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David Henry Friston , illustration de l'édition originale de *Carmilla*, 1872.

# The Female Vampire as a Figure of Female Empowerment in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*

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## Introduction

As abject as alluring, the vampire is probably the most popular monster of our time. Lurking in the shadows of our cinemas and libraries to scare us, sometimes disgust but often to seduce us as well. For more than a century, no other monster or supernatural creature has known the same overwhelming importance in our culture and literature. As Nina Auerbach states, “Ghosts, werewolves, and manufactured monsters are relatively changeless, more aligned with eternity than with time; vampires blend into the changing cultures they inhabit.”(6) If vampires are still able and welcome to leave their coffins, it is because of their uniqueness residing in their changing, adaptive nature. A reflection of the taboos and anxieties of the period it lives in, this immortal being who looks disturbingly like us, can be the receptacle of our fears and most hidden desires. Therefore, it always remains a relevant figure, especially in this period of societal turmoil and questionings.

Indeed, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the figure of the vampire knows an incredible surge of popularity, especially in literature. Since Anne Rice’s *The Vampire Chronicles*, no other series of novels with vampires has been so widely-read than Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight*. Soon adapted for the big screen, it renewed the interest for the vampire in literature (and other forms of art as well) and led to a proliferation of literary series, mostly intended for a young female audience. Those supernatural romances tend to turn the blood-thirsted evil monster into a sympathetic being trying to bond with humanity. However, this metamorphosis completed to appeal to a broader audience, also opened the way for a more traditional representation of vampires to reappear. Although he is reduced to dust at the end of Bram Stoker’s classic novel, Dracula has never been more alive than today. In TV-series, games, comic books...he is everywhere. More interestingly, this iconic character brings in his wake another vampire who stayed in his oversized shadow for long; the beautiful and deadly Carmilla. Raised from the dead 25 years before Dracula, Carmilla has never acquired the same popularity as her literary descendant. Nevertheless, series such as Netflix’s *Castlevania*, the web-series *Carmilla*, and Emily Harris’s upcoming movie adaptation have aroused an unprecedented interest for Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s Gothic novella.

If this nineteenth century Irish writer is relatively little-known of the general public today, Le Fanu had quite an important notoriety at the time. He remains famous for his ghost stories and is considered one of the major authors of the fantastic genre, notably with his chef-d’oeuvre *Uncle Silas*. A member of the

*Ascendancy*<sup>1</sup>, and son of a church dean; he was a man of rather conservative views. It is, therefore, even more noticeable that such an ungodly monster as Carmilla would arise from his hand. Although he was first a writer of historical and sensational novels, after the death of his wife in 1958, he wrote only supernatural stories such as *The House by The Churchyard*. *In a Glass Darkly*, his most famous collection of short stories, including *Carmilla*, was published the year before his death; the author was then suffering from chronic depression, enclosed in his house. Before *Carmilla*'s publication, the vampire was already a popular figure in Europe thanks to the theatre. Plenty of vampire-plays were performed in Dublin as well, following the successful adaptations of John Polidori's *The Vampyre* and *Varney The Vampire or the Feast of Blood*<sup>2</sup>. However, in literature, he was still a rare figure and could be found in a few poems of the eighteenth century. Although, Goethe's *The Bride of Corinth* and Coleridge's *Christabel* feature vampire-like female antagonists, *Carmilla* can be considered as the first work of literature where the female antagonist is explicitly presented as a vampire.

The novella *Carmilla* is a story quite unique among Le Fanu's usual works. No stranger to the supernatural, he had previously summoned other undead creatures to frighten the reader but never with such sensuality. This story, told by Laura years after the related facts, is found among the papers of the fictional detective, Dr. Hesselius. It describes the encounter and passionate friendship between Laura, an isolated English girl, and Carmilla, a "strange and beautiful"(Le Fanu, p.29) Styrian<sup>3</sup>. Rescued from an accident by Laura and her father, Carmilla becomes a host in their *schloss*. Declarations of love and tender gestures are accompanied by a growing languor for Laura; "she [Carmilla] used to gloat on me with increasing ardour the more my strength and spirits waned."(51) The real identity of Carmilla will be revealed by General Spielsdorf, a friend of the family, whose own niece had been murdered by the vampire Carmilla. The latter will be then staked, beheaded, and burned by the men. But although the vampire is at last dead for good, she continues to haunt Laura's nights. "It was long before the terror of recent events subsided, and to this hour the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations – sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw in the ruined church; and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door." (96) The story does not seem to really end with a happy ending. Thus, it seems that the male characters remained unable to save Laura from the sensual and deadly influence of the vampire.

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1 The *Protestant Ascendancy* was the elite which dominated politically, socially and economically Ireland between the 17th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

2 *Varney...* is attributed variously to Thomas Peckett Prest and James Malcolm Rymer.

3 Styria is a region of the actual Austria.

Although covered by the veil of vampirism, for the modern reader, the homoerotic elements of the novella would seem quite evident as could be the ones in another “queer” Victorian work: Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market”. Both works feature more than ambiguous relationships between women. One could presume that the Victorian audience must have been shocked by Laura & Carmilla’s relationship. However, they probably did not even consider this relationship as a romantic one. In her study of relationships between women in nineteenth century Britain, Sharon Marcus points that “the lesbian was not a distinct social type during the years 1830 to 1880, although male sodomy was a public and private obsession”(7) Other classics had depicted ambiguous relationships between women and did not fall under censorship for this reason.<sup>4</sup> “Even at their most physical and exclusive, homoerotic relationships between women were as rarely stigmatized --as sodomy or extramarital sex – as perverse or unnatural. Rather, one woman’s passionate interest in another was understood as an organic aspect of her femininity, consistent with marriage and maternity”(Marcus, p.6) Therefore, what seems to be “lesbian elements” to us would appear innocent for Le Fanu’s contemporaries. It would explain why *Carmilla* did not fall under Victorian censorship despite its apparent sulphurous nature. Anyway, Carmilla’s real nature as a vampire was enough to strike horror in the heart of the Victorian audience. Today, when the reader opens the book, he is already aware that Carmilla is a vampire; but the reader then was not used to such nefarious female characters. Because women were supposed to be innocent and obedient, the growing apparition of female predators – mainly in the Gothic genre – might have been quite shocking for the Victorian reader.

Even worst, Carmilla as an independent woman with desires, confronts the Victorian ideal of the Angel in The House<sup>5</sup>, the good English wife and mother. An ideal that Laura at first embodies before being “slowly drained of her socially productive potential by Carmilla.”(Brock, p.121) For Le Fanu’s contemporaries, *Carmilla* was therefore, a rather classic Gothic tale where an innocent young woman was to be saved by men, from a dangerous monster who threatens her life and virtue. A battle between good and evil, between men of God and a devilish woman. Carmilla is not only a vampire but also a woman actively courting a young girl. Slowly but inexorably, she is seducing Laura who feels a mix of slight repugnance and strong attraction towards the woman. However, Laura will eventually grow more and more infatuated with Carmilla, and the latter is already draining the life of Laura by night when the men are finally discovering her identity.

*Carmilla* and its seducing female vampire may be seen as the fruit of the nineteenth century anxieties regarding female sexuality and changing roles in society. This dangerous, because autonomous, female vampire seems to foresee the appearance of the “new woman”<sup>6</sup> of the *fin-de-siècle*. By depicting powerful and

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4For example, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*.

5The Angel in the House (from a poem of Coventry Patmore) was the victorian ideal of femininity.

6The New Woman was an independent woman, a feminist ideal of the late 19th century.

autonomous women as evil monsters, the novella demonstrates the danger that they represent for society. A danger to physically destroy in order to re-establish the Victorian patriarchal order. *Carmilla* has been the object of many critics and articles, but the novella and its main antagonist have stayed for a very long time in the shadow of other male vampires such as *Dracula* or *Lestat*. Yet, *Carmilla*'s popularity grows now larger by the day, almost 150 years after its publication. This renewed attention for Le Fanu's novella coincides with another exceptional feminist wave and, therefore, could be explained by the possible identification of the modern (female) reader with *Carmilla*. As the other Gothic monsters, she is persecuted and demonized because of her difference; she is an independent woman, a lesbian, and a foreigner. 'Modern people have parallel experiences of being silenced and being denied the right to exist in their own unique ways just like the Gothic monster'(Akşehir Uygur, p.57). Modern marginalized people, therefore, tend to identify with her since she is a sensual and powerful woman feared and hence, persecuted by a patriarchal society. In the Gothic genre, women are usually powerless and the object of male desires and authority. Le Fanu's novella seems to follow that pattern with its monster and damsels in distress, but a deeper reading shows a surprisingly daring tale of gender-inversion, male passivity and female empowerment. Many critics have seen the two main female characters as victims. Laura would be only a passive girl under male authority and *Carmilla*, a monster defeated by men, because, obviously "when a woman becomes a vampire herself, she has no more agency than she did when she was human." (Auerbach, p.4) Though, I will argue that it is her very monstrousness that gives her the power and agency that would be denied from her.

The Gothic genre tends to demonize what is Other, non-conforming, by turning the marginalized into literal monsters. This representation of the Other as a threatening but eventually defeated, monster can be seen as an attempt to "name that which is difficult to apprehend and to domesticate (and therefore disempower) that which threatens" (Cohen, p.8) it seems that in *Carmilla*, the result could not be the one expected. Although presenting *Carmilla* as an evil creature, a blood-thirsty vampire who will be executed by men, Le Fanu gives her ironically an enormous power over the male characters, her 'victim' and even the reader. A power which would be usually taken back by men through the female monster's physical destruction but will continue over Laura even after *Carmilla*'s death. Accordingly, the aim of this paper will be to explore how the concepts of monstrosity and female empowerment are negotiated in Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and therefore how, because of its main antagonist being a monstrous and yet powerful woman, it has known a shifting of reception from the readers; from a classic horror tale to a story about female empowerment and male fears.

The first part of the paper will focus on how *Carmilla* as a female vampire, is the embodiment of the main Victorian anxieties about women's role and sexuality. The vampire being associated closely to sexuality and violence, *Carmilla* symbolizes what is not supposed to exist; female sexual desire and aggressiveness. There, Le Fanu anticipated the growing association of women and vampirism in the art of the *fin-de-siècle*.

While male vampires were predominant in literature until *Carmilla*, the Victorian concerns about the 'new woman' and the demonization of the female body led to this new cultural trend. As a sexual dominator and societal transgressor, Carmilla represents everything that seems threatening for the male reader and is, therefore, rejected as a monstrous woman of no societal value.

But as we will see in the second part of this paper, her vampiric nature, far from disempowering her, gives Carmilla the possibility to increasingly confiscate power from the male characters. The male characters are powerless and unable to discover her true identity until the very end. They do not move the plot along and are rather excluded from the events. Laura's father does not control the events while Carmilla's vampire family forms an effective matriarchy completely independent from its androcentric environment. It offers to Laura an alternative to a patriarchal society which would only identify her as a daughter, and later, a wife and mother. Slowly but inexorably, Laura moves from the seemingly innocent Gothic heroine to a more ambiguous role as she starts to acknowledge her own desires. Even Carmilla's execution at the hands of the male characters will not eliminate her fascination over Laura, who will not be put back in her socially-acceptable role. Patriarchy has failed to restore the proper social order.

Thus, in the last part of this paper, I will argue that this failure of the male characters to eradicate the vampire threat and Carmilla's influence over Laura is what allows Carmilla to extend her fascination to this day. Vanquished and forgotten by Laura, she would not be considered as a feminist literary icon now. Her representation in other forms of arts illustrates this change throughout the twentieth century. From the hypersexualized powerless creature of the Hammer's *The Vampire Lovers* to the evil but powerful Carmilla of *Castlevania* or *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust*, she is a modern incarnation of the Monstrous-Feminine. By relying on Barbara Creed's theory on female-monsters, in which "Creed challenges the mythical patriarchal view that woman terrifies because she is castrated by arguing that woman primarily terrifies because of a fear that she might castrate"(Creed, preface), I will attempt to demonstrate that Carmilla's monstrosity is actually a source of empowerment and this is why this novella has found a new audience today. If the Victorian reader sighed of relief when Carmilla is eventually destroyed; the modern reader might feel a bit of disappointment, especially if she is a woman. The 21<sup>st</sup> century-reader might empathise with Carmilla, even identify with her. For Carmilla is not perceived as a unidimensional monster today but at worse, as a victim of patriarchy, at best, as its powerful opponent. We will see how those perceptions are influenced by the new adaptations (movies & TV series) of Carmilla and why her new popularity is part of a growing appreciation of female monsters in general. However, it is noticeable that Carmilla is still, today, the only popular female vampire from literature yet. This leads us to question what female vampires in modern literature and culture, embody now and how the reappearance of Carmilla fits into the new trends of the female vampire's representation.

**I. The Female Vampire as The Embodiment of  
Victorian Anxieties**

# 1. Vampirism as a Metaphor for Female Sexuality

In *Carmilla*, the metaphor of vampirism allowed Le Fanu to avoid censorship by attributing Carmilla's seduction to her bloodlust rather than a homosexual desire. The vampire has always been used in order to approach sexual themes rather than confronting it directly which would have led to expose writers to an eventual censorship. The vampire can be the embodiment of the anxieties and contradictions of a place or period. *Carmilla* is not an exception for "Depending on where you sit, *Carmilla* either expresses a hysterical fear of sexually and domestically powerful women or operate as a sympathetic study of women stereotyped as dangerous by Victorian culture." (Killeen, p.100) While we cannot presume of Le Fanu's intentions, we can see in *Carmilla*'s monstrosity and her corruption of Laura, the fruit of the growing male concerns about the rise of a feminist movement during the second half of the nineteenth century. In this chapter, I will argue that *Carmilla*'s underlying monstrosity is a metaphor for hidden female sexuality. Indeed, *Carmilla* appears first as conforming to the Victorian female ideal but her hidden nature is gradually uncovered while her relationship with the young Laura becomes more and more passionate. We will see how her ability to pretend to be a normal and innocent young girl allows *Carmilla* to efficiently seduce Laura and how the evolution of the relationship between the two girls parallels the progressive discovery of her vampiric nature, altering the reader's perception of her sexuality. It seems that within the female vampire *Carmilla*, lies the threat of unrestrained female sexuality, under the appearances of a seemingly proper Victorian Angel in the House.

During the Victorian era, women would have to conform to an idealized model of womanhood: the Angel in the House, from a poem by Coventry Patmore.<sup>7</sup> It describes what was supposed to be the ideal woman or as Marilyn Brock calls it, the "Good English Mother". This Angel does not belong to herself; she is a submissive wife and a devoted mother who is not allowed to be part of the public sphere. She is docile, lovely and bears her sufferings with grace and abnegation. Most of all, she is a pure being devoid of desires. At the beginning of Le Fanu's novella, *Carmilla* seems to conform to the Victorian ideal of the proper good lady. Her introduction is one of a vulnerable victim in need of assistance. She is introduced as a damsel-in-distress after her carriage is overturned in front of Laura and her father's eyes, for her horses, at the sight of "an ancient stone cross", "swerved so as to bring the wheel over the projecting roots of the tree." (Le Fanu, p.15) Out of "kindness and chivalry", Laura's father, a good English gentleman, offers to take care of the young lady while her mother, a lady with "a proud and commanding countenance" must continue "on a journey of life and death"(p.16), without suspecting that he is letting a threatening monster penetrate his household.

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<sup>7</sup>This poem was published for the first time in 1854.

