. The paper attempts to explore how the ego of each character strives throughout the play to strike a balance between the aggressive urges of the id and the ideals and ethics of civilization as stored in and dictated by the superego, and how, towards the end of the play, under the nagging of the id, the pressure of frustration, and the effect of wine, the ego surrenders and the id with its destructive impulses dominates; hence, defenses fail, masks are removed, and the animal within is set at large.

For fulfilling the objective of the study, the researcher adopts the traditional psychoanalytic approach to literature. The writer leans heavily on Freud's theory of psychoanalysis with specific reference to the three agencies of the psyche, the id, the ego, and the superego, and their relationship with one another. Special focus is given to Freud's instinct theory of aggression which he developed in his later writings and in which he considered "Thanatos" (the death instinct from which all types of aggression and destruction spring) and "Eros" (the life instinct which is responsible for life preservation) the two basic instincts from which all other urges and impulses originate. The rationale beyond the choice of the psychanalytic theory as a theoretical framework for the analysis and interpretation of *The God of Carnage* is that this research focuses mainly on the internal workings of the characters' psyches and how they strive to repress their pressing impulses of aggression and adopt the ideals of civilization instead. Any other theoretical framework would not help to dig deep inside the recesses of their personalities to uncover the unresolved conflicts taking place in these dark corners of the psyche.

In his insightful article, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), Freud proposed, for the first time, the idea of the existence of a second major instinct opposed to the life instinct (Eros) which he posed in his

earlier works. He claimed that in contrast to the human drive to preserve and continue life by eating, drinking, and marrying, to name but a few, there are other drives that work opposite to those of the Eros and that can be all ascribed to what he named the ‘death instinct’ or Thanatos. “On the basis of theoretical considerations, supported by biology,” Freud argues in his “The Ego and the Id”, “we put forward the hypothesis of a death instinct.” He, then, explains that it mainly functions to “lead organic life back into the inanimate state” (645). Man’s drives, accordingly, fall into two major categories: the first of which is mainly governed by the pleasure principle and is responsible mainly for the continuity of life through pushing man forward to reproduce, create, and survive, while the second is mainly concerned with the restoration of life to its very primitive state of inexistence through aggression and destruction.

The death instinct is translated into an uncontrollable urge for aggression and destruction whose direction is mainly towards the outside world. “The death instinct would thus seem to express itself ... as an instinct of destruction directed against the external world and other organisms,” Freud states (The Ego and the Id 646). In case the individual fails to direct his wrath outward for social, religious, political, or moral reasons, he himself becomes the prey of his own aggressiveness. Man’s aggression is, therefore, either directed towards the outer world in the form of acts of violence – killings, rapes, racism, wars, etc. – or, in the case of being renounced, turns back to the self in the form of suicide, self-injury, feelings of guilt and the like.

What is significant in Freud’s theory on aggression and death instinct is that man, in this theory, is considered an aggressive creature by nature, unlike the other theories of aggression that ascribe it to external sources. In Freud’s theory, it is not a mere response to an external stimulus as in the Frustration Theory of Aggression, for example. Man does not resort to destructive behavior because of the social or political circumstances that surround him; rather, his aggressiveness is innate and inborn and his wars throughout history, cannibalism, colonialism, racial segregation, and crimes are but manifestations of this insatiable appetite for aggression and destruction. Freud writes in this regard:

Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to

humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. (Civilization and Its Discontents 749)

According to Freud, man's aggressive drives are stored mainly in his id and keep pressing unceasingly for immediate gratification. Opposite to this violent primitive part of the character stands a supreme censorious agency in man's character, i.e. the superego that section of personality that contains the ideals of civilization by which man, especially modern man, should live. Phrased differently, the id represents the animal within man whereas the superego stands for the good citizen within him. To mediate between the irrational demands of the id and the moral dictations of the superego, the ego must intervene. The ego represents our consciousness of the external world with all its social norms and moral standards. The function of the ego is to moderate the urges of the id and gratify them within the limits of the external society and the moral guidance of the superego. In case it succeeds in its mission, psychological stability is achieved; in case it fails, the character falls a prey to an endless conflict between an over-demanding id and an over-moralistic superego.

