

“I don’t give a shit!”:

The Deterioration of Western Luxury through Objects in Yasmina
Reza’s *God of Carnage*

Matthew J. Kennedy
Theorizing Luxury
Professor David Brody
December 12, 2012

The word “carnage” is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the flesh of slain animals or men” or “great and usually bloody slaughter.”¹ This definition conjures images of genocide, the gritty reality of ruthless, unabashed war. But in playwright Yasmina Reza’s world, it’s rich white parents of tweens arguing with one another. Unfortunately for Western society, this seemingly trivial situation does not fully impugn the magnitude of the definition. In *God of Carnage*, Reza creates a microcosm of upper-middle class sociability, and the characters initially enjoy social luxuries of civility, manners, and peace of mind. John Kenneth Galbraith characterizes and forewarns such an affluent society, stating, “Western man has escaped for the moment the poverty which was for so long his all-embracing fate. The unhealthy light of a handful of nuclear explosions would signal his return to utter deprivation if, indeed, he survived at all.”² As Reza’s scathing analysis of humanity unfolds, objects once held in high regard are stripped of their prescribed dignity as the humans react to each other with animal instincts unfettered by any posh guidance that may be provided by Emily Post. Western society is indeed, as Galbraith says, plummeted into utter deprivation.

Focusing on the 2009 Broadway production of *God of Carnage*, the bold scenography and prevalent objects, mandated by the script’s heavy reliance on them, become vital forces in propelling the message of the play forward. Through interpretation of the scenic design and the characters’ interactions with objects, the socio-economic milieu of *God of Carnage* serves as a status quo for Western society. The living room set serves as a metaphor for the comforts afforded people of the upper-middle class, as a standard interior of relaxed formality. The objects presented by the play’s action are objects of civility, emerging to uphold conventions of domesticity, culture, progress, and social graces. By using the interior and material objects to

¹ “Carnage,” *Merriam-Webster*, accessed December 7, 2012, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/carnage?show=0&t=1355308077>.

² John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1958), 5.

delineate the standards of society, the characters and their behavior (instinctual or calculated) become the agents of social destruction. What this then spells for established conventions of Western culture in these precarious hands is uncertain, questioning our ability to play by our own rules. Aided by the scenic design, its deterioration, and the abuse of objects, Yasmina Reza's *God of Carnage* assesses the sustainability of Western society and its social luxuries.

To put us in the right intellectual framework, let's look to Rousseau for a strikingly appropriate comment: "Jealousy, suspicion, fear, coldness, reserve, hate, and fraud lie constantly concealed under that uniform and deceitful veil of politeness."³

God of Carnage is a play by French playwright Yasmina Reza that premiere in London in 2008 and on Broadway in 2009. According to production notes, "*God of Carnage* is a comedy of manners without the manners. The play deals with the aftermath of a playground altercation between two boys and what happens when their parents meet to talk about it."⁴ As is typical of Reza's work, it focuses on a small cast of upper-middle class characters placed in a seemingly ordinary situation. From this initial premise, however, Reza analyzes human behavior and nuance as a method to systematically dismantle and explore the human psyche. Through conversation that rapidly morphs into yelling and shouting, the situation devolves into a chaotic, high-energy farce, but typically ends in catharsis. In this instance, director Matthew Warchus calls the play "a very funny tragedy."

As a comedy of manners, it fits in a long theatrical tradition that follows after such famed works as Molière's *The Misanthrope* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. These

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences."

⁴ Andrew Gans, "God of Carnage to Play the Jacobs Theatre; Casting Announced," *Playbill*, January 12, 2009, accessed November 21, 2012, <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/125126-God-of-Carnage-to-Play-the-Jacobs-Theatre-Casting-Announced>.

plays characteristically skewer the social conventions of the upper classes of society. Therefore, in discussing such plays, it is important to note the audiences in attendance. Larry Norman states, “If we wish then to understand the aesthetics of Molière’s comic mirror, we must look at the social configuration of its performance. The comedy of manners is place where the public sees itself.”⁵ This is then true of *God of Carnage*, where the characters onstage reflect the social and economic means of the theater-going audience. Michael and Veronica Novak are the parents of Henry, the boy who lost his tooth in the playground scuffle; Alan and Annette Raleigh are the parents of Benjamin, the boy who did the hitting. Veronica works part time in an art bookstore and is a writer focusing on the Darfur conflict, and Michael is a salesman specializing in domestic hardware. Alan is an international corporate lawyer, and Annette is ambiguously in “wealth management.” All of these professions, for the most part, reflect a higher level of education and upward mobility that has landed them (or kept them) in the upper-middle class.