Carmilla's impersonation of the good and decent young lady works so well that everyone in the *shloss* falls under the charm of the beautiful and languid Styrian girl. Madame Perrodon and Mademoiselle De Lafontaine, Laura's governesses, describe her as "gentle and nice", implying that her behavior conforms to what is expected from a young lady. She is also described as "absolutely beautiful" and possessing "such a sweet voice" (21) Later, Laura emphasizes how "her movements were languid – *very* languid – indeed" (27) which puts the finishing touch on the portrait of a perfect young Victorian woman. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, a certain languidness in a lady was of good form and Carmilla's beauty and good manners were enough to make her sympathetic and unsuspected for Laura's household as well as for the Victorian readers. Appearing like a good proper lady, Carmilla gains Laura's trust and affection. Despite an inexplicable slight feeling of repulsion towards her friend, Laura feels attracted, "drawn towards her" for she considers the young stranger as "beautiful" and "indescribably engaging" (25) A prompt affinity is helped by Laura's loneliness and recent disappointment of not being visited by another female friend. Laura also recognizes Carmilla from a childhood memory which had frightened her but with the discovery that Carmilla is actually a decent girl like herself, the shared memory helps to create a bond between the two girls through recognition. Carmilla is a familiar face for Laura and it helps her to enter Laura's intimacy.

However, Carmilla never seems to have enough of Laura's attentions and regularly expresses her affection for the girl with tender words and gestures. As Gordon Melton points "Carmilla went about her assault upon Laura while inducing her to be cooperative. She would draw Laura to her with pretty words and embraces and gently press her lips to Laura's cheek. She would take Laura's hand while at the same time locking her gaze on her eyes and breathing with such passion that it embarrassed the naive Laura. So attracted was Laura to Carmilla, that only slowly did she come to the realization that her lovely friend was a vampire." (629) Thus, although Carmilla's affection for Laura seems real, it is also obvious that she uses Laura's growing attraction towards her as a means to hide her real identity. For, even if the embarrassment of Laura is quite evident, Carmilla's attitude becomes more and more passionate and her displays of affection more feverish. If it leaves Laura puzzled, she does not reject completely Carmilla's advances for she seems quickly infatuated with her friend. However, Carmilla's behavior surprises Laura and it seems to her that Carmilla's advances resemble a lover's courtship, to the point that she wonders if Carmilla is not actually a man in disguise. This suspicion is encouraged by the secrecy surrounding Carmilla's identity; Laura does not succeed in obtaining answers from Carmilla. For her, as well as for the reader, Carmilla remains mysterious, and Laura seems unaware of the danger that represents Carmilla's seduction.

Vampires often appear in the life of their victims as a token of their upcoming sexual maturity. Van de Wiel remarks that "The victims are chosen by the vampires based on their receptiveness to sexual impulses,

which is primarily expressed in their visible transition from girl to woman.” (36) Indeed, Carmilla seems to appear at a very peculiar moment of Laura’s life, before she would enter society. “Laura’s imminent sexual maturity is hinted at by the presence of Mademoiselle De Lafontaine, her finishing governess, whose responsibility is “the training of adolescent girls in the niceties of social life, manners, and culture” (Peterson, p. 23)”. Indeed, the encounters between the two girls will become overtly erotic as Carmilla starts to visit Laura in her bedroom during the night. However, this sexual initiation seems to have started in Laura’s childhood memory, a memory that she recalls at the beginning of the book. Laura has been left alone in her room by night and wakes up to find a young lady next to her bed:

I saw a solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed. It was that of a young lady who was kneeling, with her hands under the coverlet. I looked at her with a kind of pleased wonder, and ceased whimpering. She caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling; I felt immediately delightfully soothed, and fell asleep again. I was wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment, and I cried loudly. The lady started back, with her eyes fixed on me, and then slipped down upon the floor, and, as I thought, hid herself. (7)

If Carmilla seems to act at first as a mother soothing her child to sleep, the act of penetration in Laura’s breast is evidently erotic. In her article, Elizabeth Signorotti argues that Carmilla “is decidedly no mother”, as “The homoerotic overtones of the ensuing attack on Laura’s breast eclipse the initial mother/child dynamic and establish the nature of the two women’s relationship.” (612) Indeed, Carmilla attacks on an older Laura are described as erotic encounters; there is no more ambiguity in her role since she demonstrates the ardour of a lover with Laura, rather than a motherly affection. Therefore, this childhood’s scene can be interpreted as a harbinger of the future sexual relationship of the two women and a milestone in Laura’s sexual life. “Despite her long absence, Carmilla’s initial attack introduces Laura to the liberating exchange of female sexuality and begins the process of Laura’s ontological shifting.” (611) The importance of this moment is emphasized by the fact that Laura forgot everything before this moment but can actually recall it with details. “I forget all my life preceding that event, and for some time after it is all obscure also, but the scenes I have just described stand out as vivid as the isolated pictures of the phantasmagoria surrounded by darkness.” (9)” The recollection of the memory creates a rather ambivalent feeling in Laura for it is associated with both pleasure and fear.

The other nightly encounters between the two girls are however not described as bad moments for Laura.

Certain vague and strange sensations visited me in my sleep. The prevailing one was of that pleasant, peculiar cold thrill which we feel in bathing, when we move against the current of a river. This was soon accompanied by dreams that seemed interminable, and were so vague that I could never recollect their scenery and persons, or any one connected portion of their action. But they left an awful impression, and a

sense of exhaustion, as if I had passed through a long period of great mental exertion and danger. [...] Sometimes it was as if warm lips kissed me, and longer and more lovingly as they reached my throat, but there the caress fixed itself. My heart beat faster, my breathing rose and fell rapidly and full drawn; a sobbing, that rose into a sense of strangulation, supervened, and turned into a dreadful convulsion, in which my senses left me and I became unconscious. (Le Fanu, p.52)

The sensations described by Laura resemble a scene of sexual pleasure. Indeed, her heart beating faster, her deep breathing and sobbing followed by convulsion; it seems to describe Laura's climax. The "warm lips" she feels stop on her throat which would indicate that Carmilla is actually feeding on Laura's blood by biting her throat. Obviously, the very act of penetrating her victim's neck to exchange body fluids resembles the sexual act and the relation between a vampire and her or his victim is ambiguous because of their intimacy. Therefore, Carmilla's attacks on Laura seem more erotic than violent because of the way Laura describes it. When Laura narrates those events, she is now fully aware of her friend's true nature and that she was actually attacked by a vampire but she still recollects those moments as agreeable and pleasurable even if she reflects on it with lucidity "Had I been capable of comprehending my condition, I would have invoked aid and advice on my knees." It creates an ambivalent reaction in the reader for the evidently sexual encounters seem to be pleasurable for Laura but on the other hand, the decline of her health and the sensation of fear that she felt create an eerie impression.

This sense of unease is strengthened when Laura describes another dream she has when Carmilla is living under the same roof, in which her vampire friend appears at the foot of the bed, covered in blood after Laura's mother has warned the girl "to beware of the assassin." Laura interprets her dream as a prediction that Carmilla is in danger for she has no reason to suspect her friend of being the actual "assassin". But the doubt entered the reader's mind for this frightening dream is reminiscent of Laura's childhood memory and the mystery surrounding Carmilla and her identity makes her suspicious. She is now associated with frightful memories and dreams. However, this scene seems to indicate another progression in Laura's emerging sexuality; its predominant blood imagery draws the reader's attention to a sign of female sexual maturity: menstruation. "As the vampire under discussion is female, the blood cannot function as a metaphor for semen that infects through sexual contact, but must be read at a more literal level as menstrual blood." as Van de Wiel suggests, the shocking image of Carmilla "in her white nightdress, bathed from her chin to her feet, in one great stain of blood" reveals the transition from childlike purity to (monstrous) sexual maturity in that the signal of virginity designated by the white dress, is destroyed by the befouling stain of menstrual blood." (52)

During the Victorian era, the female body was considered as pure except during menstruation which was considered as the sign of sin. It was even considered as a disease which could lead to madness. Therefore, the spilling of a woman's blood (especially caused by another woman) is considered as abject and is a sign of

Laura's corruption. The young girl's age is not indicated but we can presume that she is in her late teens since she will soon enter society. Carmilla reappears in her life at a very peculiar moment; Laura is neither a child nor a full woman aware of her sexuality. Thus, Carmilla represents a threat to Laura's purity and to the possibility that she would become a Good English mother, by unrestraining her sexuality.

This danger is illustrated when a man becomes the narrator of a scene between the vampire and her victim/lover. When General Spielsdorf interrupts Laura's narration to recall the attack of Carmilla/Millarca on his niece, it is not described with terms evoking a certain eroticism but rather the attack of a monstrous creature.

[...] I saw a large black object, very ill-defined, crawl, as it seemed to me, over the foot of the bed, and swiftly spread itself up to the poor girl's throat, where it swelled, in a moment, into a great, palpitating mass. For a few moments I had stood petrified. I now sprang forward, with my sword in my hand. The black creature suddenly contracted toward the foot of the bed, glided over it, and, standing on the floor about a yard below the foot of the bed, with a glare of skulking ferocity and horror fixed on me, I saw Millarca. (Le Fanu. p.87)

The intervention of the General in the narration marks a shift in the perception of Carmilla. Before, seen through the eyes of the infatuated and ignorant Laura, she was a strange but lovely harmless girl, but in the words of the General, she becomes a dangerous beast assaulting her victim. She won't revert to the lovely girl until Laura's conclusion, for the girl will be put aside and men will proceed to the elimination of the dangerous monster. The information provided by the vampire-hunter Baron Vordenburg completes the dehumanization of Carmilla; she is not discussed as a single individual but as part of a race of monsters with its proper features and means of predation. The fact that the vampire's seduction is presented as a stratagem casts a different light on Laura and Carmilla's relationship:

The vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons. In pursuit of these it will exercise inexhaustible patience and stratagem, for access to a particular object may be obstructed in a hundred ways. It will never desist until it has satiated its passion, and drained the very life of its coveted victim. But it will, in these cases, husband and protract its murderous enjoyment with the refinement of an epicure, and heighten it by the gradual approaches of an artful courtship. In these cases it seems to yearn for something like sympathy and consent. (Le Fanu. p.94)

Therefore, Carmilla's seduction of Laura would be the vampire's means to successfully ensnare her victim and not a sincere interest for the girl. However, this negative perception of Carmilla's seduction is nuanced by Laura's longing for her friend at the very end of the novella; "[...] and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door." (96) For Laura, "the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations"; Carmilla is associated with fear and danger but also with the awakening of Laura's sexual desires.

Laura's sexual maturity means she is also able to fulfill her "natural role" which is to be a biological mother, in opposition to the female vampire who can breed other vampires but can not bear a child. Vampires, being asexual creatures, are unable to reproduce in a "normal" way but Judith Bell says that "in *Carmilla*, vampires by their very nature are implicitly connected to reproduction and motherhood, since the vampire's bite creates new vampires." (20) *Carmilla* cannot be a married mother "the most fulfilling life state for any woman" (19) but she can reproduce by turning her victims into other vampires who would have the same ability. *Carmilla's* female vampires are "monsters who are horrifying because they are capable of producing threatening offspring" (Bell, p.20) while refusing the traditional role of the good wife and mother. *Carmilla's* intention to make Laura a vampire is very clear from the beginning "You must come with me, loving me, to death; or else hate me and still come with me, and *hating* me through death and after." (Le Fanu, p.44) Although these words remain obscure for Laura, it reveals to the reader *Carmilla's* power to create another vampire, without a male intervention, who will possess the same ability; "'I live in your warm life, and you shall die – die, sweetly die – into mine. I cannot help it; as I draw near to you, you, in your turn, will draw near to others,'" (29) The female vampire threatens her victims' potential to become "good English mothers" with her ability to make them self-reproducing monsters excluding males from the reproductive function.

This form of reproduction also raises the taboo of incest for *Carmilla's* vampires seem to offer eternal life only to their lovers who become their symbolic children. *Carmilla* says to have been turned by "a cruel love – strange love, that would have taken my life. Love will have its sacrifices. No sacrifice without blood" (45) Strange being the Swedenborgian<sup>8</sup> word designating homosexuality, we could assume that the vampire who turned *Carmilla* was female. The fate of Bertha, General Spielsdorf's niece and killed by *Carmilla's* "accursed passion" (11) remains unknown but considering *Carmilla's* intentions towards Laura and similar relationship, it is probable that Bertha did not stay in her coffin for long and had become a vampire herself. In *Carmilla*, the vampire community appears to be only female, creating a family where its members are mothers, sisters and lovers at the same time.

Thus, the first hints of Laura's transformation appear after *Carmilla's* resume her nightly attacks on her which indicates that Laura has been chosen to join this community. The young girl starts to be visited by "certain vague and strange sensations" in her sleep and her appearance betrays her changing nature. "I had grown pale, my eyes were dilated and darkened underneath, and the languor which I had long felt began to display itself in my countenance." (52) At the same time, "*Carmilla* was looking charmingly. Nothing could be more beautiful than her tints." (58) But the latter is killed before the transformation can be complete and therefore Laura never acquires this ability of reproducing as a vampire but she seems to not be able to have

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<sup>8</sup> Le Fanu was highly interested in the Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg's ideas. Swedenborg gave his name to a new religious group.

children in a normal way neither. When she dies still young, she is not married and has no children. Carmilla's influence has never left Laura, preventing her from becoming a "good English mother". Thus, Carmilla's monstrous sexuality is associated not only with violence and corruption but with sterilization as well. Although we know that Carmilla has the power to give eternal life to another, we never see this transformation happening in the novella; we do not witness Bertha's rebirth as a vampire although we know that it was probably her fate. Only Carmilla's ability to offer death is shown. Through the funeral's cortege of a "pretty young girl [...] the daughter of one of the rangers of the forest" and the information given by Laura's father about a disease killing young peasant girls, we see only the negative consequences of Carmilla's blood-lust and never her reproductive power.

Le Fanu seems to portrayed female sexuality in an ambiguous manner; although Carmilla seems to embody the Victorian fears about female sexuality for the vampire is usually used to represent transgressive, unrestrained sexuality, she is not portrayed simply as a monster. Laura's longing for Carmilla even after the discover of her nature, tends to demonstrate that her relationship with the female vampire was not clearly negative but might even have been, pleasurable and liberating. However, Le Fanu eventually restores the traditional norms by physically destroying Carmilla and her unnatural desires at the hands of men. Nevertheless, Laura never fully recovered from this experience, demonstrating that Carmilla has left a permanent mark on the girl. The actual depiction of female sexuality in the book is very noticeable considering the Victorian belief of its non-existence, even if Le Fanu depicts the female sexuality as negative *à priori* by making the sexually-aggressive woman a literal monster, an Other whose difference would represent in itself a threat.