Civilization intervenes to put a limit on man's desire for aggression against his fellowmen through man's "ego-ideal", the reservoir of all civilizational codes of good conduct. It keeps directing one's ego to deal with the aggressive impulse within man and put it in check. Resulting from this attempt to renounce man's instinctual violence his conscience develops "which then demands further instinctual renunciation" (Freud, Civilization and its Discontents 760). "Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression," Freud argues, "by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city" (756). This garrison is but the ego which works to repress man's aggressive instinct for the sake of the celebration and adoption of the civilizational ideals.

Under the pressure of the demanding id and the torturing senses of guilt generated by the superego, with specific regard to one's conscience, the ego starts to feel anxiety at high levels. Anxiety is the overwhelming feeling that the conscious self is about to collapse, together with the subject itself, under the conflicting demands of the different parts of the character. This sense of anxiety requires quick and effective strategies to deal with. Those strategies are known as defense mechanism. Defense mechanisms are "psychological strategies that are unconsciously used to protect a person from anxiety arising from unacceptable thoughts or feelings" (McLeod). They work on the level of the unconscious and

function as a safeguard against the tormenting senses of anxiety and guilt. The characters firstly attempt to repress the aggressive drive and disallow its appearance on any level. To repress an overwhelming drive, for Freud, is to cast away the undesirable urges, including of course the aggressive one, from the realm of the conscious to that of the unconscious (Repression 569-570). Following the repression of the inclination to violence into the unconscious sphere come other defense mechanisms whose exploitation is meant to keep the repressed repressed. Reaction-formation, displacement, projection, and sublimation are but some of these defenses which are unconsciously used to relieve the ego of the pressure it is falling under.

This plan of unconscious actions can keep working forever: the id keeps nagging for gratification of its instincts, on the top of which is the aggression one, the superego goes on directing for the civilizational path, and the ego keeps attempting to relieve anxiety and strike a balance between the two other agencies through the exploitation of defenses. Every now and then, however, the repressed id desires come out to the surface in the form of slips of tongue or daydreaming; other times, the superego dominates and, therefore, the individual tends to be over-moralistic. Yet, in the case of the aggressive impulse, matters do not usually go like that forever. Since aggressiveness is linked to one of the two basic instincts in man, namely the death instinct or Thanatos, it presses continuously for gratification and resists relentlessly the ego attempts to keep it dormant. "As human beings we try very hard to do right, to be nonviolent, to be appropriate, and to do the socially acceptable thing," Rick Synder affirms, "but, in reality, our true instincts and feelings are always right beneath the surface, and they sometimes emerge violently" (8). The id, therefore, keeps nagging, and under the pressure of frustration and depression in reality, anxiety heightens, defenses fail, the ego surrenders, the id commands, and the animal within man arises wild.

In the light of the previous theoretical background about the existence of a death instinct within man from which an insatiable urge for aggressiveness towards others and the self emerges, Yasmina Reza's *The God of Carnage* is critically read. The play is originally meant to be about the animal within man, that beast that hides secretly in a dormant state behind the mask of civility awaiting to attack at the proper time. In her interview with Elizabeth Day, Reza refuses her plays, in general, and *The God of Carnage*, in particular, to be read in social terms. Readings, or rather misreadings, like "she has written an acidic exploration of middle-class savagery and liberal hypocrisy" (Interview with David Ng) or "Reza's brutally comic dissection of bourgeois values (Billington) do not appeal so much to the playwright. She rather prefers the psychological

reading. She claims that she writes about the internal turmoil of her characters and the psychological conflicts that take place secretly within their personalities. "It's when you hold yourself well until you just can't anymore, until your instinct takes over. It's psychological," she states (Interview with Elizabeth Day). For her, the characters of the play are "impulsive by nature" not due to any external forces that depress them or press on their nerves. For that reason, she prefers to call her theatre a "theatre of nerves" (Interview with David Ng). It is a theatre that mainly tackles "the hilarity in human beings' darkest moments" (Arden 7) when civilization turns to be a mere fragile façade that "conceals our true bestial nature" (6).

The God of Carnage is a play about the violence core to the nature of man par excellence. Two couples meet one night in the house of one of them to discuss in a civilized way a verbal argument between their eleven-year-old children that escalated into a physical quarrel in which the son of the guests struck the son of the hosts with a stick in his mouth resulting in the knocking out of two of his teeth. However, what has begun as an amiable meeting to work out the problem and discuss the matter peacefully turns by the passage of time and under the influence of wine into a savage debate between the four adults including name-calling, mocking, insulting, and physical assaulting. Such savagery is dramatized, however, in a humorous, funny way in which the audience cannot help but laugh at the drastic transformation of the assembly from its noble objective into the barbaric way it ends up with and at the childish nature of the adults themselves.