The society they are meant to represent needs little introduction, but Reza pinpoints it:

VERONICA. We’re living in America. We’re not living in Kinshasa! We’re living in America according to the principles of Western society. What goes on in Coble Hill Park reflects the values of Western society! Of which, if it’s all the same to you, I am happy to be a member.⁶

With this sentiment and the established demographic of the audience by the conventions of satire, the need to define “Western society” is almost redundant. But Galbraith succinctly summarizes the very milieu that Reza depicts in discussing his *Affluent Society*:

Exemption from manual toil; escape from boredom and confining and severe routine; the chance to spend one’s life in clean and physically comfortable surroundings; and some opportunity for applying one’s thoughts to the day’s work, are regarded as unimportant only by those who take them completely for granted.⁷

⁵ Larry Norman, *The Public Mirror: Molière and the Social Commerce of Depiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁶ Yasmina Reza, *God of Carnage*, trans. Christopher Hampton (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2008), 54.

⁷ Galbraith, 345.

Galbraith is of course talking in terms of employment, but this profile can be extrapolated to home and property ownership that not only pleases the individual, but also provides security and comfort. To cite a specific example, the couple establishes their neighborhood of Coble Hill, Brooklyn, as a safe place for their children and family. When discussing the park where the playground altercation took place, they note:

VERONICA. The irony is, we've always regarded Coble Hill Park as a haven of security, unlike Whitman Park.
MICHAEL. She's right. We've always said Cobble Hill Park yes, Whitman Park no.⁸

Because of their status, they are able to appreciate a degree of security in their lives, even though here it has been questioned. They are economically comfortable and socially at peace—or at least trying to smooth over any ill feeling. But as we will see, their behaviors and the mediation of objects of civility question the stability of this structure.

The scenic design of *God of Carnage*, designed by Mark Thompson, immediately establishes the combative tone of the play and defines for the audience the social and cultural standing of the characters.⁹ Through its use of color, ethnically inspired iconography, and furniture arrangement, the setting creates an environment ripe for tension and is precariously situated in a peaceful world. What is created is a construct of Western civility masking a jungle gym for tempers to flare and for enraged guests to arbitrarily wreak havoc on the material world that has been built around them.

The playwright's direction is initially simple: "A living room. No realism. Nothing superfluous."¹⁰ Nothing is superfluous, but it is still very dramatic. We are confronted with a

⁸ Reza, 3.

⁹ Contact was made with Mr. Thompson for an interview, but at the deadline for this paper he had not yet responded to questions about his design despite numerous follow-up emails.

¹⁰ Reza, 2.

looming, cracked-mud wall limiting the space, and a vibrantly red carpet that matches the adjacent wall (Figure 1). Most of the furniture is concentrated at the middle of the room, creating a tight living space of a cream couch, two modern-looking white chairs, and a large glass coffee table tastefully piled with oversized books. Other small items of furniture are situated on the room's peripheries, a small chest of drawers and a table with glasses. They are made or fashioned to look like unfinished wood. These pieces are visually associated with the brown of the cracked-mud wall rather than the white of the central seating area. Susan Bennett analyzes an audience's initial response to the view of the proscenium space: "The audience is likely at the outset of a performance to read the stage as a macrocosm. All elements may be taken as of more or less equal importance in establishing a hypothesis of the nature of the on-stage world."¹¹ Through this theory of audience perception, the pictorial space of Thompson's design can be distilled into three major elements: the red floor, the brown back wall, and the white furniture in the center.

The bold fields of color immediately bear a striking resemblance to Abstract Expressionist painting, particularly the work of Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. This somewhat amorphous approach to such a structured space does not serve to demarcate the space itself, but rather communicate information about its inhabitants. While ideologies of the movement such as dynamism and the penetration of the inner psyche certainly service the themes of the play, the reference to the movement is itself more intended to be indicative of the room's inhabitants. The reference to Abstract Expressionism not only imbues the residents of the home with cultural capital, but it also situates the setting chronologically in cultural history. It is aligned with ideals of the postwar period upon which contemporary society is still founded. While society has progressed, notions of domesticity and social behaviors are still engrained in

¹¹ Susan Bennett, *Theatre audiences: a theory of production and reception* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 140.

the daily functioning of Western society, just as the visual product of the time period composes the very fabric of the space.