## 2. Carmilla as a Threatening Other

We have seen that Carmilla represents the sexually unrestrained woman; the predator who penetrates good households to seduce the daughters. She is a mysterious stranger who does not conform to conventions and has the role of the Other. Within The Gothic Genre, the concept of Otherness, especially embodied by the Monster, had a predominant importance. The “Other” being someone who does not conform in a fundamental manner, someone different, is considered as a threat to the norms of society. The representation of *Otherness* in Gothic served to marginalize certain categories of people whose difference is considered unacceptable by society. Therefore, the Gothic was used as a way to express the anxieties of a writer and/or a society towards social and political topics which threaten to change society to its core. By depicting monstrous sexually deviant characters who represent what is different, abnormal, *Other*, threatening “good” characters who embody the virtues and morals of the society. In the Victorian society, the ones who differ from the bourgeois, white and heterosexual norm would promptly be put into this category. “These ‘other Victorians’ included working-class people, imperial subjects, prostitutes, homosexuals and anyone else who did not fall into the prudish and rigidly structured identity deemed appropriated in the Victorian age.” (Akşehir Uygur, p.2)

Therefore, the Victorian Gothic Fiction was used to enforce the distinction between what is acceptable or not in society. What is abnormal takes the form of the monster and must be either tamed or destroyed. Homosexuality, Feminism, Reverse-Colonisation were some of the societal issues that worried the Victorian society and were represented through the traits of a new trending monster: the vampire. The most evident example is of course, *Dracula*, but we have already seen that *Carmilla* was also a novella about male anxieties regarding female sexuality. The Vampire is strongly linked with sexual deviancy in general, and in particular homosexuality. Although, rarely as overtly than in *Carmilla*. We will see therefore why Carmilla is an embodiment of the notion of Queerness and thus, Otherness and how it is conveyed in the novella.

First, we need to define the notion of Queerness, since its signification has changed through time. Haefele-Thomas offers a definition, when in her book, she uses the term Queer “on numerous levels: in its nineteenth century historical context to point to the generally weird, odd or ill, as well as in the early twentieth century evolution of the term as it was applied (quite negatively) to homosexuality. (3) The Queerness of Carmilla is thus, indisputable. As a vampire, she is the utmost embodiment of the “weird” and even more, her desire for Laura is a *same-sex desire*<sup>9</sup> as demonstrated in the previous chapter. By the end of the nineteenth

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<sup>9</sup>The Victorian term for Homosexuality.

century, *same-sex desire* was considered as a sexual deviance, even as a disease. “Krafft-Ebing<sup>10</sup>, in particular, in his ‘General Pathology’ as well as his ‘Special Pathology’ sections, lingers on fetishism, sadomasochism and other forms of perversion, consistently tying them in with masturbation and homosexuality, both of which were seen as detrimental to one’s physical and mental well-being.” (97)

Most people thought that homosexuality was so revolting that it could not exist. When cases of homosexuality were brought to light, it was severely sanctioned<sup>11</sup>. In literature, this fear and disapproval of homosexuality is projected in the vampire. The Queer is there represented as an Other, cast out from the “normal” society in order to assert what is acceptable. One could think of Dracula of course, for the homosexual undertones within the relation between the Count and Jonathan Harker is never explicit but always present. Although, in *Carmilla*, the relationship between Carmilla and her victim is more explicitly sexual and it would be difficult to not see Carmilla as a Queer character. As Nina Auerbach points out: “Carmilla is one of the few self-accepting homosexuals in Victorian or any literature. One might assume that her vampirism immunizes her from human erotic norms, but most members of her species were more squeamish: no male vampire of her century confronts the desire within his friendship.” (41) When *Carmilla* was written, male homosexuality was illegal and lesbianism was ignored. In the law against homosexuality promulgated by the British government and approved by Queen Victoria, the mention of female homosexuality was non-existent. It was a taboo subject for there was a fear that if we talked about it openly, it could lead to a “spread” of homosexuality. Same-sex desire was even considered as a disease which could be contagious. In an article on the “Queer Vampires and The Ideology of Gothic”, Mahinur Akşehir Uygur says “The vampire is the monstrous reflection of a homosexual/bisexual that is a threat to every single individual due to their potential to spread their deviation to other individuals of the society.”(51) Indeed, the vampire and its sexually deviance paired with its ability to contaminate others seems the perfect monster to embody the danger of homosexuality. As *Carmilla*, who threatens both Laura’s life and virtue, the female vampire as Queer is dangerous because it could disturb the heteronormativity of the society. In a society where female sexuality is above all a question of procreation, the idea of sexual relations between women motivated by desire and not by the biological conception of children, seems abnormal.

Haefele-Thomas underlines the importance of non-reproductive sexuality in *Carmilla*; “One of the most overtly sexual scenes between Carmilla and Laura takes on both a lesbian and an autoerotic aspect which foreshadows some of Krafft-Ebing’s connections between homosexuality and masturbation, both forms of sexual expression that are not ‘productive’.”(104)

Sometimes after an hour of apathy, my strange and beautiful companion would take my hand and hold it with a fond pressure, renewed again and again; blushing softly, gazing in my face with

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<sup>10</sup>Richard Von Krafft-Ebing was an Austro-German psychiatrist.

<sup>11</sup>For example, in 1895, Oscar Wilde was sentenced to 2 years of hard labor for « gross indecency » with men.

languid and burning eyes, and breathing so fast that her dress rose and fell with the tumultuous respiration. It was like the ardor of a lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet overpowering; and with gloating eyes she drew me to her, and her hot lips travelled along my cheek in kisses; and she would whisper, almost in sobs, ‘You are mine, you *shall* be mine, you and I are one for ever.’ Then she has thrown herself back in her chair, with her small hands over her eyes, leaving me trembling. (Le Fanu, p.30)

Indeed, we have previously seen that homosexuality is not a ‘productive’ form of sexuality and within this passage, the unproductivity of Carmilla’s sexuality is emphasized since her desire for Laura is expressed as she was experiencing pleasure by herself and provoking arousal in Laura as well. Laura is quite unsettled by Carmilla’s expressions of desire as if the possibility of being courted by a woman was unthinkable. This confusion is made more explicit with Laura’s naive question: “was there here a disguise and a romance? What if a boyish lover had found his way into the house and sought to prosecute his suit in masquerade?” (30) Laura shows here her understanding that Carmilla is indeed courting her but needs to question Carmilla’s gender; if she is courted it *must* be a man then. “Laura’s musing about Carmilla’s gender epitomizes the way that same-sex desire often gets mapped back onto the heterosexual paradigm; it also demonstrates Le Fanu’s uncertainty toward the homoeroticism at the heart of his tale. If there is any sort of masquerade here, it is the vampire as a living human being. The disguise is not one of sex or gender, and the romance is definitely queer.” (Haefele-Thomas, p.105)

If the romance is queer, it is also definitely a dangerous one for Carmilla’s own queerness threatens to reveal Laura’s hidden one. While Carmilla’s queerness is a strength, as a weapon and a defence mechanism, Laura’s strength resides in her ability to ignore her very queerness. Conforming to the cultural norms of gender and sexuality, she does not even acknowledge at first, her own queer desire for Carmilla. The vampire’s seduction will bring Laura’s queerness to the surface, revealing it to the reader and questioning Laura herself as well. When she declares to Carmilla “I don’t know you – I don’t know myself when you look so and talk so.” (30), the extent of Laura’s inner turmoil is evident. She does not understand (or pretend to), her own feelings when confronted to Carmilla’s gestures of affection.

While Laura’s queerness can still be arguable, Carmilla’s is far more evident for her attacks are always on women. Before her arrival in Laura’s life, Carmilla has been draining the life of General Spielsdorf’s niece and she still feeds on peasant girls while seducing Laura. As Nina Auerbach remarks:

Carmilla feeds only on women with a hunger inseparable from erotic sympathy, distinguishing among her prey only on the sterling British basis of class. She preys on peasant girls but falls in love with Laura, a protected lady like herself whose relative in fact she is: Laura’s dead mother was a Karnstein, part of the “bad family” that produced Carmilla. (41)

Laura's seduction by Carmilla takes a very long time while peasant girls are rapidly dying, as if Carmilla uses them only out of (blood)lust, almost as cattle to feed on. She uses her power as a lady from the upper-class on the peasant girls and creates a real bond only with ladies which she can identify with, although she is not a *real* lady herself. Nothing indicates that Carmilla preys on men too. Her "family" is only constituted by women and no cases of attacks on peasant men are reported. Carmilla seems to bond only with women whether it is as predator or victim. When she tells about the night she was "all but assassinated" to Laura, she seems to present her attack as an act of love "a cruel love – strange love, that would have taken my life." (45) We can assume that her aggressor was a woman. "Though she leaves her lover's gender unspecified, the word *strange*, the Swinburnian euphemism for homosexual love, suggests that Carmilla's original maker was female." (Auerbach, p.39) The lady who accompanies Carmilla is presented as her mother, but it is uncertain if she is her biological mother or if she is the vampire who turns her and becoming her parent by doing so.

However, the violence of Carmilla towards those peasants women is also part of her relationship with Laura, although in a lighter way. Whether it is the deadly attacks on the peasant girls or Laura's seduction, Carmilla seems to impose her sexuality on her victims and, therefore, lesbianism is always associated with violence. Pain and disease are the results of the nightly encounters between Carmilla and her victim, no matter how pleasurable those moments can be for both women. "This is female sexuality, not turned toward itself but turning on itself, and the result is not desire for love but cruelty, possession, contagion, and, potentially, death." (Stoddard, p. 32)

Zimmerman explains this negative representation of same-sex desire as the result of male anxiety regarding lesbianism; "depicting the lesbian as 'a vampire-rapist who violates and destroys her victim, men alleviate their fears that lesbian love could create an alternate model' (156) Indeed, Carmilla's lesbianism is highly threatening for the heteronormative society, for she menaces to take Laura away from her future role as wife and mother if the young lady succumbs to her charms. Carmilla, as the Other, represents the fear of the corrupted and the corruptive. Her sexuality and animality makes Carmilla a corrupted being but this corruption is contagious too, through the form of a vampiric reproduction. Hence, the mixing of repulsion and attraction in Laura demonstrates how dangerous Carmilla is. Her manners are unsettling for Laura but Carmilla seems like a proper young lady like her and is therefore attracted to her. Even after Carmilla's death, it is not only the "writhing fiend" that Laura remembers, but the "playful, languid, beautiful girl"(96). Laura's attraction towards Carmilla is undeniable. This is why Carmilla's queerness is so dangerous, she is Other but her appearance is too familiar to be easily disavowed by Laura.

We need to ponder upon Freud's theory of the Uncanny to better understand this complicated perception of the female vampire. According to Freud, the uncanny is formed from the barrier between the *Heimlich* meaning familiar and *unheimlich* meaning something which is concealed or kept out of sight.<sup>12</sup> It

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<sup>12</sup>From Sigmund Freud's essay "Das Unheimliche" (1919)

designates something that seems familiar but also contains a certain sense of strangeness. In the case of Carmilla, it is the monster's resemblance with a proper young woman that unsettles the reader the most. She seems to fit so perfectly her role as the young innocent lady that it puts the observer at unease, for we can not clearly draw the line between what is human and what is monstrous in her. The blurring of those lines, those boundaries which define and therefore restrain, is actually what makes Carmilla not only a Queer but an Other as well.

This crossing of boundaries makes Carmilla an abject creature. Indeed, the notion of Otherness is closely linked to the notion of abjection as theorized by Julia Kristeva in her essay "Powers of Horror". This concept of abjection has been defined as such by Kristeva: it is what does not 'respect borders, positions, rules' and what 'disturbs identity, system, order' (Kristeva, 1982, 4.) According to this definition, Carmilla is a creature utterly abject for this abjection takes many forms in the lesbian female vampire. First and most evidently, the vampire blurs the line between life and death, Carmilla was killed by "a strange love" which turned her into a vampire. She walks unsuspected among the living, in a dead body. Her only needs are a "daily renewed slumber in the grave" and "its horrible lust for living blood supplies the vigour of its waking existence." (Le Fanu, p.94) which explains her late exit of her room "generally not till one o'clock, her almost immediate exhaustion when the girls go for a walk and her food-loathing. Carmilla has been dead for more than a century but she looks alive and her heart beats. When she is found lying in her coffin, she is described as such: The features, though a hundred and fifty years had passed since her funeral, were tinted with the warmth of life. Her eyes were open; no cadaverous smell exhaled from the coffin.[...] there was a faint but appreciable respiration, and a corresponding action of the heart. The limbs were perfectly flexible, the flesh elastic; and the leaden coffin floated with blood, in which to a depth of seven inches, the body lay immersed." (92). It is the coffin full of blood that indicates her vampiric nature but the body in itself would not give her nature away. Being raised from the dead, she is an affront for science but also to God.

As Barbara Creed notes "Within a biblical context, the corpse is also utterly abject. It signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution – the body without a soul. As a form of waste it represents the opposite of the spiritual, the religious symbolic."(10) Carmilla is therefore an abomination to exterminate, this time, for good. Furthermore, Laura often insists on the paradox of Carmilla's physical languidness and her vivid intelligence "this was a bodily languor in which her mind did not sympathise." (Le Fanu, p.32) Carmilla is perceived by the reader as a zombie-like creature; her body is dead and her gestures very slow but her mind is still active enough to make her "live". A state as abominable as it seems, but that Carmilla seems to enjoy "Why you must die – everyone must die; and all are happier when they do." (p32). She dismays Death as a trifle and pretends that the life *after* is happier and that her abjection should be therefore desirable to Laura.

The other boundary that Carmilla transgresses is the one between the human and the animal. She is often presented as a preying predator and an animal imagery is often associated with her when her attacks are described. Laura speaks of “a sooty black-animal that resembled a black cat”(46) and General Spielsdorf of a “black creature” (87). We can presume that Carmilla’s ferocity during the attacks might make her look like an animal or more probably that she has the power of shape-shifting. The vampire also shares a common feature with animal predators, they have fangs to suck the blood of their victim. It is noticed by a mountebank<sup>13</sup> who offers to make Carmilla’s teeth “of a fish”, “round and blunt”. (35) Once again, she is described as animal-like. But Carmilla herself compares Laura and her to animals: “Girls are caterpillars while they live in the world, to be finally butterflies when the summer comes” “so says Monsieur Buffon, in his big book” (37).<sup>14</sup> She is, of course, referring to the state of vampire after death, as if it was a natural evolution from simple human to immortal vampire. She does not see herself as an abnormal being but only a *different* being. When Laura’s father tells to Carmilla and his daughter that another woman has been attacked, he tries to reassure them in saying that “We are in God’s hands; [...]He is our faithful creator; He has made us all, and will take care of us.”. His attempt to comfort them meets with the disagreement of Carmilla who demonstrates her absence of faith in God but defends a faith in Nature: “Creator! *Nature!*[...]All things proceed from Nature – don’t they? All things in the heaven, in the earth, and under the earth, act and live as Nature ordains? I think so.”(36) By defending the idea of a natural system and denying the power of God over their fates, she proves herself to be a pagan and thus, her difference is hinted to the reader by this crack in her disguise.

If in Carmilla’s mind, everything proceeds from Nature, it includes herself. But as a humanoid monster driven by bloodlust, “she is not completely animal or human, because she hovers on the boundary between these two states, she represents abjection.” (Creed, p.21) She acts as a reminder of the human tendency to forget his nature as an animal who is part of the natural world and of the natural instincts which lie within everyone and labelled as animal-instincts. She hides those instincts under an apparent normality which makes her even more disturbing. When the doctor speaks to Laura’s father about the possibility of vampirism as the cause of her daughter’s illness, he answered “What do you say to hippogriffs and dragons?”(37). While emphasizing the supernatural aspect of the vampire by comparing it to other mythological creatures, it is noticeable that this comparison is made with supernatural animals. It demonstrates that in his mind the vampire is more associated with supernatural animality than humanity. By removing the vampire from human society, it reinforces its Otherness, the idea that if it is so abnormal, it has nothing to do with humanity and with ourselves.