The play is dominated by a gloomy atmosphere of destructiveness on all levels: language fails, social relationships malfunction, and family bonds dissolve. "Annette vomited on the art books; Veronique assaulted Michael – Alain collapsed in defeat after Annette dunked cell phone in the flower vase; Annette flung tulips through the air like a wild animal tearing through the jungle" (Sebesta 127-128). These are but few examples of the violence that permeates the drama in different forms: violence of children, adults, couples, men, women, sons, parents, verbal, and physical. The playwright highlights the violent nature of the play and the idea of confrontation at its core from the very beginning through the play's setting. The stage directions state that the Vallons and the Reilles sit "facing one another" instead of sitting comfortably in any other less confronting position (Carnage 3). The play setting, thus, suggests that we are on the eve of a fight rather than an amiable meeting to settle things down in a civilized way. It is this idea that "man versus man not beside man" that Reza wants to stress from the start. The stage direction keeps

highlighting the idea of confrontation from the first page of the play; it reads, “the place belongs to the Vallons” hinting that belongings can also function as a trigger to man’s instinct of death which emerges in the form of aggressiveness towards others. What belongs to me does not belong to you and vice versa; we are ready to fight on that if there is no more logical reason for fighting. Yet, we still need to beautify ourselves and decorate our fragile ids by wearing some masks that hide our savagery behind. Here springs the role of civilizational props. The playwright brings these props, also, to the focus early in the play. “In the centre,” Reza writes in her description of the setting, “a coffee table, covered with art books. Two big bunches of tulips in vases” (*Carnage* 3). Later in the play we will discover that these flowers, symbolic of peace, and these art books, representative of the human civilizational heritage, are but masks that hide beneath a deep brutal instinct that is able to destroy fellow men and cause them all unbelievable forms of harm.

The title of the drama has been chosen significantly as well to epitomize the same idea of what may result when the animal within man is set at large without control. The result is a “carnage” in which a large number of people are hurt physically and psychologically because of the uncontrollable release of their inner instinctive urge to destroy one another as well as their own selves.

Not only do the title and the setting of the play reflect the characters’ readiness for confrontation and fighting, but their language does as well. The language used in the play does not fulfill its original communicative function that helps break the ice, remove barriers, and create a warm interaction between people. In contrast, the characters of *Carnage* use language aggressively to hurt, agitate, and assault one another consciously and unconsciously. “Language fails in many ways in this play,” Amanda Giguere argues in this regard pinpointing that, “vocabulary deteriorates as the characters resort to less refined, cruder words; they begin to use words as weapons rather than as tools that lead toward positive change; finally, words are replaced with silences” (222). From the very beginning the communicative purpose of language is lost between the two families, and “the playground fight between the boys becomes a catalyst for both sets of parents to reveal their own inherent cruelty, savagery, and selfishness” (Giguere 218), and language, of course, is the medium of this revelation. For example, instead of welcoming her guests and breaking the ice between them, Veronique uses harsh language that aggravates the crisis caused initially by the children. “So, this is our statement,” as such she directs her speech to both Anette and Alan, “you’ll be doing your own, of course.” She goes on, “At 5.30 p.m. on the 3rd November, in Aspirant Dunant Gardens, following a

verbal altercation, Ferdinand Reille, eleven, armed with a stick, struck our son, Bruno Vallon, in the face” (*Carnage* 3). In addition to the military-like style of address, the choice of words themselves is so significant; “armed” is a striking example of the deep dormant desire for aggression within man’s psyche that just awaits the suitable circumstance to erupt. The word, in addition to its aggressive denotation, hints at the previous intention and planned decision of the Reilles’ child to harm his schoolmate. If such is the case with the supposed-to-be innocent children, certainly it will be more intense with their grown-up parents who actually fight verbally from the very beginning of the meeting; was the Reilles’ child “armed” or just “furnished” with a stick. “Hoping to stabilize the event through language,” Sebesta comments on the debate over the use of armed or furnished, “they found it impossible to agree on a simple word. ... From here, language slipped from the characters' hands and repeatedly failed to contain any decipherable meaning” (126).