The flooding of red, through its visual abrasiveness, immediately dyes what would be the otherwise calm waters of a living room. As scenographer and theorist Pamela Howard states, “color guides the viewer’s eye to the focal point and meaning of a composition through careful placing within a space, or frame.”¹² In *God of Carnage*, Thompson does exactly this by isolating the white furniture in the center of the red canvas. With this living room, Thompson constructs a nucleus of civility in a ravenous pool of blood red. Symbols of Western civilization—couch and chairs surrounding a coffee table—are nestled within this metaphorical jungle. Howard further advises, “To use color effectively onstage is to use it economically so that it achieves maximum effect. Too often color is used indiscriminately.”¹³ But subtlety is no virtue in the Novak living room, as is quickly revealed by the feuding characters, and Thompson smartly exceeds the budget with the use of red. The tension between the modern, hygienic, proper Western construct in the middle and the foreboding, crusting surroundings is pungent but not long lasting as the conversation starts and the situation devolves. To cite theater analyst Amanda Giguere’s interpretation, “Despite the characters’ attempt to uphold a language-based civilization, the design elements point to their underlying savagery.”¹⁴

Through the set and early in the play’s dialogue, Western culture’s relationship with Africa emerges as a dominant theme, particularly characterizing Africa as a primitive, savage “Other.” As mentioned, Veronica studies the Darfur region in her research. This interest perhaps inspired the cracked-mud wall that barricades the back plane of the living room. While the

¹² Pamela Howard, *What is Scenography?*, Second edition (New York: Routledge, 2009), 94.

¹³ Howard, 113.

¹⁴ Amanda Giguere, *The Plays of Yasmina Reza on the English and American Stage* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010), 137.

iconography is not specific to a culture or geographic region, it evokes a rustic quality that seemingly has no place in the civil world of a living room. Its texture of a harshly beaten path is in direct conflict with the clean, padded couch placed directly in front of it. Coupled with the intense saturation of the carpet, the cracked-mud wall cries out with violence.¹⁵ The furniture that is displaced from the central seating area reflects this untamed aesthetic, as it is roughly crafted from crudely stained wood (Figure 2). From first sight, the cracked-mud wall and the rebelliously satellite furniture become metaphors for the crumbling façade of Western civility that is soon expressed through the behavior of the characters.

Overall, there is a playful irony in this relationship of the West as civilized and Africa as savage. While the genocide in Darfur is certainly a travesty, Veronica's interest in it gives her intellectual and political ethos, giving her credentials as a caring citizen of the world and stereotyping her as the cosmopolitan liberal. She proudly takes credit where she feels it is due:

VERONICA. One day you may understand the extreme gravity of what's going on in that part of the world and you'll be ashamed of this inertia and your repulsive nihilism.

MICHAEL. You're just wonderful, darjeeling, you're the best of us all!

VERONICA. I am. Yes.¹⁶

Her unapologetic tone is repellent, but speaks to the regard for her worldly knowledge. But as Galbraith says of such a society, "These are also days in which even the mildly critical individual is likely to seem like a lion in contrast with the general mood."¹⁷ While the topic of Africa itself is acknowledged from a cautious distance, the room's decorating, reflective of modernist ideals, elevate African culture to high art.¹⁸ This elevation of course suggests that Western appropriation

¹⁵ The use of a mud-inspired wall was a change made by Thompson to the set's design when the production transferred to Broadway. The 2008 London production featured a wall of similar texture but in red, meant to mimic the appearance of dried blood. No reason has been provided for the change, as the interview with Thompson is still pending.

¹⁶ Reza, 63.

¹⁷ Galbraith, 4-5.

¹⁸ While not present in Thompson's design, many subsequent productions of *God of Carnage* include African sculpture as a prominent feature on the back wall.

of the primitive is somehow improving it. The situation is particularly ironic in *God of Carnage*, as the “civilized” people who appreciate and enjoy the art devolve into despicable, self-serving sociopaths.