By casting people’s hidden (because socially unacceptable) and repressed desires in the vampire, it is a way to “other” what people would not accept in society and in themselves. It draws the line between the

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<sup>13</sup>An itinerant seller.

<sup>14</sup>A reference to Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, an eighteenth-century expert on Natural History.

acceptable, the norm in which one can recognize safely himself, the Same, and what is disturbing, abnormal and therefore must be rejected in order to not disrupt the normal functioning of society.

This dichotomy is represented in *Carmilla* in the group of men, similar to Dracula's "Crew of Light"<sup>15</sup>. Those males represent the heteronormative patriarchal order, associated with God and the Good, the reader could safely identify with them for they represent what the Victorian society valued. On the other hand, *Carmilla* is the Queer non-conforming, associated with Evil and Death, "the individual to be corrected". But *Carmilla* can not be fixed, after all, she is not even alive anymore. Her monstrosity makes her unredeemable and her desires can not be repressed and her fangs smoothed. Her execution is therefore, the only way to eliminate the sexual abnormality she represents and an attempt to "correct" Laura before her transformation is completed. "If the necessary correction is not done, the subject automatically becomes a deviation, an outcast, and hence, a monster." (Foucault, 2003). The absence of details about Laura's death while still young, can be interpreted as a possibility that the "necessary correction" of Laura has not been done with success...

Although, Le Fanu seems to depict the homosexual in a negative light, as an Other and a threat, he has the merit to actually demonstrate its existence. Female homosexuality was not yet recognised and female passionate affection was considered as normal and innocent. Lilian Faderman, in *Surpassing the Love of Men*, notes that because "it was generally inconceivable to society that an otherwise respectable woman could choose to participate in a sexual activity that had at its goal neither procreation nor pleasing a husband, and because "there was seemingly no possibility that women would want to make love together," women were "permitted a latitude of affectionate expression and demonstration" that had decreased by the time of the 20th century (152). However, as we have demonstrated, in *Carmilla*, the relationship between the vampire and Laura can not be easily dismissed as a conventional friendship between women. The real nature of this relationship seems obvious at least to the General Spielsdorf who "explicitly blames *Carmilla*'s "accursed passion" for his ward Bertha's death (7), later noting that the two girls were "taken with [one] another at first sight" and that *Carmilla* herself "seemed quite to have lost her heart to [Bertha]" (60)." (Bell, p.70)

While Le Fanu appears to follow the traditional Gothic schema of the destruction of the monstrous Other and the restoration of patriarchal authority (and heteronormativity as well); the open-ending of the novella put into question the fate of Laura who might have become a vampire. We don't know what happened to *Carmilla*'s mother neither and considering the nature of her relationship with *Carmilla*, it is possible that Bertha has become a vampire too. Therefore, if the power of patriarchy is demonstrated by the elimination of the monster, its incapacity to completely succeed in the destruction of the female vampire community, shows that an alternative model to patriarchal order is possible. The Queer Other would be therefore the purveyor of

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<sup>15</sup>An expression by Christopher Craft, for the group of men who defeated Dracula.

this alternative model and would convey a certain ambiguity. For if she is considered as a threat by male authority, we have seen that this invading Queer is not entirely unwanted by the female characters. Therefore, this Other will be able to create relationships with women and to spread vampirism as a disease among them.

### 3. Female Vampirism as a Contagious Illness

If Carmilla's sexuality is threatening, it is her ability to contaminate other women with her vampiric disease which makes her a really dangerous figure. If vampirism and its spreading can be evidently interpreted as a metaphor for "contagious" homosexuality; the connection between this vampiric disease and the Victorian medical discourse about hysteria seems to be relevant.

Indeed, the way in which Carmilla is described seems inspired by the symptoms characterizing the Victorian hysterical girl. In his book "Fat and Blood" (1877), the American Physician Silas Weir Mitchell described "nervous women" as lacking fat and blood; in other words, they "as a rule are thin, and lack blood". Thus, Mitchell concluded that if they lack blood, they are blood-suckers as well; "A hysterical girl is, as Wendell Holmes has said in his decisive phrase, a vampire who sucks the blood of the healthy people about her; and I may add that pretty surely where there is one hysterical girl there will be soon or late two sick women" (Mitchell, p.35) As Tamar Heller notes in her article "The Vampire in The House", this statement resembles disturbingly the plot of *Carmilla*. Considering Le Fanu's genuine interest in new medical theories, it seems reasonable to believe that discourses about female hysteria might have influenced his work. Carmilla then, would be the hysterical girl who launches her unnatural appetites on another girl, literally sucking her blood and threatens to contaminate her victim and to turn her in another hysterical girl. If the hysterical woman was considered to be acting like a vampire, in Le Fanu's novella, "the vampire can be read as a figure for the hysterical woman." (Heller, p.78) A connection between the figure of the female vampire and hysteria, especially *hysteria libidinosa*, can be made in *Carmilla*.

This connection is quite evident from the beginning, as soon as Carmilla appears. Besides her sexuality – which is linked to hysteria as we will see – in her behaviour and appearance, Carmilla shows the symptoms of a hysterical girl. Her habits seem to be ones of a sick woman; she sleeps very late and does not eat. She is quickly exhausted but goes through moments of great agitation. Her very appearance seems to fit Mitchell's description of a "nervous woman"; slender, languid and often looking exhausted. When Carmilla is introduced to Laura's father by her mother, she insists that Carmilla "was in delicate health, and nervous, but not subject to any kind of seizure – she volunteered that – nor to any illusion; being, in fact, perfectly sane." (22) as she wanted to reassure that her daughter was conforming to the ideal of the weak woman but not to the point of being hysterical. This apparent natural female weakness allows Carmilla to hide her identity effectively from everyone. Her odd habits are therefore dismissed as being part of her condition and aroused no suspicion.

Soon, Laura shows similar "symptoms" and her health starts to wane. "I had grown pale, my eyes were dilated and darkened underneath, and the languor which I had long felt began to display itself in my countenance." (Le Fanu, p.52) Even when the doctor tries to warn Laura's father of what might be going on

under his roof, Laura's father tends to attribute Laura's sudden decline of health to an illness she shares with Carmilla "whose symptoms slightly resemble those of [his] daughter,"(61) The actual contagion can therefore spread and cause irremediable damages as exemplified by the General Spielsdorf's blindness resulting in his niece's death and probable return as a vampire. The intervention of men will be then needed to save Laura from Carmilla's contagious disease which would drain her blood and eventually kill her and make her another hysterical girl. The most important symptom of hysteria that Carmilla shows is nonetheless her lesbianism and the expression of her sexual desires. Heller points that at that time;

Some doctors (Weir Mitchell included) shied away from explicitly linking hysteria and female sexuality and instead ascribed the illness to the peculiar sensitivity of the female nervous system. A series of metonymic associations in Victorian physiological theory, however, linked the female reproductive system not only to nervousness and hysteria but also to women's capacity for sexual arousal, suggesting that nerves were, as Cynthia Eagle Russett says in *Sexual Science*, "apparently synonymous with female sexuality" (Russett 118) Therefore, in Victorian society, hysteria was considered as the result of a "potentially insatiable, sexual desire." (p.78)

An idea already developed by Boissier de Sauvages<sup>16</sup>, in the form of *hysteria libidinosa*, which makes sexual overindulgence the cause of female hysteria. Indeed, Carmilla is "insatiable" in her sexual desires for Laura and in her lust for blood. Those "appetites" would be soon those of Laura as well, if Carmilla was not be stopped before contaminating the young lady. Here lies the real power and threat of Carmilla; her ability to turn other women into vampires is the ability to turn docile young women into ravenous hysterical women who could contaminate others too. Therefore, Carmilla "must be removed from society because of their illness and the ability to infect others both with the vampiric disease and the "disease" of immorality." (Lindsey, p.24) She might be seen as a threat by the male characters, bringing to the surface all the appetites that good young ladies repress consciously or not. Women who would not abide by the rules of society but follow their own desires.

This "immoral" contagion of Laura might be initiated by her childhood's memory which allows Carmilla to create an intimate bond with her. Through their shared memory, Carmilla is able to penetrate Laura's mind and to create a sense of recognition between them. This immediate bond speeds up the spread of Carmilla's infection of Laura and within the sphere of women's intimacy, the vampire is able to nurture certain desires in her victim. This "contamination" of desires takes root in Laura's childhood memory for we have seen how Carmilla acted as a sexual initiator for the young girl, and continues through Laura's ambiguous reactions to Carmilla's advances. This ambiguity echoes a concern in society about sexual desire and awareness.

The dichotomy predator/victim is not so clear for this sexual "contamination" seems not entirely unwelcome on Laura's part. It raises the question of whether they [women] acknowledged their sexuality – for female sexual knowingness considerably complicates the innocence, or sexual ignorance, that defines

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16François Boissier de Sauvages de Lacroix was a French doctor of the XVIIIe century.

“Woman” in domestic ideology. In “Carmilla”, sexual knowledge is an important aspect of the story of hysterical contagion whereby one hysterical girl infects, and creates, another. For, while critics have read Carmilla’s murderous designs on Laura as sexual advances, it is equally important that the would-be victim’s narrative reveals an ambivalent, but still pronounced, awareness of her attraction to the woman who tries to kill her.” (Heller, p.79) Indeed, we have already seen that even though Laura knows that Carmilla would have killed her, she still recalls their passionate encounters ambiguously and ends her story by admitting her longing for her dead friend.

The question of Laura’s acknowledgement of her own desire is therefore central. As a protected and isolated young lady, she might be genuinely unaware of the nature of her desires but as an unreliable narrator, she might be trying to conceal those desires under a veil of innocence and apparent slight repugnance for her friend that she, however, can not explain. The very act of trying to conceal her desires in her story might reveal that she, indeed, acknowledges them. Laura might not be the innocent victim that she would like us to believe, but more probably, as Heller calls her a “knowing accomplice in sexual crime” for her attraction to the female vampire is more and more evident throughout the book. For the male characters,, Carmilla needs to be destroyed, but so does her influence over Laura’s contaminated mind, in order to re-establish male control of her desires. This struggle for control over Laura’s mind is complicated by the strong hold that Carmilla possesses over it.

Even if Laura has no reason to do so, she copies Carmilla’s precautions for her security; “The precautions of nervous people are infectious, and persons of a like temperament are pretty sure, after a time, to imitate them. I had adopted Carmilla’s habit of locking her bed-room door, having taken into my head all her whimsical alarms about midnight invaders and prowling assassins.” (Le Fanu, p.46). Carmilla had succeeded in planting the seed of a feeling of insecurity in Laura’s mind in order to isolate her even more from everyone else and to make herself appear as a non-threatening figure. Interestingly, Laura’s use of the words “nervous” and “infectious”, shows that she is probably aware of the incongruity of those precautions but she is too influenced, too “infected” to not follow them. These habits are seemingly useless and show Laura as someone who creates her own fear. It could be considered as one of the first symptoms of a corrupted Laura who does not act reasonably anymore. Laura is thus becoming a “nervous” woman through her mental and sexual invasion by Carmilla who threatens to turn the conforming girl into a “hysterical” woman/vampire with insatiable desires. “Hence, the thematics of appetite in “Carmilla” [...] encode this fear of the devouring, sexually voracious woman lurking beneath the docile surface of the devoured woman, her apparent victim.

Such anxieties about “uncontrollable female hungers”, as Susan Bordo claims, are particularly marked “during periods when women are becoming independent and are asserting themselves politically and socially” (Heller, p.161) The female vampire can be seen therefore, as a reflection of the “dangerous” feminist demanding rights and independence and who needs to be silenced before she increases her ranks of “infected”

women. In that regard, Carmilla is part of a new artistic trend of the second half of the nineteenth century. In reaction to a rising feminism, artists started to represent more and more evil female figures; vampires, sorceresses, murderesses haunted museums and libraries. Voracious, independent, murderous and worst of all, contagious, Carmilla would be the leading figure of the monstrous feminine who embodies the Victorian anxieties regarding female body and sexuality. It is therefore non-surprising to see such strong connection between the female vampire and the medical discourse on hysteria which was used as a way to control women and their appetites. Carmilla's symptoms of hysteria are even more explicit during the funerals scene. When the funeral procession of one of Carmilla's victim passes in front of Laura and her, she has a form of crisis;

Her face underwent a change that alarmed and even terrified me for a moment. It darkened, and became horribly livid; her teeth and hands were clenched, and she frowned and compressed her lips, while she stared down upon the ground at her feet, and trembled all over with a continued shudder as irrepressible as ague. All her energies seemed strained to suppress a fit, with which she was then breathlessly tugging; and at length a low convulsive cry of suffering broke from her, and gradually the hysteria subsided." (Le Fanu, p.32)

The vampire's reaction to the holy hymns of the funerals resembles highly a fit of a "nervous" woman, which is moreover called "hysteria" by Laura. This extreme reaction is most evidently spontaneous and is a crack "in her performance of normality and a reaction motivated by her transgressive and infected body." (Lindsey, p.31) Carmilla had so far, succeeded to keep the appearance of a proper lady but we see suddenly a glimpse of her monstrous side. Calm and gentle until this moment, this scene shows "the woman as angry, demonic, and animalistically sexual Other, for the "irrepressible" shuddering of *globus hystericus*<sup>17</sup> in this scene suggests both menace and orgasm." (Heller, p.84)

This autoerotic connotation is important to notice, for female masturbation was believed to be another cause of hysteria; "Masturbation was the target of a vehement and well-organized nineteenth-century medical campaign arguing that auto-eroticism caused hysteria in girls and was encouraged by such practices as eating red meat." (83) Moments of evident auto-eroticism of the carnivorous vampire are recurrent in the novella;

My strange and beautiful companion would take my hand and hold it with a fond pressure, renewed again and again; blushing softly, gazing in my face with languid and burning eyes, and breathing so fast that her dress rose and fell with the tumultuous respiration. It was like the ardour of a lover, it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet overpowering; and with gloating eyes she drew me to her, and her hot lips travelled along my cheek in kisses; and she would whisper, almost in sobs, "You are mine, you shall be mine, you and I are one for ever. Then, she has thrown herself back in her chair, with her small hands over her eyes, leaving me trembling. (Le Fanu, p..30)

Once again, in this intense agitation between Carmilla and Laura, the vampire seems to go through waves of pleasure which make this scene highly resembling a moment of autoeroticism. Masturbation, as a

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<sup>17</sup>As a symptom of hysteria. it is the sensation of a lump in the throat.

symptom of hysteria, was believed to be contagious as well and is depicted as such in the novella. Their first encounter in Laura's childhood could evidently be interpreted as Laura's discovery of her own sexuality and as Heller remarks, "Carmilla's night time excursions to drink her friend's blood – her way of eating flesh, or red meat – cause Laura to display classic symptoms of the masturbator according to nineteenth-century medicine: she is pale and her eyes are "dilated and darkened underneath"(52)" (83) It is suggested that the hysterical vampire's masturbating habits would be now shared with the innocent girl.