The failure of language in *The God of Carnage* is a mere symptom of a failed attempt to repress a burning desire for aggression latent deep within man’s id. Yet, this urge to hurt and sometimes destroy other human beings is in most cases hidden in man’s unconsciousness so that it may not come up to reality and expose the animalistic self. However, despite the relentless attempts of the ego to put limits to the destructive instinct within man, this nature manages to express itself temporarily in slips of the tongue and temporary bursts of physical violence every now and then. On reading Reza’s play, we find it pregnant from the very beginning with many examples of this interim aggressiveness, both verbal and physical. The verbal debate between the children followed by the physical attack is representative of man’s natural inclination to be aggressive. The accident occurred in one of the most thought-to-be peaceful places in town. “The irony is,” Veronique comments on the violent quarrel, “we’ve always regarded Aspirant Dunant Gardens as a haven of security, unlike the Montsouris Park” (*Carnage* 3). If we replace Aspirant Dunant Gardens with “children” and the Montsouris Park with “adults”, the irony will be crystal clearer. Children are always thought of as innocent, pure, and upright compared to adults. It is logical therefore to find such aggressive impulses in grown-ups rather than youngsters since the former are even shown in classical literature as “tigers” in comparison to the pure latter “lambs”, to quote William Blake’s terminology in his “Songs of Innocence” and “Songs of Experience”. The irony, thus, signifies that aggression is part and parcel of the human nature and that the innocence stage of childhood is a mere fallacy and that “our son is a savage” that Alain declares from the start functions as a microcosm of the

human nature in general (Carnage 14). Here lies the core message that Reza likes to reveal about humanity from the outset: “Beneath humanity’s civilized trappings, all people are savages” (Giguere 219).

Man’s id aggressiveness is not, hence, limited to a particular age or just directed to specific objects. Rather, it extends to cover whoever and whatever is around man. Michel’s decisive attempt to get rid of the hamster is exemplum of that fact. On the occasion of having his son in pain as a result of his fight with his schoolmate and unable to bear the noise of the hamster, Michel seizes the opportunity to practice his inner aggressiveness, but this time towards the poor animal. He takes it secretly and leaves it in the street for its unknown fate without having pity either on the animal or on his little daughter who will suffer from the sudden unexplained absence of her pet. “As for me, to tell you the truth,” he narrates how he did it to the Reilles, “I’ve been wanting to get rid of it for ages, so I said to myself, right, that’s it” (Carnage 7). What is so significant in this quote is that we feel beneath the words an insatiable deep intended decision to attack whenever the circumstances allow. We sense in Michel’s words an internal superpower, that of the id, that pushes him to be aggressive towards the animal whatever the results may be, and that this power to hurt is so overwhelming that he cannot hold it at bay. His id keeps pressing and his ego keeps resisting and what appears every now and then are but temporal manifestations of the tremendous will to be violent. Michel’s resistance to his innate aggressiveness is embodied in his initial refusal to his wife’s sharp tone; “no, no, I refuse to allow myself to slide down that slope,” he firmly addresses Veronique (Carnage 36). When asked by Alain which slope he means, he answers, “The deplorable slope those two little bastards [the two children] have perched us on” (Carnage 37)! What he does not know is that he has unconsciously slid it down already by his use of the word “bastards”. What the children have, in fact, done is that they have stirred the latent beast of aggression inside their parents’ ids.

Man’s id desire for aggression finds expression also in the every now and then altercations between the two couples. Though they have originally met for arriving at a civil solution for the problem caused by their children, the two families easily get down the slope of verbal aggression through their repetitive slips of the tongue that, in turn, reflect much about what is hidden in the dark corners of their personalities. Alain and Anette debate so fiercely over whether their young Ferdinand understands what he has done or not and what he should do to correct it that Annette accuses her husband of being ridiculous and of no use: “Since you’re no use, we won’t be needing you” (Carnage 15). In a much harsher reaction to his wife’s accusations, Alain wages, in turn, a verbal

attack but this time not on his wife alone but on women in general. "I'm no use whichever way you cut it," he puts it, "Women always think you need a man, you need a father, as if they'd be the slightest use" (*Carnage* 14). Veronique and Michel are no exceptions. They debate as well on every possible peripheral matter until they finally burst in face of each other towards the end of the drama.