Thompson’s set also alludes to Germany Expressionist scenography of the 1930s. This is not as literal a reference as the previous mention of Abstract Expressionism, but more a stylistic nod. As defined by theorists Joslin McKinney and Philip Butterworth, “Expressionism concentrated on the inner dimension of human experience, the subjective, visceral, and embodied aspects of existence and its contention with an external reality.”¹⁹ They further argue, “the scenic place [becomes] the focal point of dramatic tensions that [permeate] the entire stage space.”²⁰ As will be discussed later in reference to the objects themselves, this permeation of the entire space is integral to the full realization of the set’s progression over time, and the communication and interpretation of Reza’s work as a whole. *God of Carnage* departs somewhat from this style, however, as other examples rely heavily on light and shadow to create exaggerated, almost horrifying character drama while *God of Carnage* is not nearly so fanciful. Lighting remains balanced, and the actors rely on naturalistic acting techniques in portraying the characters, maintaining a necessary realism for the successful performance of the play. The living room, with its angularity and intensity, still follows the movement’s effort to evoke visceral and shocking effects through the setting.

The living room can be immediately typified as upper-middle class, as dictated by the playwright: “We need to sense right away that the place belongs to the Novaks and that the two couples have just met. In the centre, a coffee table, covered with art books. Two big bunches of

¹⁹ Philip Butterworth and Joslin McKinney, *The Cambridge Introduction to Scenography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 92.

²⁰ McKinney and Butterworth, 92-3.

tulips in vases.”²¹ The setting is bold and designed, but not overly expensive looking. The quantity of books on the coffee table suggests that the room is multi-functional. The books on the table consist an array of modern and contemporary art subjects, as well as photography books derived from Veronica’s interest in the people and the civilizations of Africa. These subjects connote a level of education customary of a member of the upper-middle class. Michele Lamont additionally argues that knowledge of culture is derived from education and a perceived conveyor of status by the upper classes of America.²² This status, however, becomes compromised as the objects of civility are introduced and handled in extremely uncivilized manners.

Unlike more traditional playwrights, Reza rarely adheres to a cause-and-effect plot progression, and as a result her plays are fluid discussions around a theme. Their substance is not plot-driven, but rather propelled by the evolving discourse between the characters and their changes as human beings. We start with a premise, and as the conversation evolves, the characters devolve. Because of this intellectualization of the plot, objects play a pivotal role in the progression of the story, and thus create a unique investigation of material culture presented in Reza’s world. The visual presence of the objects’ role can be articulated as follows:

An object might displace an actor in the fluid hierarchy of the stage action. In semiotic analysis the human and the object are accorded the same signifying potential...Scenographic objects, during performance, might become more important in the hierarchy of the signified as they become the focus for the audience and signify momentum of action.²³

²¹ Reza, 3.

²² Michèle Lamont, *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²³ McKinney and Butterworth, 153.

The relationships of the objects to the characters are therefore fundamental in shaping the dynamics of the situation. In *God of Carnage*, the objects embody social ideals that in some way become ravaged by the characters.

The objects represented in this analysis are particular sources of contention in between the characters. Particularly *clafoutis*, art books, a cell phone, rum, a purse, and vases of tulips represent factions of society that are in some way obliterated throughout the action of the play. The objects are all vehicles for conspicuous consumption, as Thorstein Veblen might suggest, and reflect the socio-economic status of the characters. Discussion is made of the cost or effort exerted to obtain some, while worth is inherent in others. But the objects' destruction from the characters' behavior allows Reza to raise tense questions about our culture's sustainability.

Early in the play, when the train is still on the track and chairs are still in the upright position, Michael offers the guests some pastry as a peace offering after one of Veronica's pushy antics. The pastry, *clafoutis*, is presented and consumed by all the characters, but immediately becomes polarizing as an indication of status. A clear distinction is made in the sophistication of the dessert as Michael (in the Broadway production) gives it an Americanized pronunciation (*clah-FOO-tee*), which is quickly corrected by his more worldly and more pretentious wife to the French pronunciation (*clah-foo-TEE*). Discussing the dessert not only grants Veronica the opportunity to assert her culinary knowledge, but also provide cooking tips to Annette, suggesting that she is more accomplished in both matters of culture and matters of domesticity:

ANNETTE. Apples and pears, that is a first.

VERONICA. Apples and pears, it's pretty textbook, but there's a trick to it...Pears need to be cut thicker than apples. Because pears cook faster than apples...*Clafoutis* is a cake. The pastry's not rolled out, it's mixed in with the fruit.

ALAN. You really are a cook.

VERONICA. I love it. The thing about cooking is you have to love it. In my view, it's only the classic tart, that's to say on a pastry base, that deserves to be called a tart.²⁴

²⁴ Reza, 10-18.