Then again, the female sexuality is demonized, for those "excursions" are what brings Laura to her death. In the medical discourse of hysteria, Female masturbation was both a symptom and a cause of hysteria, and was believed to lead to another "deviant" sexuality; lesbianism. Sally Shuttleworth in "Demonic Mothers" notices that onanism was described as a "vampire feeding on the lifeblood of its victims" and a "vicious" habit considered as a "lesbian pleasure". In *Carmilla*, female sexuality is again, tightly intertwined with the idea of a hysterical contagion. While seducing Laura, Carmilla is also preying on peasant women – and women only – for sustenance. This "wave" of lesbianism is talked about as a disease spreading among the neighbourhood. People, according to Laura's father, "infect one another" (36) as the lesbian vampire infect other women with her sexuality. Thus, Carmilla can be seen as the epitome of female sexual contagion. With her ability of contamination, she can not only turn her victims in bloodthirsty vampire but also into hysterical lesbians with insatiable desires. Here lies the most frightening power of the voracious independent woman; the ability to contaminate and led astray the good Victorian mothers and daughters.

## **II. The Shift of Power Away from Male Characters**

# 1. Vampire Matriarchy and Male Exclusion

Le Fanu is not only the first to present a female vampire community in literature but he also creates a functional vampire matriarchy that confronts a weakened patriarchy. This representation of a matriarchy of monsters could be seen as an echo of a possible Victorian apprehension concerning a feared fall of patriarchy caused by the feminist movement. However, Le Fanu's representation of a powerful matriarchy is not merely a demonization of it but rather an ambivalent depiction of an alternative to a powerless patriarchy. By depicting a dangerous yet functional and powerful matriarchy confronting a patriarchy composed of blind and inefficient men, the author shows a confrontation which questions the relation between both genders and power. He does not depict this confrontation in a manichean way for if women are dangerous creatures in *Carmilla*, their male opponents are characterized by their blindness and inefficiency. Not only men are depicted in the story as blind to the dangers which threaten their daughters under their own roof, they "increasingly become relegated to powerless positions while women assume aggressive roles." (Signorotti, p.611) The two most important figures of patriarchal authority, Laura's father and General Spielsdorf, are shown as ignorant and therefore passive spectators of what is happening in their own household. Their recovery of power will eventually be too late as the novella ends with a bittersweet conclusion for them.

The female vampire who threatens the virtue and life of their daughters is also a threat to the whole functioning of their patriarchal order. By "seduc[ing] the daughters of patriarchy away from their proper gender roles" (Creed, p.61), she takes away from men the power of using women as valuable goods to exchange in order to create social bonds between them. Once among the ranks of the vampire family, those women are no longer daughters and wives, but independent women who can not be exchanged anymore. This exchange of women between the isolated male protagonists of the novella would have been a way to connect them and to perpetuate the patriarchal control over women. In *Carmilla*, women are "exchanged" only within a matriarchal order, making the men powerless side-characters. Blind to the retrieval of this power over women's exchange, this confiscated power will make them eventually even more powerless.

"In truth I know not why I am so sad:

It wearies me; you say it wearies you;

But how I got it – came by it.

I forget the rest. But I feel as if some great misfortune were hanging over us." (Le Fanu, p.14)

Quoting imperfectly *The Merchant of Venice*<sup>18</sup> Laura's father shares with his daughter his feeling of unease after receiving a letter of General Spielsdorf announcing the death of his niece. He is unaware yet, that the "great misfortune" he is speaking of, will appear in the form of a black carriage whose passenger will gradually remove his daughter away from his authority. After those words, Carmilla's carriage immediately appears and crashes in front of the *shloss*. A woman "with a commanding air and figure" (15) gets out of the returned carriage and we come to think that she is probably Carmilla's mother. Whether she is Carmilla's real mother or not is unclear, but she definitely acts like she was and refers to Carmilla as her daughter. Laura describes her as an impressive woman; "There was something in the lady's air and appearance so distinguished, and even imposing, and in her manner so engaging, as to impress one, quite apart from the dignity of her equipage, with a conviction that she was a person of consequence." (17) Declaring to be "on a journey of life and death" (16), she easily manipulates Laura's father. By appealing to his "kindness and chivalry", she successfully forces Carmilla into his care while pretending to be reluctant to do so. Later, when General Spielsdorf tells Laura's father how he has encountered Carmilla/Mircalla and her mother, the reader discovers that she has used a similar stratagem to entrust Carmilla to the General. We understand that The "Mother" is therefore the provider of victims/lovers for Carmilla. She represents the "bad" mother for she does not train her daughter to be an obedient woman, she seems to let her act on her own will, and even worse, is her accomplice in crime. Once she has successfully gained the access to Carmilla's victim for her, she leaves her daughter. She forces her daughter on men, taking the male power of asserting the partners of her daughter. We do not have much information about her – Le Fanu does not even give her a name – but her commanding stature and the probability that she is really Carmilla's mother puts her in the position of a Matriarch. By providing Carmilla victims/lovers, she secures the enlargement and strength of her functional community of women.

Indeed, there is no indication that there are men among Carmilla's female community. In addition of her mother, Carmilla's carriage has another passenger, a black woman whose animalistic description may indicate her vampiric nature; "a hideous black woman, with a sort of coloured turban on her head, who was gazing all the time from the carriage window, nodding and grinning derisively towards the ladies, with gleaming eyes and large white eye-balls, and her teeth set as if in fury." (21) The male servants with "lean, and dark, and sullen" faces are of no real importance and seem to be real servants and no part of the "family". This idea is supported by the evident fact that Carmilla feeds only on women and creates relationships only with them and therefore, has no reason to turn men into vampires and members of her family. She could have chosen to attack Laura's father or the General but she seems to have no interest on men whatsoever. Her veneration of Mother Nature is another indication of her disinterest for men as Signorotti underlines: "Carmilla disdainfully replies, "Creator! *Nature!*... All things in heaven, and under the earth, act and live as *Nature* ordains." Carmilla's inability to accept God as omnipotent extends from her general refusal to include males in her

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<sup>18</sup>By William Shakespeare. 1596-1597.

exclusively female kinship system. Instead, she worships the embodiment of the feminine, Mother Nature, and implies the naturalness of her and Laura's female union."(616) Carmilla emphasises female power by referring to Mother Nature, as if Nature was some kind of Matriarch as well.

Carmilla's choice of victims reinforces the idea of an expanding vampire matriarchy for they are all members of the Karnstein family. Both Bertha and Laura are Karnsteins from their mother's side. As Torres notes: "Laura, Carmilla and the General's niece are related by blood, the three of them descending from Countess Mircalla<sup>19</sup> Karnstein through the maternal line. Countess Mircalla appears to be the original mother of an exclusively female vampire line intent on establishing a vampire matriarchy where men would be dispensable." (19) Carmilla's choice of victims may be motivated by the will to continue this female vampire line within her own family. Carmilla's seduction of Bertha having ended in her death, it is highly probable that she has been successful in making her a vampire. For Laura, it is not explicit, but her premature death could point in that direction too. Laura died at a very young age, and the most common death of young women at the time being in childbirth, it cannot apply to the unmarried Laura. Therefore, Laura and Bertha might have become vampires who still roam the Styrian country, perpetuating Carmilla's lineage. Carmilla would therefore be trying to take out her female lineage from men's control and to share with them her power by gathering them in her own matriarchy.

Carmilla appears to take Laura away from her father's control. Indeed, the special bond created between Carmilla and Laura is especially problematic for men, for it makes Laura unavailable for male courting. Therefore, she is no longer an object to exchange between her father and her possible husband. Male are excluded from the exchange and it is a woman, Carmilla's mother, who imposes her daughter in men's homes without them even understanding that the exchange of women has been made without their active participation. This is highly problematic for the male characters in *Carmilla* who are already isolated and have no other means to create bonds than through marriages. Laura's father was "in the Austrian service, and retired upon a pension and his patrimony, and purchased this feudal residence, and the small estate on which it stands" (4) His military career and wealth give him a certain prestige, but he has no one to bequeath his possessions to. He has only one daughter, and the death of his wife renders the making of an heir impossible; the only possibility to secure his legacy is to marry his daughter. The possibility that he intends to marry Laura to the General Spielsdorf is arguable. Living in "a very lonely place"(5), those men are extremely isolated and the opportunities of finding suitable suitors for their daughters must be rare. Signorotti argues then that marrying Laura to the General would be a great means for her father to create a bond with another man and save his estate. When the General comes back from his trip, Laura's father says to his daughter: "I wish our good friend, the General, had chosen any other time; that is, I wish you had been perfectly well to receive him." (63). Implying that Laura would have more chances to catch the General's attention if she was as beautiful as she

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<sup>19</sup>Mircalla is Carmilla who changes names but can only use anagrams.

usually is. Later, Laura's father asks "gaily" the General about the Karnstein's domain "I hope you are thinking of claiming the title and estates?" (66) It shows his concern about the position of the General but it might also carry another implication; since Laura is a Karnstein by the maternal side, her marriage with the General would strengthen his claiming of the title. This marriage could be wanted by the General as well, for he is childless, isolated and with the death of his niece, he has no heir. Therefore, by attacking the General's niece and Laura, Carmilla takes away men's means of connection and their ability to secure their heritage.

Signorotti explains that "For Levi-Strauss, marriage most significantly reveals men's complete control of women. He argues that traditionally "the total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, where each owes and receives something, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners between whom the exchange takes place." (115) As an essential and valuable "sign" to be possessed and exchanged, woman's sole purpose is to provide the passive link between men." (607-8) The relationship between Carmilla and Laura makes the latter unavailable for this exchange and threatens to remove her entirely from men's control. The patriarchy that Carmilla infiltrates is therefore even more weakened for its men are helplessly isolated since they have lost their means to connect. This weakness is made evident by the need for men to be a group in order to kill a unique female vampire. Men will have to gather into a "crew of light", to succeed in exterminating Carmilla and the threat of a powerful matriarchy. Men need to create a community for they are seemingly powerless all alone. General Spielsdorf was incapable of saving his niece and so is Laura's father whose blindness renders him ineffective. In contrast, although part of an effective matriarchy, Carmilla is also individually capable. Carmilla's cleverness and strength allow her to be competent by herself. Meanwhile, it takes several men to take out one single female vampire.

This incapacity to marry Laura leads to another problem for the men; the impossibility of the perpetuation of their family. Without daughters and wives, there is no possibility of producing an heir who would continue their lineage. Patriarchy is again weakened, for it has no future. On the other hand, the vampire matriarchy is able to reproduce without men. Presumably, each member of the family is able to turn another woman into vampire, and by doing so, expanding their family and their power. There is no need of a male participation in the system of vampire reproduction, making the matriarchy viable and self-sufficient. It shows again, the individual power of the women of the matriarchy, not only they don't need men at all, but they don't need another person to give birth to another vampire. While this matriarchy is able to expand itself through vampiric reproduction, the weakened patriarchy surrounding Laura cannot do the same.

If the power over the "exchange" of women and reproduction is taken over easily by the women in the novella, through the limiting of access to information. In the very beginning, Carmilla's mother warns Laura's father about her daughter; "I shall return for my child in three months; in the meantime, she will be silent as to who we are, whence we come, and whither we are travelling." (Le Fanu, p.22) She makes clear that no

information about herself, her daughter and their whereabouts will be divulged. It puts Laura's father in an inferior position; while Carmilla intrudes on his family and intimacy, he will remain ignorant of her identity. The warning given to Laura's father allows Carmilla to protect her identity without raising suspicion, and to prevent any questions which could have put her plans in danger. Carmilla's mother acted in the same way successfully with the General, during the masquerade. She seems to know a lot about him (or succeeds in making him believe so) while he had absolutely no clue about her identity.

Availing herself of the privilege of her mask, she turned to me, and in the tone of an old friend, and calling me by my name, opened a conversation with me, which piqued my curiosity a good deal. She referred to many scenes where she had met me – at Court, and at distinguished houses. She alluded to little incidents which I had long ceased to think of, but which, I found, had only lain in abeyance in my memory, for they instantly started into life at her touch. (70)

Laura's father does not know, and does not express an eager want of knowing neither. He does not seem really curious about Carmilla's secrets but her secrecy excites even more Laura's interest for her.

What harm could it do anyone to tell me what I ardently desired to know? Had she no trust in my good sense or honour? Why would she not believe me when I assured her, so solemnly, that I would not divulge one syllable of what she told me to any mortal breathing. There was a coldness, it seemed to me, beyond her years, in her smiling melancholy persistent refusal to afford me the least ray of light. (28)

Although, Carmilla remains secretive for a while, she reassures Laura in telling her that she will share her knowledge with her one day. "The time is very near when you shall know everything." (44) However, Laura already knows far more about Carmilla than her father. She is the witness of the strange behaviour and habits of the vampire but doesn't share her suspicions with her father and doesn't even trust him when she is ill. "My father asked me often whether I was ill; but, with an obstinacy which now seems to me unaccountable, I persisted in assuring him that I was quite well." (52) This distance with her father, the "kindest man on earth" (5) in her own words, shows the place that Carmilla takes in Laura's life. As Signorotti remarks; "Carmilla supplants Laura's father in his position as guide, companion and confidant." (613)

The situation is aggravated by the refusal of Laura's father to share his knowledge with his daughter. When the doctor discusses Laura's health with her father, they do it while being sure to not be heard. "Not a word could we hear, however, for they spoke in a very low tone, and the deep recess of the window quite concealed the doctor from view, and very nearly my father, whose foot, arm, and shoulder only could we see; and the voices were, I suppose, all the less audible for the sort of closet which the thick wall and window formed." (Le Fanu, p.60) Laura's attempt to obtain any details about her own condition is confronted with a harsh response from her father; "Nothing; you must not plague me with questions," he answered, with more irritation than I ever remember him to have displayed before; and seeing that I looked wounded, I suppose, he kissed me, and added, "You shall know all about it in a day or two; that is, all that *I* know. In the meantime you

are not to trouble your head about it.” (63) The following deterioration of Laura’s health would have been prevented if an exchange of knowledge had been initiated by Laura’s father.

When the men acquire at last enough knowledge to discover Carmilla’s true identity, it is in all probability too late to save Laura. After Carmilla’s death, Laura seems still under her fascination and her father tries to make her recover with a trip. “The year-long tour represents his attempt to reinstate Laura in the male chain of exchange, to reinscribe her into the world of her father and cure her of the lesbian desire she still maintains.” (Signorotti, p.618) This is an unsuccessful attempt, for Laura dies young, unmarried and childless; and possibly has risen again from the grave to join the vampire matriarchy. Since the reader does not know the fate of Carmilla’s mother and Bertha’s, the vampire matriarchy probably does not disappear with Carmilla and can still expand without men knowing it. Even if Laura does not actually become a vampire after her death, however, she stays lost to “the world of her father”.

## 2. Carmilla's Usurpation of Male Powers

Conforming in appearance to the feminine ideal of the weak and passive Victorian woman, the female antagonist of *Carmilla* hides her desires, strength and power from men, for it would reveal her monstrosity. Those qualities that she possesses because of her monstrous nature, would also make her “masculine” in a patriarchal society. Carmilla seems to manipulate the gender conventions to navigate unsuspected in society and fulfill her desires successfully. Carmilla seems to fully conform to the Victorian ideal of femininity at the beginning of the novella. She is beautiful, gentle and possesses a certain weakness and languor particularly suited for a lady. But those features are used as a veil to hide her true identity and goals. By hiding her predatory nature and presenting only her “suitable” traits to the male characters, she fools them by seemingly being what she is expected to be. This false entire conformity to a certain idea of femininity is what gives her the key to her victims' household and intimacy and then, the ability to feed under the guise of an inoffensive girl. However, those “feminine” traits are balanced with traits that were considered as masculine at the time; strength, agency, power over others (even men) and the expression of sexual desire. There is a duality within Carmilla of which she seems aware when she declares to Laura: “think me not cruel because I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness;” (Le Fanu, p.29) In her thesis, Emily Mai notes that “Carmilla herself seems to recognize that although her body may be female, her essential nature (that of a vampire) is neither male nor female, but a combination of the two, or perhaps more appropriately, a full spectrum of both.” (5) As a vampire, she is no longer concerned about gender limitations which are not relevant for this creature. Nevertheless, in order to penetrate the human society unsuspected, she has to behave as expected from a woman and to hide her “masculine” traits.