Such slips of the tongue express a deep internal urge for aggression latent in the id that strives to penetrate the siege of the ego to the outside world. For laying its siege to the aggression impulse within the characters, the ego espouses the standards of courtesy and civility. Freud argues that "civilization has been built on a renunciation of instincts," including the aggression instinct (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 756). Then, he explains how civilization manages to achieve this sacred mission: "Civilization, therefore, obtains the mastery over the dangerous love of aggression in individuals by enfeebling and disarming it and setting up an institution within their minds to keep watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city" (756). This garrison is but one's ego which works to have man's aggressive instinct under control for the sake of the celebration of the civilizational ideals.

The *Carnage* characters, hence, try to seem as polite and well-mannered as possible throughout the drama despite their unconscious slips of the tongue until the mask of civilization they wear finally falls and their inner savagery is revealed by the end of the drama. Their ego is attempting throughout the play to function properly by putting restrictions on the demanding id and adopting the standards of civilization instead. Yet, we feel deep conflict within the characters' psyches and that the ego and superego are losing their authority step by step for the overriding id. Veronique, for example, surrounds herself with art books and flowers and pretends to be a cultivated intellectual who writes a book on the Darfur crisis to propagate peaceful coexistence all over the world, yet behind this façade we easily discover a savage who does not hesitate to insult her husband in front of others or throw the contents of her guest's handbag all over the place. On her first interaction with the Reilles she claims to be on the side of the civilizational standards of peace and cooperation: "Fortunately, there is still such a thing as the art of co-existence, is there not" (4)? However, the rhetorical question at the end of her speech reveals that she is not heartedly convinced of what she is saying as if she realizes deep in her heart that such an art exists only in the art books she ornaments her tea table with. She goes on in her pretense by informing her guests that she has contributed to "a collection on the civilization of Sheba, based on the excavations that were restarted at the end of the

Ethiopian-Eritrean war. And I have a book coming out in January on the Darfur tragedy” (7). Veronique’s words carry a significant irony; she works either on a civilization that was already destroyed or one that is on the eve of destruction and the cause in both cases was and still is man’s aggression, manifested either in war in the first case or ethnic cleansing in the second, as if civilization is the ever loser of the game on the public level and as such are the ego and the superego on the personal one.

When we concentrate on the character of Veronique, we find her the most suitable of the four characters to be the spokesman of civilization on the social level and the ego on the psychological one. In many a situation she struggles to keep her aggressive desire under control and celebrate the values of civility. She is the one that initially calls for the meeting, leads the negotiations, and attempts to reach a fair solution to the problem despite the somehow negative comments that sometimes drip out of her mouth. Yet, when she finally surrenders to her demanding id by the end of the drama, she becomes the worst of all, something that symbolizes the final defeat of the standards of humanity in favour of the animalistic urges within man on the top of which lies aggression.

With the same strength we feel how Veronique strives for incarnating the norms of civility, we feel how doubtful she is of their sustaining power. Deep in her heart, she feels that such norms will deteriorate one day against the overwhelming passions of the id and the animal inside will, then, appear devouring whatever comes in its way. When asked, for example, about whether her children are interested in art, she replies, “We try to make them read. To take them to concerts and exhibitions. We’re eccentric enough to believe in the pacifying abilities of culture” (Carnage 17). The word “eccentric” reflects how doubtful she is of the tool she uses to pacify her children against their inner savagery. When her husband accuses her and himself of being “uncouth” like the rest and Alain supports the idea by exclaiming, “Aren’t we all?”, she bursts into a fervent defense of herself against the accusation as if affirming to herself before others that she will never be on the id side: “No. No. I’m sorry, we are not all fundamentally uncouth,” “No, not me, thank the Lord” (41). Yet, when her husband tries to soothe her wounded ego by claiming that, “You stand up for civilization,” she does not feel much happy as expected. Rather, she “on the brink of tears”, as the stage directions read, begins to state what would be if not: “Is it normal to criticize someone for not being fundamentally uncouth? ... What were we supposed to do? Sue you? Not speak to one another and try to slaughter each other with insurance claims” (42)? The paradox here lies in her tears. Why does she cry at the time when she should rejoice? The answer again lies in her deep belief that the civilization that she represents is

doomed in its conflict with the savage inside her id. Yet, she strives hard to defer this fate to the last moment when all her mechanisms of defense fail.