Veronica's pretentious nature comes through very clearly in this early dialogue. The *clafoutis* is presented as means of social appeasement and social luxury, but becomes an opportunity for ostentatious show of knowledge.

Projectile vomit, unfortunately, plays a prominent role in both the progression of the play and as a statement on civility. In a moment of panic, Annette vomits onto the coffee table, home to Veronica's collection of out-of-print art books: "Annette vomits violently. A brutal and catastrophic spray, part of which goes over Alan. The art books on the coffee table are likewise deluged."²⁵ This moment fuels the fury and destruction of the surroundings that perpetuates throughout the remainder of the play. In a rare interview, Reza commented on the controversial vomiting scene saying, "In *Art* [her previous play that was a Broadway success], there is a phrase about 'culture that I vomit over.' In *God of Carnage*, I put it literally: she vomits on a pile of art books."²⁶ After the art books—the embodiment of culture—are sullied, nothing else is worthy of being sacred. The host couple fervidly attempts to clean the drenched objects, but the sad little blow dryer and wheezing sprays of perfume they utilize cannot salvage the books. Their advertisement of how cultured they are is ruined. By pairing books and vomit, the intellectual with the carnal, the sophisticated with the philistine, the standing metaphor is that cultural capital is no match animalistic impulse. The very notion of culture itself is subverted through Annette's bodily ailments. As was mentioned regarding the appropriation of African forms in art, Western culture sees itself and its cultural products as superior. When that has been destroyed, what remains? In *God of Carnage*, there is nowhere to go but down. Although Veronica ardently protests against the vomit being a result of the pastry (and more probably the discharge of a

²⁵ Reza, 27.

²⁶ Elizabeth Day, "Yasmina Reza: 'There's No Point in Writing Theater If It's Not Accessible,'" *The Observer*, January 21, 2012, accessed November 23, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2012/jan/22/yasmina-reza-interview-carnage-polanski>.

panic attack), the *clafoutis* is the material composition of the vomit; therefore, Annette is vomiting Veronica's pretention and attempts at civility onto society's idea of culture.

As an object, a cell phone is viewed as a symbol of technology, progress, and upward mobility. It provides instant communication and connection, and has become integral to daily functioning, not just in Western cultures, but all over the world.²⁷ Despite this global reach, outside communication is incredibly limited the afternoon during which *God of Carnage* transpires, except for a few phone calls on the Novak's landline and Alan's persistent cell phone usage. Alan's character trait is his dedication to every ring and vibrate his cellular device produces. His behavior alienates the others, as every passionate appeal to pathos is abruptly punctuated by a jarring buzz and a prompt "hello." As frustrations toward his behavior mount, the beloved object meets a watery grave at the bottom of a flower vase. As Amanda Giguere says, "Communication, progress, and sophistication seem impossible in the face of the brutal nature of these characters."²⁸ This is not to defend obnoxious cell-phone usage, but note its dedicated usage as a mark of importance and status, and as a hallmark of the progression of civilization.

Prohibitionists may not call rum an object of civility and it certainly receives a much kinder treatment than other objects, but its emergence from a bottom drawer catalyzes the further downward spiral of the characters. It allows them to shed any inhibition they were exhibiting, and objects, like the vomit, quickly become projectiles. Giguere notes, "Michael, the seeming optimist, realizes that he no longer needs to play along with this wife's liberal routine, and offers a bottle of rum to his guests as a way to asserting his independence."²⁹ Of the objects discussed

²⁷ According to *Design with the Other 90%: Cities*, more of the world's population now has access to cell phone service than clean water.

²⁸ Giguere, 129.

²⁹ Giguere, 128.

here, it is the most generally acknowledged as a vice. This attitude is readily demonstrated as Michael procures the bottle from the bottom drawer of the chest of drawers—a vase of tulips are perched atop this very unit. At one point, cigars are also withdrawn from a similarly concealed location. The need to hide Michael’s objects from visitors versus the conscious display of Veronica’s books and tulips only make more transparent the veneer of good behavior for the sake of sociability. Veronica would not wish to suggest to outside company that they engage in rude or “morally corrupt” behaviors in their home, so the alcohol and cigars are hidden as to keep guests comfortable and secure. Additionally, the entrance of the rum as a manipulating force symbolizes Michael’s departure from his wife’s agenda, as well as the collapse of the institution of marriage. “Till death do us part” is erased with a hearty swig of rum, as he no longer feels the obligation to unconditionally defend her. This breach is reiterated when the intoxicated Veronica tackles Michael onto the couch and begins beating him with her fists. After the assault, Michael retorts, “She’s a supporter of peace and stability in the world.”³⁰ His sarcasm in this comment is noted and confirms the metaphorical dissolution of the marriage.