Carmilla reveals, however, to her friend Laura much more about herself than to the other characters. Paradoxically, Laura is the one who is kept ignorant of the events by her entourage but in the same time, she is the one who sees the most of Carmilla's personality. Within their intimacy Carmilla's desires are expressed through her words and gestures towards Laura. But if those desires were discovered by their male entourage, it would make Carmilla masculine. Irigaray indicates that in patriarchal societies, “as soon as she [woman] desires (herself), as soon as she speaks (expresses herself, to herself), a woman is a man. As soon as she has any relationship with another woman, she is homosexual, and therefore masculine” (194). Interestingly enough, Laura herself suspects Carmilla to be a boy in disguise because of the desire she expresses for her. The existence and expression of desires were considered as male prerogatives, but Carmilla does not suppress or even restrain her desires as Laura would in order to fit the role that society would enforce on her. Quite the opposite, Carmilla is nothing but desires; desire for blood, for love and for sex. Although pretending to be a

compliant woman and hiding those desires from men, she acts nonetheless on her own will; “as far as Laura perceives, [Carmilla] sleeps, prowls, and falls in love on her own authority” (Michelis, p.39) Indeed, Carmilla chooses her lovers/victims herself and they are always women. Then again, her sexuality makes her masculine according to Irigaray<sup>20</sup>; as a homosexual, she would be considered as masculine but she possesses also the male privilege of choosing her lovers/victims.

The idea that Carmilla is a lesbian reinforces the idea of gender fluidity while in life she might have been constrained to the male sex for reproductive purposes, as a vampire she faces no such restrictions. Instead, she is able to exercise masculine agency in her choice of victim and in the pursuit of that victim, for while women were certainly able to refuse a suitors hand in the Victorian era, they were still expected to be the pursued, not the pursuer.” (Mai, p.13)

No authority chooses Carmilla’s partners for her and she actively pursues the object of her desires; courting Laura as a young suitor would. While Laura seems to fulfill the traditional role of the passive victim/pursued, Carmilla, like a male lover, woos her. She invites herself in her victims’ bedroom at night for intimate encounters, when she caresses her victim’s body and sucks her blood from the breast. As a vampire, Carmilla has powers of decision and action over her “life” that she would not have as a living woman. Her victim/partner would have been chosen for her, not the other way.

This apparent courtship by a woman confuses Laura who wonders: “What if a boyish lover had found his way into the house, and sought to prosecute his suit in masquerade, with the assistance of a clever old adventuress” (Le Fanu,p.30) Obviously, it is unthinkable for Laura that a woman could be her pursuer. “[Laura] is accustomed to straightforward manifestations of gender in her sheltered life: an authoritative father, a dead mother, and female servants have served to produce in Laura the accepted forms of gender and sexuality.” (Mai, p.8) However, Laura has to admit that her pursuer is indeed a woman for “her ways were girlish; and there was a languor about her, quite incompatible with a masculine system in a state of health.” (30) But the fact that Laura wonders about Carmilla’s gender demonstrates that she might have been more at ease if the vampire was indeed a man in disguise. Carmilla being a woman confronts Laura with her own response to Carmilla’s courtship. If she were male, then her courtship would be appropriate and Laura’s own attraction to her suitor, acceptable.

Laura’s interrogation about Carmilla’s gender could also be influenced by the very appearance of the vampire woman. Although, Carmilla has indisputably a female aspect, Laura describes her as being “above the middle height of women”, possessing a “low voice” and dark eyes and hair. Her physical description further evokes the image of a dark Gothic villain. A role that is usually male, for it is associated with violence. A violence symbolized by another physical particularity, her teeth. While evoking the violence inherent of

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<sup>20</sup> Irigaray, Luce. “Commodities among Themselves.” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed, Blackwell, 2004.

vampirism, her fangs are evidently a strong phallic-symbol. Usurping the role of the male seducer, she uses her fangs to penetrate Laura's body at night; "suddenly I felt a stinging pain as if two large needles darted, an inch or two apart, deep into my breast." (46) Emily Schuck notes that if the vampire bites her victim on the breast and not on the throat, it "demonstrat[es] the power of Carmilla to penetrate a feminine symbol, the breast." (4) Thus, she endorses the role of the male sexual aggressor over the helpless young girl. The importance of her fangs, her symbolic phallus is highlighted by Carmilla's anger when the mountebank offers to smooth her teeth. He threatens to castrate her symbolically and to make her simultaneously harmless and feminine. She would be literally unable to feed but also symbolically dis-empowered by the removal of her masculine persona.

However, this symbolic castration takes place at the hand of men who execute Carmilla at the end of the story. Her death is an act of castration, through her decapitation, and of forced penetration, through the thrusting of a "sharp stake" through her heart. She is forced back into an inferior position; no longer the penetrator but the feminized-penetrated. "The body, therefore, in accordance with the ancient practice, was raised, and a sharp stake driven through the heart of the vampire, who uttered a piercing shriek at the moment, in all respects such as might escape from a living person in the last agony. Then, the head was struck off, and a torrent of blood flowed from the severed neck." (92) The execution of Carmilla is extremely graphic and committed with a great violence which reflects the men's need to re-establish their dominance over the woman who threatens to take their power. At first, it seems like the re-establishment of the patriarchal dominance has succeeded. But as Carol A. Senf remarks, "although the men in the story use physical force, a skill traditionally associated with men, this skill is ultimately revealed as ineffectual" (55), for the vampire's influence over Laura remains strong even after her death. The prologue had also revealed that when the events had been reported to Dr Hesselius, Laura was already dead, which might imply that she is now a vampire too and that Carmilla has eventually succeeded. Violence is here, associated with masculinity but it is also something inherent in the vampire. Since its mean of sustenance is through the aggression of its victim, violence stains its relationship with its victim/lover. Carmilla is a predator who isolates her prey, haunts her dreams and sucks the life out of her. She even appears as a "real" predator in the form of a "monstrous cat" (46) This masculine predation is nonetheless attenuated by the filter of a love/erotic language used to describe her attacks by Laura. The latter remembers caresses, "warm lips" kissing her, of "soothing" hands; words which evoke tenderness. This contrast is striking when Carmilla demonstrates the boldness of a lover towards Laura, actively trying to seduce her but in the same time, acts as a shy girl when she sobs and blushes during their "foolish embraces" (29). Half violent, half tender, Carmilla has both male aggressiveness and female endearment.

Considering the recurring theme of disguise in the novella, the motif of the masquerade is one of great importance. Bertha's meeting with the female vampire occurs during a masquerade and is the starting point of General Spielsdorf's misery in his own words: "The night from which my sorrow dates was devoted to a

magnificent masquerade” (69) Bertha, the General’s niece and previous victim of Carmilla, did not wear a mask; making herself the object of Carmilla’s gaze. A gaze that could not be reciprocated for Carmilla was masked. It made the General unable to detect her intentions; “Had the young lady not worn a mask, I could, of course, have been much more certain upon the question whether she was really watching my poor darling.”(p.69) Carmilla’s mother also used a mask to conceal her identity and to distract the General from Carmilla’s attention for his niece. Seducing her victim during a masquerade allows the vampire to literally hide her identity and her usurpation of male traits works as the continuation of this hiding. But it underlines also an inversion of the male gaze, for the masquerade allows Carmilla to see without being seen. She uses this male privilege multiple times with Laura who catches the vampire looking at her repeatedly; “she sighed, and her fine dark eyes gazed passionately on me.”(25), and “her fine eyes under their long lashes gazing on me in contemplation,” (p.39) Carmilla successfully hides her identity, revealing only what she wants to Laura’s inquisitive eyes while she openly watches the girl and violates her intimacy. This unbalanced relation is illustrated when after having gazed “in [Laura’s] face with languid and burning eyes”, Carmilla placed “her small hands over her eyes, leaving [Laura] trembling.”(30) Laura is left unsettled and vulnerable while Carmilla hides her eyes from the girl as if preventing any attempt from Laura to find explanations in her friend’s look. Carmilla can dare to look at the girl as a man would but there is no possible reciprocity. However, if Carmilla seems to endorse a male role with Laura which would then, only be the object of desire as illustrated with the extract above, it seems that Laura’s role as a supposed passive victim is far more complicated.

### 3. Laura as a Willing Victim

We have already seen that there is a duality in our so-called villain Carmilla, which I believe can be found in Laura as well. She would have a more ambiguous position than it seems and could even be seen as a willing victim if not an accomplice in crime for Carmilla. After a short prologue indicating that the following Narrative is part of the supernatural cases collected by the fictitious Dr Hesselius; the story *Carmilla* is narrated by its main protagonist, Laura. This young woman, aged 19 at the time of the events, seems to embody the archetype of the innocent Gothic Heroine. Living in an isolated castle under the sole authority of her old father, she would be the perfect victim of a Gothic villain's malevolent design. Portrayed as naive and ignorant, Laura tells a story of hidden dangers and incomprehensible desires in which she would be the powerless victim of a seductive "writhing fiend"(Le Fanu, p.96). But is she really that naive and powerless, though? While many critics have seen our narrator as a young girl who does not understand her own desires and whose ignorance would make her recall moments of passion with an innocent clarity, I will argue that Laura's apparent role as a mere blameless victim can be disputed. While seemingly conforming to the role of the Gothic heroine, passive and innocent, Laura would write about her desires as incomprehensible for her and insist on her ignorance in order to cast a veil on her real motives and feelings. To support this idea, I will ponder upon the ambiguity of Laura's response to Carmilla's seduction and the preponderant importance of the exchange and retaining of knowledge in her relations with her entourage. Laura's infatuation for Carmilla would then exist, not because Laura is ignorant of her friend's true nature but *despite it*. Therefore, she would not be only a mere victim, but also an intelligent woman who carefully crafts her recollection of events in such a manner that she would appear blameless.

*Carmilla* starts as a rather classic Gothic tale. A young and innocent heroine looks back on the frightful events which occurred in her youth. This narrator, Laura, seems to perfectly fit the role of the Gothic heroine at first. She is presented as an obedient and gentle young girl, living a rather solitary life in a secluded place. She lives under the sole authority of her father, as "a rather spoiled girl, whose only parent allowed her pretty nearly her own way in everything." (6) and has very few acquaintances; "two or three young lady friends besides, pretty nearly of [Laura's] own age, who were occasional visitors, for longer or shorter terms; and these visits [Laura] sometimes returned." As an only child and isolated lady, she is an ideal victim for the malicious villain who ought to appear at the door of the castle. But when a stranger appears, it is in the form of another pretty girl in danger. Thus, Laura does not show the expected reserve of an obedient daughter and actively tries

to influence her father's decision of taking the stranger girl, Carmilla, into his home and care. Laura has just been "profoundly disappointed" by the death of her would-be new friend Bertha and Laura urges her father to provide her a companion by asking Carmilla's mother to leave her daughter with them. "Oh! Papa, pray ask her to let her stay with us – it would be so delightful. Do, pray." (16) Although, Laura's father would have probably acted in the same way without the intervention of his daughter – since she describes him as the best person she knows – it shows Laura's awareness that she can influence, even manipulate her father in order to obtain what she wants. Then, when Carmilla's mother talks to her father "with a fixed and stern countenance, not all like that with which she had hitherto spoken" (17), she is "filled with wonder that [her] father did not seem to perceive the change, and also unspeakably curious to learn what it could be that she was speaking, [...]". (17) It also shows that Laura is actually a perceptive and curious young person.

Her curiosity for Carmilla will be encouraged by a sense of recognition between the two girls. When she approaches Carmilla for the first time, she is met by "a strange fixed smile of recognition." Each girl recognizes in the other the frightening stranger of their shared childhood memory. In their recollection of this event, both put themselves in the role of the scared child which creates a sense of likeness between them. Although Carmilla's explanation of the event is evidently a stratagem to ease Laura's apprehension, this mutual recognition helps the vampire to enter Laura's intimacy for she is already in Laura's mind since childhood. "I saw the very face which had visited me in my childhood at night, which remained so fixed in my memory, and on which I had for so many years so often ruminated with horror, when no one suspected what I was thinking." (23) Laura seems to have been thinking a lot about Carmilla those last years and had concealed it from her entourage, which demonstrates an existing tendency to keep her thoughts about herself even before her reunion with Carmilla. When Laura meets Carmilla and is shocked to face the woman of her memory, Carmilla mirrors Laura's reaction by exclaiming "How wonderful! Twelve years ago, I saw your face in a dream, and it has haunted me ever since." (23) This other young girl reflecting Laura's reaction about their shared memory works as an inversed mirror-reflection of Laura. Even in their appearances and personalities, they are similar and opposite in the same time; while Laura is "a beautiful young lady, with golden hair and large blue eyes" (24), Carmilla is dark of hair and eyes, as a negative photo of Laura's beauty. While Laura is shy and reserved, Carmilla is confident and passionate. This opposition influences our perception of the two characters; we are invited to see Laura and Carmilla as representing two opposite roles while being two young ladies alike. Therefore, when Carmilla is discovered to be the villain of the story, Laura must then represent the opposite the innocent victim. But we have seen that this dichotomy is complicated in Le Fanu's novella, for the antagonist is not depicted as a unidimensional monster. Therefore, we need to reconsider Laura as a more ambivalent character than she seems to be. Echoing Carmilla's own change from an innocent girl to a night creature after her seduction by a vampire, Laura evolves and blurs the frontier between the naive victim and the knowing accomplice.

Laura falls quickly under the charm of her new friend who assiduously offers her declarations of love and tender gestures. However, if Carmilla is Laura's pursuer, the roles are exchanged when Carmilla disappears from her bedroom one night. Although, it is probably a premeditated manoeuvre on Carmilla's side to initiate a change in Laura, this search put Laura in the role of the hunter, the pursuer of Carmilla. Laura actively searches her friend everywhere and Carmilla becomes the "hunted". On this occasion, Laura shows a glimpse of her feelings for Carmilla; "I, too, was almost beside myself, though my grief was quite of a different kind." (56) and when she finds Carmilla at last the next morning, Laura becomes the daring one, inverting the usual roles of their courtship. "I ran to her in ecstasy of joy; I kissed and embraced her again and again." (57) Until this moment, Carmilla always initiated the gestures of affection which would put Laura at unease. However, she had previously touched Carmilla the same way when they met, something Laura dismisses as a mere manifestation of enthusiasm; "I took her hand as I spoke. I was a little shy, as lonely people are, but the situation made me eloquent, and even bold." (23) She states that she was shy which makes understand that her reaction is supposedly unusual and she is not really herself. Laura seems therefore to gradually allow herself to show affection to Carmilla despite the secrecy surrounding her.