Veronique stands for the ego of the characters in its fervent struggle to balance the demands of the id and the ideals of the superego. She never loses an opportunity to preach on the importance of espousing the ethics of civilization and getting rid of the cravings of the id out of a deep knowledge that the moment the id triumphs life will be unbearable in the full sense of the word. She even attempts to overcome her doubts regarding the durability of the power of culture versus the aggressiveness of the id via adhering to the principles of civilization to the last moment. Towards the end of the drama a debate that occurs between Alain and her reflects much about how she sticks to the dictations of her superego till the last moment. When Alain justifies his son's violent deed as a natural occurrence between children at this age and generalizes that "it's a law of life," she vehemently refuses, "no, no, it isn't" (*Carnage* 52). And when he adopts the logic of the id claiming that "might" is right and necessary in many times, she again reminds him that "possibly [that was true] in prehistoric times. Not in our society" (52). However, like the rest of characters she cannot help her recurrent slips of the tongue which signify how her id keeps popping up to the surface despite her relentless attempts to keep it inactive in the dark corners of her personality.

The fervent attempts of the id of Veronique and the other characters to dominate in challenge to the dictations of the superego represented here by the ideals of civilization create a state of anxiety within the characters which, in its turn, requires immediate means to reduce it and restore a state of balance in which the ego prevails. These means which the characters exploit to relieve their anxiety are defense mechanisms. Defenses are psychological, unconscious means that aim at lessening anxiety and protecting the ego from surrendering to the pressing demands of id. At the center of these defenses comes "repression". Repression aims at excluding the negative hostile urges of the id such as aggression from the realms of consciousness and unconscious alike. The characters of *Carnage*, and Veronique in particular, as we have pinpointed earlier try hard to repress their aggressiveness in the deep recesses of their psyches and pretend to be civilized as much as possible. Everything that they do from the very beginning of the play is aimed at neutralizing their aggressive ids and excluding them from the realms of effectiveness and activity. However, by the passage of time they discover that they need other defenses to support repression and strengthen their fragile egos; hence comes the importance of "reaction-formation" for them.

Reaction-formation is such a defense mechanism in which the individual hides his true feelings towards others and show, instead, fake ones, mostly opposite to the ones s/he hides. In our case, the characters exaggerate in showing politeness, courtesy, and civility despite their true feelings of dislike, envy, and aggressiveness. Phrased differently, the characters wear the mask of civility to hide behind their true savagery. “Even today the social feelings arise in the individual as a superstructure built upon impulses of jealous rivalry against his brothers and sisters,” Freud writes indirectly about reaction-formation, “since the hostility cannot be satisfied, an identification with the former rival develops” (The Ego and The Id 644). Social relationships, love, peacefulness and the like are, thus, for Freud a mere façade that disguises the animal within man. For him, there is no true love, thoughtfulness, or friendliness among people; all are but masks, and the individual is like a politician whose mere aim is to gain popular favour through his opportunism (657). As a result, the person indulges in a series of pretenses to appear more civil than he really is and to gain more privileges – a job, promotion, social prestige, etc. – not available for him in case he does not put on a mask.

In their initial peaceful discussions of the children quarrel, both Annette and Alain pretend to be civilized people to the degree that they explicitly admit that their Ferdinand is mistaken and he has to apologize for his misdeed; yet, when time passes and the row between the two families escalates, they withdraw their admission and, rather, throw the responsibility of the fight on the Vallons child. Furthermore, on hearing the story of the hamster for the first time Annette does not hesitate for a while to show her utmost sympathy with the animal against the uncivil behavior of Michel. However, when wine puts her beside herself towards the end of the play she manifests the most horrible behavior ever towards all around her, scattering the tulips all over the place, dunking her husband’s phone in the vase, and using the hamster story as a weapon for teasing Michel. The Vallons, in fact, are no less in their reaction-formation mechanism. Throughout the play they pretend friendliness and civility. They call for the meeting and show hospitality towards their guests by presenting beverages and snacks. Yet, the moment the Vallons are alone, the façade of politeness is cast away and the animal within them immediately pops up. When both Alain and Annette go to the bathroom after the vomiting scene, Michel and his wife’s language shifts radically as follows:

Veronique: What a nightmare! Horrible!

Michel: Tell you what, he’d better not push me much further.