Probably still operating under the effects of the contested beverage, Veronica once again lashes out with physical violence. In the midst of dialogue, Annette repeatedly opposes Veronica’s conviction about who is to blame for the situation. Veronica reacts:

VERONICA. Fuck off! I’ve had quite enough of you.
*She grabs Annette’s handbag and hurls it towards the door.*³¹

Veronica snatches Annette’s purse and empties its contents onto the floor before disdainfully discarding the purse itself. A handbag is a symbol of female identity and a tool for maintaining privacy in the public realm. They are also representative of a woman’s consumer agency, as it is

³⁰ Reza, 54.

³¹ Reza, 62.

the primary link between the home and the place of consumption.³² This action is a clearly intrusion on private space, a space held so dearly in our society, but also an attack on femininity and female independence. Reza has stated that she is not a feminist playwright. So as the men have already been emasculated through destruction or simply resigned to their own nihilism, the desecration of Annette's purse levels and ultimately negates the power dynamics of gender in our patriarchal Western society. Annette responds by calling Veronica the uniquely feminine insult, "bitch."

And finally, the tulips. They tilt gracefully in their vases and are seemingly innocuous for the larger part of the afternoon, but nonetheless become an explosive end to all the proceedings. When conversation is still polite, a point is made of their beauty by the characters. "\$40 for a bouquet of fifty," Veronica reports.³³ They are imported and therefore afforded primarily by the elite.³⁴ Emily Post herself singles them out as one of the few decorations one should use during a simple afternoon gathering, such as the one in which the Novaks and the Raleighs find themselves.³⁵ But by the end, Annette has met the brink of her self-control, and in a rageful gesture runs around the room throwing and shredding the tulips in her wake. In this act, the tulips are transformed from their symbol of hospitality and elegance into lethal weapons.

This discussion of objects and their abuse symbolizes the descent of a world of social and economic luxury into an apocalyptic chaos. If the vomiting was a comma signaling change in the sentence of *God of Carnage*, the eruption of tulips is the exclamation point. The introduction of objects of civility and the destructive tornado that becomes their demise is a physical manifestation of Reza's deconstructed society, driven to turmoil by its own illusions of social

³² Kelley Styring, *In Your Purse: Archaeology of the American Handbag* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2010).

³³ Reza, 5.

³⁴ Giguere, 129.

³⁵ Emily Post, *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics and at Home* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1922).

luxury that deny true expressions of human nature. The blanket of petals covers the expanse of the living room, allowing the objects of the periphery (the symbolic “savage”) to fully penetrate the entire environment, including the once-defined nucleus of civility in the center (Figure 3). The center has been breached through the characters’ instability and reckless behavior—chairs have been overturned, pillows have gone rogue from their cushy positions on the couch, soiled glasses have been strewn around the room, books are piled in a disorderly fashion, the contents of Annette’s purse litter the floor, clothes have been shed and abandoned, and remnants of now-dried vomit surely remain. As Giguere concludes, “The play continues along a destructive path as the characters gradually destroy everything around them: the room, their relationships, and their marriages.”³⁶ To return to the discussion of the set, the living room becomes an environment that channels that characters’ tumultuous behavior and consequently its own deterioration. The objects of civility have mediated this deterioration by becoming its tangible proof. The characters’ abuse and obliteration of objects has torn down the controlled, Western society and blended it with the surrounding “savage” space. Perhaps ironically, only the cracked-mud wall escapes unscathed.

As has been discussed, the environment and objects in *God of Carnage* serve as physical representations for constructs of civility and social luxury in Western culture. As they are ravage, so are ideals of sociability. The carnage they created seems distant from the previously supplied definition that characterizes the warfare of other cultures, in this case the heavily discussed situations in Africa. However, through this analogy, Reza pokes fun at Western society’s arrogant superiority. It has been deluded by its own dominance and affluence, almost as if it has tricked itself into thinking it’s more robust than the impacts it can truly withstand. Galbraith puts

³⁶ Giguere, 129.

the mentality in terms of economic inequality: “One would not expect that the preoccupations of a poverty-ridden world would be relevant in one where the ordinary individual has access to amenities...which not even the rich rejoiced a century ago.”³⁷ Through Western society’s power and sophistication, it has exempt itself from the savage problems that plague the rest of the world.