However, Laura has also a strong desire for knowledge which is a key-element of her evolution. Laura seems always being seeking the truth, especially from Carmilla. Her affection for Carmilla makes her highly curious about her secrets and she relentlessly tries to extricate information from her friend; "But curiosity is a restless and unscrupulous passion, and no one girl can endure, with patience, that her's should be baffled by another. What harm could it do to anyone to tell me what I so ardently desired to know?" She seems almost exasperated by Carmilla's silence and tries to justify her attitude when she talks to the reader of her narrative; "You are not to suppose that I worried her incessantly on these subjects. I watched opportunity, and rather insinuated than urged my inquiries. Once or twice, I did attack her more directly. But no matter what my tactics, utter failure was invariably the result."(28) Laura uses particular words to describe her ways with Carmilla; "opportunities", "attack", "tactics"... her inquiries seem to have been carried by a reflexive strategist rather than by a naive young girl. When she recollects those moments, she seems aware that her behavior could seem improper; "It was, of course, very unfair of me to press her, very ill-bred, but I really could not help it; and I might just as well have let it alone."(28) Nevertheless, she succeeds in obtaining some information about Carmilla:

"First. – Her name was Carmilla.

Second. – Her family was very ancient and noble.

Third. – Her home lay in the direction of the west." (28) Laura dismisses this information as "vague disclosures" but this information could have been crucial in the identification of the monster and it seems strange that someone as clever as Laura would not make the link between General Spielsdorf's account of the events leading to the death of his niece and Laura's own situation. Moreover, she does not share her knowledge

with anyone while she continuously seeks answers, from Carmilla, but also from her father. When the doctor leaves Laura after her examination, his father does not seem eager to share information with her about her own health. However, Laura insists and therefore expresses the desire to not be preserved from the truth and be put aside. "But do tell me, papa," I insisted, "*what* does he think is the matter with me?" This search for answers seems only natural, but while she asks questions, Laura does not share any information with her father even when she thinks that Carmilla is acting oddly. Every time she is confronted with a male interlocutor, whether it is a doctor, a priest or her own father, Laura seems reluctant to share her thoughts or information with him. "Alienation from male authority figures becomes a central, if secreted, feature of a life filled with such males. Doctors and priests are mentioned at least sixty-two times in the sixty-five-page story and are joined by Laura's father and General Spielsdorf, Baron Vordenburg, the woodsman, the pedlar, and others. From the doctor who delays Laura's visit to the crash victim, on to the final cadre that kills the vampire, males are arrayed uniformly against Carmilla." If Laura's initial distrust in men might be unconscious, the fact that she continues to remain silent even if she seems to know more about Carmilla than the others, might indicate that she has consciously taken a side.

Indeed, Laura, being so intimate with Carmilla, is the witness of her strange habits and behavior and it could seem dubious that she does not have any suspicions about her friend until the very end. While no one else seems to express reserves about Carmilla, Laura feels a certain disgust for Carmilla that she can not explain however. "Although Laura is sheltered, she has a sharp reaction to the aspects of Carmilla that make her feel uncomfortable; Laura senses the abject within Carmilla, but she is unable to explain the reason for this inner reaction." (Lindsey, p.29) Even before being intimate with Carmilla, Laura perceives that something might be wrong with her friend despite her lovely look but this discernment is unexpected from someone who is supposedly incredibly naive or blind. Some critics argue that it is her strong feelings for Carmilla and genuine naivety which keep her from seeing the truth about her friend. But this naivety is pushed so far that it might put into question. After Carmilla would declare her love for Laura in unequivocal terms, Laura would ask "Are we related? (30) Such naivety would confer to foolishness in this occasion, unless this naivety is consciously feigned and this would cast a different light on Laura's narration.

The prologue introduces Laura as "a person so clever and careful" but as Veeder states; "Since the editor has no more firsthand knowledge of Laura than we do, his pronouncement functions less as an imprimatur than a challenge, reminding us of the equivocalities of any first-person narrative. Laura herself makes the same point soon. "I have said that this is a very lonely place. Judge whether I say truth" (275)." (200) Laura is quite insisting on the reader's need to believe what she says "I am now going to tell you something so strange that it will require all your faith in my veracity to believe my story. It is not only true, nevertheless, but truth of which I have been an eye-witness." (10) She insists on the veracity of her words which opposes the introduction which tends to make the reader doubt the reliance of the narrator and the way she presents herself.

Veeder says “At issue is not veracity but recognition. Laura is an unreliable narrator, not because she consciously fabricates, but because she unconsciously represses. Since she is too implicated emotionally to understand and explain events fully, *Le Fanu* uses stylistic signals to direct us beyond her verbal screens”(200) This apparent veil of non-understanding and naivety seems arguable at first, although complicated by Laura’s particular insight about Carmilla. But Veeder’s interpretation seems less convincing as the story goes forward, for this veil of naivety seems towards the end of the narrative to show some defects in its frame, especially after the intervention of General Spielsdorf. He has told his story which bears too much obvious evidence that Carmilla is the murderer, especially for Laura who has witnessed her oddities. However, she still welcomes Carmilla after that; “[...] I saw very gladly the beautiful face and figure of Carmilla enter the shadowy chapel. I was just about to rise and speak, and nodded smiling, in answer to her peculiarly engaging smile;” (88) She acts as she has not understood the General’s story which would be completely astonishing since Laura lives exactly the same experience as Bertha.

Moreover, after this moment, Laura seems to fade, "Laura's point of view shrivels under this invasion of experts and official language, as does the vitality of *Le Fanu's* story" (Auerbach, 46). Although, it would seem that the male intervention in the narration is a reflection of their handling of the situation it could be also interpreted as a narrative tool of Laura to keep her feelings about the events for herself. She distances herself so much of the events that she even calls Carmilla only “the body” when she is staked. She even feels the need to prevent our possible interrogation about her lack of reaction “I write all this you suppose with composure. But far from it; I cannot think of it without agitation. Nothing but your earnest desire so repeatedly expressed, could have induced me to sit down to a task that has unstrung my nerves for month to come, and reinduced a shadow of the unspeakable horror which years after my deliverance continued to make my days and nights dreadful, and solitude insupportably terrific.” (93) Indeed, before the intrusion of the General in the narrative, Laura was very generous in the expression of her feelings and emotions. She described her reactions to Carmilla’s acts and her inner turmoil with much details and it could be expected that she would be as expressive in reaction to the dreadful events of the end. Yet, Laura keeps her feelings for herself and seems almost insensitive in the face of the violent fate of her beloved friend; so much that she feels the need to excuse herself but still avoid to express her feelings by telling that she recalls the events only because she has been asked to. The fact that she chooses to end her narrative by admitting her longing for Carmilla might indicate that she is consciously hiding her feelings because they would not be acceptable. Since Laura had made a habit of keeping her thoughts from men, it could be that she would do the same with male readers.

The ending of her recollection is extremely expeditious, she does not even say what happened after the trip with her father as if the events concerning Carmilla were the only important ones. It seems rather odd for she has been giving a lot of details at the beginning and eventually, she chooses to end with her longing for

Carmilla as if it was the only thing relevant about her actual self. This deliberate hiding of thoughts and events, before and after Carmilla's death, might indicate that Laura has gone further on her path of change. This point of view is encouraged by the absence of a framing narrator at the end of the story, which leaves the story open-ended. The threat may have not been destroyed with Carmilla but may dwell in Laura's secrecy, like it has dwelt in Carmilla's. In the prologue, when Dr. Hesselius described the story as "involving, not improbably, some of the profoundest arcane of our dual existence, and its intermediates."<sup>(3)</sup> he might have been referring, after all, not to the vampire Carmilla but to the ambiguous Laura.

### **III. Carmilla as The Empowered Female Vampire**

# 1. A Tale of Female Empowerment and Male Failure

Le Fanu's *Carmilla* differs from the other Vampires tales of the nineteenth century because of its highly ambiguous ending. Rather than revealing her ultimate fate, Laura's report of the events ends with the girl's reverie in which she still hears "the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door." (Le Fanu, p.96) No further information is given to the reader about Laura's life after the events or at the moment of her writing. The only thing that is overtly stated is that she has died before the editor could "re-open the correspondence commenced by Dr. Hesselius [with Laura]"(3); there is no mention of any events of importance in a young woman's life such as a marriage or the birth of children which would demonstrate that Laura has recovered from Carmilla's influence. Instead, the ambivalent expression of Laura's souvenir of her friend and the absence of information concerning her own fate leave the door open wide for multiple, if not contradictory, interpretations of the story. However, in this chapter, I will attempt to demonstrate that Laura's fate was to become a vampire and that the intervention of men was therefore, eventually unsuccessful. The key of understanding the tale's ending could reside in what is *unsaid*. Like the mystery surrounding Carmilla hides her true nature, Laura's secrecy about her life after the events might be the result of a need to throw a veil over her changed nature. If we consider that Carmilla had succeeded in turning Laura into another vampire, we could therefore argue that Carmilla can be interpreted as a tale where men, despite the destruction of the monster, fail to restore their control over women who eventually gain agency by turning into vampires.

One can not help but feel a sense of incompleteness when Le Fanu's story comes to an end. Once a prolific provider of details at the beginning, Laura seems now reluctant to write about her feelings and actual personal situation after the death of Carmilla. It gives the impression of a story finished in a rush by someone who does not want to linger anymore on what has become of her. The very structure of the narrative seems incomplete for, if Laura's story was framed by a prologue, there is no epilogue to close her narration. 'Laura's relationship with Carmilla is not sandwiched between an editor's and doctor's comments and then exchanged with the reader; rather, like Spielsdorf's and Papa's failed attempts to contain these women, the editor similarly fails to frame them in his narrative. Laura addresses her female reader directly, eliminating any intervening male agent, just as she and Carmilla eliminated the middle-man in their own exchange' (Signorotti, p.619) Laura's story is therefore not confined by another person's intervention at the end and it leaves the story open in its structure as well as in its interpretation. We have seen that Le Fanu has depicted his female characters in an ambiguous manner, neither radically evil nor completely innocent, and this ambiguity is at the core of the story

itself as well because of the first-person narrative but also because of its open-ending. It makes *Carmilla* stand out among the other vampire works written during the nineteenth century.

Indeed, usually, the vampire tale, following the Gothic tradition, ends with the correction of the Gothic heroine, either by her death or by her saving and re-establishment under male control “Dependent on a chevalier or a good young nobleman to save her from danger, she is far from autonomous. And, of course, her reward in such a society is marriage to that same chevalier or nobleman.” (Horner, “Women, Power and Conflict”) But Laura is not ‘corrected’ at the end of *Carmilla*. Even if nothing has prevented her from getting married, now that *Carmilla* is dead, Laura dies without a husband or children. It seems quite surprising, especially considering the fact that she is still the only heir of her father and his only means to preserve his legacy. Her father’s attempt to inverse the change that Laura had undergone is ineffective as Signorotti remarked: “The year-long tour represents his attempt to reinstate Laura in the male chain of exchange, to reinscribe her into the world of her father and cure her of the lesbian desire she still maintains. But his attempt fails. Laura has tasted the sweet fruit of self-determination and fulfilling desire and does not wish to return to her pre-*Carmilla* life” (618) Indeed, Laura still thinks often of *Carmilla* and since she dies without being married, the destruction of the vampire seems to have been useless in saving Laura from her influence.

An everlasting influence which is suggested by the last information given by Laura about vampires’ physical strength; “But its power is not confined to its grasp; it leaves a numbness in the limb it seizes, which is slowly, if ever, recovered from.” (Le Fanu, p.96) This information provided just before Laura tells that she still regrets *Carmilla*, encourages the idea that Laura never recovered from the grasp of *Carmilla* over her life and affection. If men successfully destroy *Carmilla*’s body, they are eventually proved powerless to erase her existence. They have used strength to kill *Carmilla* in an act of great violence; she is staked, beheaded and burned until nothing is left of her body. If this violence puts an end to the immediate threat represented by *Carmilla*, her memory is very much alive within Laura’s mind and male intervention is not enough to prevent the consequences on Laura’s life. “Thus, despite *Carmilla*’s symbolic destruction, she still exists as a reminder; no stake, decapitation, or destructive practice upon her body could possibly erase the fact that *Carmilla* existed.”(Vesperry, p.16 – 17)

Even worse for the male characters, it is *Carmilla*’s power of creation that is effective in the end. Indeed, there is a strong probability that Laura has become a vampire herself. Besides the hint of her inexplicable death at a young age without being married or having become a mother, which is already very suspicious, the mystery surrounding what she becomes after the events is a reminder of *Carmilla*’s own secrecy. Nothing indicates that *Carmilla*’s death has put an end to Laura’s own transformation. As Auerbach suggests “[*Carmilla*’s] resurrection raises a lurking question about Laura’s own condition: if a “strange love”

transformed Carmilla into a vampire, hasn't her own love the power to transform Laura, making their lives literally one? The cryptic announcement in the Prologue that Laura "died" after writing her story does not preclude her being also alive – on the verge, like Carmilla, of opening the door." (47) If Laura chooses to end her narrative with an emphasis on Carmilla's influence and does not talk about her life after that, it might be explained by her awareness that she is becoming a vampire too. In that case, not only men would have failed to save the vampire's victim but the danger that represented Carmilla would still exist within her progeny.

Moreover, even if Laura did not become a vampire after all, the threat still exists in Bertha and Carmilla's mother who are still at large. Indeed, nothing indicates that they have been hunted down too or had left the country. It seems therefore dubious that, after Carmilla's death, the "territory has never since been plagued by the visits of a vampire." (92) as pretended by Laura. This threat could also be easily revived as explained by the Baron Vordenburg; "A person, more or less wicked, puts an end to himself. A suicide, under certain circumstances, becomes a vampire. That spectre visits living people in their slumbers; they die, and almost invariably, in the grave, develop into vampires." (95) Laura's statement could be therefore explained by her possible ignorance of the remaining existence of vampires; so much information had been kept away from her by her entourage until then, it would seem logical that her father would have kept the existence of other vampires a secret in order to not disturb her recovery. Carmilla's vampire family might still be roaming the country, proving the male power of destruction eventually inefficient confronted to the female vampire's power of reproduction.

If this ending is a bittersweet one for the male characters, it may seem quite satisfying for the reader. The relationship between the vampire Carmilla and her would-be victim Laura was not entirely depicted as negative and their encounters were described as more erotic than violent. Actually, this relationship and Laura's possible transformation into a vampire could be seen as a liberation for this isolated girl. Like many other Gothic heroines, Laura has lived much of her life confined within an isolated shloss, under the protection and authority of her father. When she describes her life before the arrival of Carmilla, she does not seem to be a thriving young lady but rather a bird in a cage; sheltered but trapped. Laura's transformation would be the opportunity to have the agency and freedom that she lacked when she was human. Her death is not the end of her existence but rather the beginning of a new life where she is no longer confined or under the authority of anyone. She could throw her affection on however she fancies as Carmilla did and be part of a community without being restrained. Laura's death would be the coming of summer that Carmilla talked about "Girls are caterpillars while they live in the world, to be finally butterflies when the summer comes;" (37) She insinuated that death was nothing but a new stage of existence and that Laura would eventually blossom in death.

Therefore, men eventually appear as incompetent and fail to assume their protective role. Laura's father is not capable of saving his daughter in the end, as the General. Even dead, Carmilla has eventually won.