Veronique: She’s dreadful as well.

Michel: Not as bad.

Veronique: She's a phoney.

Michel: Less irritating.

Veronique: They're both dreadful! Why do you keep sliding with them?

This shift in language from courtesy in public to offensiveness in private is a sign of the reaction-formation mechanism of defense that all the characters of *The God of Carnage* resort to for hiding their savage nature in front of others.

In spite of all the ego attempts to balance the demands of the id and the requirements of the superego throughout the play, a moment comes when, under external frustration and the internal pressure of the id, all the masks are removed, defenses fail, and the repressed pops up to the surface. It is the moment when the id, with its aggressive impulses, triumphs over the ego and the superego with their ethical and social standards. Yet, this moment does not come all at once; it waits long for some provocation from the external world to trigger the destructive energy of a dormant death instinct within man's psyche. This provocation can vary from a mere glass of wine that puts the characters by themselves and stir their inner aggressiveness to a frustrating situation that explodes their latent violence towards one another. Yet, in all cases the resulting energy of destructiveness is by all means overwhelming. "When the mental counter-forces which ordinarily inhibit it [aggressiveness] are out of action," Freud argues in this regard, "it also manifests itself spontaneously and reveals man as a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien" (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 749-750).

This savage beast is what exactly looks us straight in the face at the end of *The God of Carnage*. "A mouthful of grog and, bam, the real face appears," as such Michel summarizes the whole situation towards the end (*Carnage* 64). On getting a little bit drunk, the fragile mask of civility falls down and the characters' savagery prevails. Frustration, also, plays a great role in provoking the characters' sleepy monster. Everything taking place onstage and offstage turns them mad and, therefore, escalates their sliding down the slope of savagery. Annette is utterly frustrated by her husband's addiction to his cell phone: "Drives me mad, that mobile, endlessly" (26)! "I'm not saying another word. Total surrender. I want to be sick again" (50). Alain is a victim of a frustrating marriage relationship as well; he is dull with his wife's intrusion into the very specific details of his life, even if it is just a cigar to smoke: "I shall do what I like, Annette, if I feel like accepting a cigar, I shall accept a cigar" (49). Michel's nerves are agitated by the horrible sound of the hamster as it made "the

most appalling racket all night” (7), as well as by his wife’s pretended idealism and her getting things “out of proportion” all the time. Finally, Veronique, the most reasonable and civilized of all, at least on the surface, has her own disappointments as well. She speaks her mind on just one of them: “I live with a man who’s decided, once and for all, that life is second rate. It’s very difficult living with a man who comforts himself with that thought, who doesn’t want anything to change, who can’t work up any enthusiasm about anything” (46). In a nutshell, unsatisfying marriage relationships stand as the most frustrating condition beyond the provoking of the aggressive impulse within man; however, such dysfunctional marital relations are not the source of aggression as it is instinctive first and foremost.

Under the external influence of wine and frustration and the internal pressing urges of the id, the characters drop their façades, dispense with their defenses, and allow their ids to dominate. The vomit master scene of the play signals the defeat of the ego with all its rationality in its struggle with the id with all its anarchy. After some sterile fragments of conversation with the other characters, Annette feels sick and suddenly throws up over the art books and the tulips. “This expulsion of Annette’s bile is a visceral symbol of the play’s collapse of civilization,” as such Amanda Giguere interprets the scene (239). Annette’s bile on the flowers and books of art is a turning point in the play. It dramatizes the downfall of everything human and civilized under the pressure of the beast inside man. The values of human civilization that Veronique has kept celebrating and showing off with throughout the play have turned to be mere slogans that, on their first testing, have fallen down under Annette’s vomit. Now masks are removed altogether and the truth about man’s nature stands naked. After many attempts to keep herself calm and civilized, Veronique finally takes off her pretended mask that hides beneath her true savage nature that is not exclusive to her; she explodes and declares it boldly to the others: “Behaving well gets you nowhere. Courtesy is a waste of time, it weakens you and undermines you” (Carnage 38). The same is announced by her husband as well: “We tried to be nice, we bought tulips, my wife passed me off as a lefty, but the truth is, I can’t keep this up any more, I’m fundamentally uncouth” (41). In reply to these war-like announcements, Alain rhetorically questions from the other side, “Aren’t we all?” hinting at their equivalent bestial nature (41). Such is the case, there is nothing expected after the vomit scene and the removal of masks but looking the bitter truth straight in the face and attack.