Veronica is the only character of the four who differs slightly from this way of thinking, condemning the others for not being concerned with other areas of the world. However, her burdened conscience makes her devolution even more hypocritical. At one point, her husband Michael has just expressed his nihilism and pronounced that at heart, he is a “fucking Neanderthal.” She responds with a furious tirade defending her convictions and questioning how they would have handled the situation had she not proposed their meeting and attempt at civility. But in her rant, she contradicts herself and in doing so succinctly expresses the theme of the play. Starting the speech with “I stand up for society,” and ending it with a blunt “I don’t give a shit,” she completely reverts to uncivilized behavior.³⁸ She stands up for what she thinks is right and decent as a proud steward of Western society, but then treats the other characters with disrespect, as manifest in throwing Annette’s purse across the room. Because of this, Veronica is perhaps the most emblematic of Reza’s critique—she presents the most polished social front, but in doing so crashes the hardest. The objects around her follow in suit.

Veronica’s behavior leads to a comment by the continually cynical Alan: “I can understand you saying to yourself, right, I’m going to choose a massacre, what else does history consist of, and I’m going to write about it. You do what you can to save yourself.”³⁹ This comprises his moral conception of the world, and serves as a preface for what Reza is probing at

³⁷ Galbraith, 2.

³⁸ Reza, 41-42.

³⁹ Reza, 47.

through this play. It is a penetrating assault on Western social luxuries and notions of security. The home is a sheltered place where one can feel protected. But in *God of Carnage*, this environment highlights the self-destructive nature of human instinct. The massacre Reza has evidently chosen to write about is one in which social niceties and projections of luxury cannot conceal the solipsistic and self-serving natural instincts necessary for survival. Through the characters' behavior and their destruction of objects of civility, she questions the sustainability of our Western society as built on these modern principles of social and economic luxuries. Galbraith argues that for renewed economic success, the expansion of the New Class should be a primary concern of society, second only to its survival.⁴⁰ But Reza questions, can it even survive? In the final line of *God of Carnage*, Michael poses a question, almost meant to be read as a statement. He inquires in exasperation, "What do we know?"⁴¹

⁴⁰ Galbraith, 345.

⁴¹ Reza, 67.

Sources Cited

- Bennett, Susan. *Theatre audiences: a theory of production and reception*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Butterworth, Philip and Joslin McKinney. *The Cambridge Introduction to Scenography*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- “Carnage.” *Merriam-Webster*, accessed December 7, 2012, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/carnage?show=0&t=1355308077>
- Day, Elizabeth. “Yasmina Reza: ‘There’s No Point in Writing Theater If It’s Not Accessible.’” *The Observer*, January 21, 2012, accessed November 23, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2012/jan/22/yasmina-reza-interview-carnage-polanski>.
- Galbraith, John Kenneth. *The Affluent Society*. Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1958.
- Gans, Andrew. “God of Carnage to Play the Jacobs Theatre; Casting Announced.” *Playbill*, January 12, 2009, accessed November 21, 2012, <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/125126-God-of-Carnage-to-Play-the-Jacobs-Theatre-Casting-Announced>.
- Giguere, Amanda. *The Plays of Yasmina Reza on the English and American Stage*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2010.
- God of Carnage*. By Yasmina Reza. Dir. Matthew Warchus. Perf. James Gandolfini, Jeff Daniels, Marcia Gay Harden and Hope Davis. Bernard Jacobs Theatre, New York. Performance filmed on October 28, 2009. Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, New York Library of Performing Arts.
- Howard, Pamela. *What is Scenography?* Second ed. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Lamont, Michèle. *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class*. Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Norman, Larry F. *The Public Mirror: Moliere and the Social Commerce of Depiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Reza, Yasmina. *The God of Carnage*. Translated by Christopher Hampton. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2008.

Styring, Kelley. *In Your Purse: Archaeology of the American Handbag*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2010.

Images



Figure 1. *God of Carnage*, photo by Joan Marcus



Figure 2. *God of Carnage*, photo by Joan Marcus



Figure 3. *God of Carnage*, <http://nateolsonfamily.blogspot.com>