Now the ego surrenders to the demanding id and the required balance between the ethics of the superego and the aggressive impulses of

the id is lost, the stage turns into a forest in which wild animals attack for nothing but attacking. "The more the civilized façade is peeled away," Giguere argues, "the more these characters reveal the savagery at their core" (244). And savagery does not have rules; once the characters' ids dominate, each one plays the game of violence by himself. There are no permanent alliances in the battle taking place on the stage; men attack women, women attack men; husbands bother wives, wives insult husbands; parents abuse children, children offend parents; and the like. In this barbaric context, language is not used "to achieve positive change, but as a weapon, and in self-defense" (Giguere 221).

The word "armed" that was used at the beginning of the meeting and elicited objections from the other characters as inappropriate diminishes in face of the harsher and more tough words used towards the end of the drama. Annette accuses Michel of being a monstrous "killer" who "murdered" the poor hamster in cold blood without feeling guilt. In response, Michel curses the hamster and what it has brought on him. Veronique, in her turn, uses language as a weapon rather than a means of communication; she, for example, describes the son of the Reilles as an "executioner", a "bastard", and a "grass". The verbal war is accompanied by a physical one as well. Veronique "throws herself at her husband and hits him several times, with an uncontrolled and irrational desperation," accusing him of negativity and inability to foster any positive change in their life (Carnage 53). On another occasion, she "snatches the cigar box out of Michel's hands and slams it shut brutally" (59). Finally, when her id utterly controls her and she surrenders completely to its overwhelming power, she "grabs Annette's handbag and hurls it towards the door" telling her to get out of her home immediately (62). Annette is no exception to such a verbal and physical battle. Tired of her source of frustration, her husband's mobile, she decides to put an end to all of it in her own way; she "launches herself at Alain, snatches the mobile and, after a brief look-round to see where she can put it, shoves it into the vase of tulips" (56). In a last scene that sums up the whole theme of the play, she goes towards the tulips and lashes them out violently in a final death sentence pronounced against the idea of civilization and peaceful co-existence among human beings.

From the above critical analysis of Reza's *The God of Carnage*, it appears that savagery and aggression are at the core of the human experience and that civilization merely disguises them. The main theme that the playwright would like to stress is the fragility and hollowness of human civilization. Despite the characters' unstoppable efforts to hide their internal aggressiveness beyond the masks of civility and courtesy,

there comes moments where all these masks fall and the true vulgar face of the characters is uncovered. This may partly explain the unprecedented appeal of the play to the audience in the different contexts in which it has been produced. ‘The audience gets to watch four people speak in a way we wish we all could’ (Lack 8). In other words, the audience go to watch the play so that they can see their own selves acted out on the stage; that is, they go to the theatre to thrill at watching violence and identify with those who do what they sometimes cannot. In this way, Reza’s theatre nourishes their inner psychological hunger for being violent and, therefore, appeals to them.

The God of Carnage hilariously, yet subtly, dramatizes the malignant conflict taking place within its four characters between the different parts of their personalities, the id, the ego, and the superego. The writer is “screwing the tops off of these characters’ heads and letting the ids out” (Fisher 8). Throughout the course of the play, the id with its reservoir of savagery and aggression keeps nagging attempting to jump to the surface. In reaction, the ego attempts to repress these destructive urges and adopt, instead, the ideals and standards of the human civilization as absorbed and stored in one’s superego. For doing as such, the ego exploits all the mechanisms available for it including the use of the reaction-formation defense which manifests itself in pretending something opposite to what the character actually believes in. Hence, during the first part of the play the characters appear as if wearing real masks that hide their true faces behind. They appear amiable and gentle at the beginning of the play opposite to what they really are. Yet, by the acceleration of the events and the heat of discussions, along with the unstopped nagging of the demanding id, the rate of anxiety hastens and the ego finally gives up. On the surrender of the ego, the civilizational role ceases to exist and the id masters. With the mastery of the id, the animal within the characters is set at large destroying through language, then the body itself, whatever is human and civilizational. The audience, in their turn, get out with the lesson that aggression is instinctive to man not a temporal phenomenon and that whatever the power of civilization may be or the mechanisms of the ego can be, “you cannot control the things that control you” (Carnage 28).

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