She still exists in Laura's narration after her death and her vampire family has only expanded and will continue to do so, since Laura's own ability to make other vampires as been made explicit by Carmilla; "as I draw near to you, you, in your turn, will draw near to others," (29) In John Polidori's *The Vampire* or the penny dreadful *Varney or the Feast of Blood*, vampire works which preceded Carmilla, women were only victims for their male predators but in Carmilla, the female vampire creates a bond with her victim which might become a way to freedom. Certainly, Carmilla is not only a threat in the eyes of the men, but also a concrete menace for the peasant girls she kills in order to sustain her need for blood. But she is the provider for the ones she chooses to become independent and self-assertive. Although, if her female victims become literal monsters feeding on the blood of the living, they possess an agency they did not have when they were human, and that they can share with whomever they want. From this perspective, Carmilla is a powerful opponent to the patriarchal order in which Laura has lived so far and although, she is killed, she was still able to share her power with her so-called victim.

Le Fanu ultimately told a story in which men are not only relegated to the role of spectators during most of the story but are eventually powerless to get rid of the existence of the female vampire, despite a display of great violence. However, in the vampire literature post-*Carmilla*, men swiftly regained dominance thanks to the timeless *Dracula* written by Bram Stoker and considered by Signorotti as "a strong reaction to [Le Fanu's] demolition of male authority". In *Dracula*, Stoker respond[s] to Le Fanu's narrative of female empowerment by reinstating male control in the exchange of women"(607); the threat is eliminated, the women fixed by death or marriage and motherhood. The immense popularity of Bram Stoker's vampire has eclipsed *Carmilla* for a long time, but its fascinating female vampire and its ambiguous ending have been continuously a subject of interrogation and criticism since its publication nonetheless. It has allowed this story to experience a regain of interest today and Carmilla to become a literary symbol of the powerful female monster standing against patriarchal oppression.

## 2. Carmilla's representation in Modern Cinema and TV-fiction

If Carmilla knows a renewal of interest today, it is because of what she symbolizes and how she has been recently portrayed in the last decade. Although she is the most well-known female vampire of the nineteenth century literature, Carmilla has stayed until this day in the shadow of Dracula. Indeed, Bram Stoker's novel is still widely read and the overwhelming presence of Count Dracula in movies, tv-series but also video-games has made him the most popular vampire of all time, if not to say a veritable myth. If Carmilla has not become an icon like Dracula, she succeeded in surviving in our cultural landscape through regular movie adaptations throughout the twentieth century, with more or less respect for Le Fanu's book. However, since the beginning of the twentieth-first century and especially during the last decade, Carmilla has been far more present in the theatres and on the tv-screen. Therefore, we will see why Carmilla has not fallen into oblivion and has experienced a surge of popularity these last years. To understand what this character symbolizes for the modern audience, I will explore how she is characterized in the cinema and TV fictions of the last decade. To do so, I will compare the two most recent fictions where Carmilla appears; the web-series *Carmilla*<sup>21</sup> and the netflix animated series *Castlevania*<sup>22</sup>.

Although Le Fanu's name is not very well-known of the general audience today and that his novella Carmilla is far less read than Dracula or other more recent vampire novels, Carmilla has become recently more popular. And there is no doubt that the last movie & TV adaptations of Le Fanu's work have something to do with it. Within a decade, several movies and two series inspired by Carmilla have been released. During the twentieth century, there have been multiple movies featuring Carmilla, like Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932) or Roy Ward Baker's *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) but never in such number in such a short period. If Carmilla is so present in today's cinema, it might be because of her ability to change shapes; she is able to embody multiple things. Indeed, Carmilla is not another female monster, she is an incarnation of the Monstrous-Feminine as theorized by Barbara Creed in her book on the female-as-monster in cinema<sup>23</sup>; Creed explains that the term female-monster is a simple reversal of the male-monster while the monstrous-feminine can be defined as follows: "As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase 'monstrous-feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity." (3)

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21 Hall, Jordan. *Carmilla*. KindaTV. 2014 - 2016.

22 Ellis, Warren. *Castlevania*. Netflix. 2017 - 2020.

23 Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine*. Routledge, 1993.

Indeed, we have seen that Carmilla's true monstrosity for the male characters is above all, the threat that she represents as an independent and sexually-aggressive woman who may contaminate their own daughters. In Le Fanu's novella, monstrosity is strongly linked to womanhood, for there are no male monsters; the monsters are part of a matriarchal structure confronting the "good" patriarchal order. Since Carmilla's monstrosity actually arises from her sexual difference, it makes this character easily sympathetic for the modern reader or spectator. As the receptacle of the anxieties concerning the female body and sexuality, Carmilla can shift and adapt to the modern anxieties about women. While some other female vampires from literature have always been represented as seducing villainesses like Dracula's sister-brides, Carmilla's portrayal is sometimes more nuanced. Although, for a long period, her lesbianism has made her the perfect character for the making of movies where the attacks of the lesbian vampire become more an opportunity to show erotic moments and glimpses of female flesh than a means to scare the spectator.

For example, in the Hammer's movie *The Vampire Lovers*, the seduction of the naive Laura by the vampire Carmilla is an excuse to show the naked body of the actresses for the satisfaction of the male viewer. Carmilla has been reduced to a villainess with strong erotic potential for a long time, until the beginning of the twentieth-first century when other aspects of the characters have been represented. Carmilla's characterization differs, sometimes greatly, in the different recent adaptations, and therefore what she symbolizes differs as well. There seem to be two main approaches emerging recently, one where Carmilla's homosexuality and victimisation are put forward and another where she is represented as a powerful villainess confronting the patriarchal order. To understand those two representations, we will explore how the character Carmilla is represented in particular, in two recent series: the popular Youtube web-series *Carmilla* and the Netflix success, *Castlevania*. Those two works represent Le Fanu's Carmilla very differently. The twentieth-first century and its enthusiasm for vampires have given birth to plenty of new adaptations of *Carmilla*. These adaptations characterize Carmilla in new manners; not always reducing her as a mere seducing villainess but sometimes, even portraying her in a more nuanced way.

In 2000, Carmilla is a character and eventual villain of the beautiful animated movie *Vampire hunter D: Bloodlust*.<sup>24</sup> As it already has been done before, the character of Carmilla is a mix of Le Fanu's antagonist and the real infamous Countess Bathory<sup>25</sup>. As the Vampire Queen, she is portrayed as being truly evil, but on the other hand, it may be the first time that her power and intelligence are more important than her sexuality. This representation of Carmilla as a woman of power is to be found too in the on-going series *Castlevania*. This adaptation of the eponymous video-game, the animated tv-series *Castlevania*, tells the story of Dracula's

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24Kawajiri, Yoshiaki. *Vampire Hunter D : Bloodlust*. Mad House, 2000.

25Elizabeth Bathory (1560 – 1614) was an hungarian countess accused of the murders of hundreds of young women. It is said that she would bath in their blood to remain young and beautiful.

revenge over humanity for the death of his human wife. Seeking the extermination of the whole human race, he summons all his vampire generals, including Carmilla. In Le Fanu's book, Carmilla is a Styrian countess, but in the series, she is presented as the Queen of Styria. She wants to get rid of Dracula's authority for his plan to exterminate the human race would leave the vampires without food. Like in Le Fanu's novella, Carmilla is part of a female vampire community; a 'Council of Sisters' which rules over Styria with her and whose members seem to genuinely care for each other. This female vampire community, much as the one in the book, no longer suffers from the intervention of men in their lives; men are rather used or killed like Carmilla's maker, killed because he was 'old and cruel'. This community is not only independent but powerful, so much that Carmilla wants to expand their territory and establish their dominance over the world.

Carmilla is represented more than everything else as an intelligent leader, a woman of power. If Carmilla can be considered as the great villainess of the series, her portrayal is more nuanced as the episodes go, for her actions are understandable. Dracula would have starved the vampires by killing all the humans; therefore her "betrayal" is sensible. Her will to transform humans into cattle instead may indicate that she shares the same ideas about nature and evolution as Le Fanu's Carmilla. Indeed, we have seen that Carmilla considers herself to be a part of nature, "All things in the heaven, in the earth, and under the earth, act and live as Nature ordains? I think so" (Le Fanu,p.36). It is therefore logical for her that if humans prey on animals, the vampire is the natural predator of humans. This way of thinking was already Carmilla's in *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust*, when she said: "Humans are nothing more than livestock, we prey on them as they prey on beasts! This is the rule of nature!" In that regard, we can see a continuation of Carmilla's portrayal as a natural predator for humans, following the reasoning of Le Fanu's Carmilla.

If Carmilla is showed as a powerful ruler and a predator only, it is because we do not see her through the eyes of a loved one as in the book. In *Castlevania*, Carmilla has no love interest and Laura does not seem to exist at all. Although, her bisexuality is sometimes suggested in her words, contrary to the book, Carmilla's sexuality and relationships are of no real importance in the series. It is her power and opposition to male authority which are important. Thus, *Castlevania* uses aspects of Le Fanu's Carmilla which make her an independent woman, surrounded by her female community, who effectively opposes the patriarchal order within the vampire community, represented by the mad Dracula or Carmilla's maker.

If the relationship of Carmilla and Laura is totally ignored in this first way of representing Le Fanu's vampire, another tendency in representations is to emphasize the importance of this relationship. In confidential movies such as *The Unwanted* (2014) and *Styria* (2014), but also in the, surprisingly, very popular web-series *Carmilla* (2014 – 2016) with its 78 million<sup>26</sup> views on Youtube. It follows the life of Laura Hollis, a student at Silas University who films her daily-life with her webcam while she investigates the disappearances of other students. One day, her own room-mate Betty Spielsdorf goes missing and Carmilla becomes Laura's room-

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26According to Shaftesbury's website. <https://shaftesbury.ca/portfolio/carmilla/>

mate. If the two girls don't get along very well at first, they eventually get romantically involved. Together, they will try to thwart the plans of Carmilla's mother who forces Carmilla to provide her with victims for the making of ritual sacrifices. If this adaptation does not follow the plot of Le Fanu's book, it restores Laura's narration for she relates the events to the spectator through her filmed-diary. Therefore, we only know what she tells us or what is happening in her room when she turns the webcam on.

Some elements of the original book are blended more or less seamlessly in the series. In the series, Carmilla Karnstein is still a Styrian Countess who has been turned into a vampire during a ball. She would seduce girls in their homes, like Laura, but in the series, it is not to make them vampires but to provide sacrifices for her adopted mother. In order to continue this arrangement, Carmilla pretends nowadays to be a student at Silas University while her mother is the dean. If the past told by Carmilla, the victims' dreams about a black cat and some characters' names are evident references to the book, it seems more like a way to make a forced connection between the book and what is actually happening in the series. Indeed, none of the thematics of the novella – whether it is female sexuality and alliances or the question of power and gender – are really tackled. Carmilla is not part of a functional vampire family which she would attempt to expand, defying patriarchal order by doing so, but actually suffers her own adopted mother's evil deeds. The web-series rather focuses on Laura and Carmilla's relationship and makes Carmilla a sympathetic heroine rather than an antagonist. With this web-series, Le Fanu's Carmilla has been re-appropriated by the twentieth-first century queer audience and turned into a lesbian romance. This series can not be considered as an adaptation of Le Fanu's work but rather a loose interpretation of Carmilla & Laura's relationship, but it has the merit of bringing a new interest for the novella. Its audience might not have been so interested in Le Fanu's novella if it did not feature what is considered now as a romance between the two female characters. Carmilla has become a 'must-read' of the queer classic literature and from this perspective, Le Fanu's Carmilla is often seen nowadays as a sympathetic lesbian character victimized by patriarchy and the ambivalent feelings of Laura are seen as the natural result of her repressed sexuality.

Thus, this new interest for the character of Carmilla can be explained by her capacity to represent contemporary anxieties about female sexuality and/or empowerment and is also part of a new tendency, particularly in horror cinema, to represent so-called villainesses in a more nuanced way. The monstrous-feminine is no more always relegated to the role of the antagonist who has to be punished for her difference but is often used as a metaphor of the marginalized or oppressed facing an oppressive society. Because of the different ways of adapting Le Fanu's novella and his main antagonist, Carmilla can symbolize different things for the modern viewer and reader who can identify with her. Like the Carmilla from the book, who is able to shift forms, the twentieth-first century's Carmilla appears in different shapes; as a figure of agency and

independence when she is represented as a powerful vampire noble or as a fictional lesbian icon when she is seen as a sympathetic vampire girlfriend.

### 3. *Carmilla's* significance in XXI<sup>e</sup>'s Vampire Fiction

The movies and TV-series featuring Carmilla's character are part of a proliferation of fictions featuring the figure of the female vampire, since the beginning of the century. This new enthusiasm leads to a variety of representations of this creature, which was relegated for a long time to the unique role of the evil whore. Although the female vampire has already undergone several metamorphoses in literature, she has remained relatively unaltered in her representation in movies.

After an overview of current vampire literature, a few examples of movies of the last decade will be studied in order to understand the different shapes the female vampire takes in today's cinema, how the female vampire has evolved, and what she symbolizes today. As the female vampire is able to metamorphose to embody the anxieties of the period that creates her, I will argue that those cinematographic representations tend to demonstrate that the symbolism of the female vampire has shifted to represent the threat of the modern empowered and independent woman. The renewed interest for Le Fanu's female vampire, and thus for his novella, might be seen in this context as the opportunity for directors to explore the thematics of female empowerment and confrontation to the patriarchal structure of the novella, rather than focusing on the erotic potential of the depiction of Carmilla and her victims' relationships.

In the popular culture of the twentieth century, the female vampire has been often portrayed as a highly sexualized creature whose existence was only justified by her lust for blood and flesh. "Presented as outside acceptable femininity – single, independent, homosexual, and eschewing biological reproduction – female vampires reflect the unending fear of the powerful woman. As a result, vampiras in mainstream visual culture have typically been formed from the simple template of the Whore or Temptress." (Anyiwo,p.172) As Carmilla's numerous representations have shown, the female vampire was incarnating the threat of the unleashed female sexuality and was therefore depicted as highly sensual but lethal. However, towards the end of the twentieth century, a plethora of vampire novels appeared with a more nuanced portrayal of female vampires. We immediately think of Anne Rice's best-sellers, *The Vampire Chronicles*, started in 1976, with its variety of strong and powerful female vampires or Whitley Strieber's *The Hunger* (1980) but there were also more confidential novels which have nonetheless contributed to this renewal. Books such as Jan Jennings' *Vampyr* (1981) or Jody Scott's science-fiction novel *I, Vampire* (1984), feature more sympathetic female vampires whose sensuality was the critical element of her interpretation in a period where female sexuality was far less liberated than nowadays.

Nevertheless, it is with the vampire romances series *Twilight* (2005 – 2008), written by Stephenie Meyer, that the vampire literature became very popular, especially with the young audience. Following the success of *Twilight*, an enormous amount of books series stamped 'paranormal romances' have been published since, and targets in particular young female adults or adolescents. Again, the male vampire is often at the centre of the plot as the heroine's love interest. In this genre, vampires are less monstrous and threatening and treated more sympathetically. But the most popular series of 'paranormal romances' such as *Twilight* or *Vampire Diaries*, follow the same patterns and gender conventions. The male vampire is a prominent figure; he is almost always handsome, brooding, and in love with the female protagonist. The female vampires are either secondary characters, often the heroine's rival, or the heroine herself who rarely become a vampire for other reasons than to be with a loved one forever. Here, the female vampire is very often in a heterosexual relationship and ends her story with marriage and motherhood; the symbolism of the female vampire as a transgressor of sexual or gender boundaries seem to fade away in favour of the representation of strong and less threatening female vampires with whom the reader/viewer can identify with.

About this kind of female vampire characters, Dr Magdalena Grabias<sup>27</sup> stated: “These are all vampires and portrayed as startlingly beautiful and powerful — as powerful as the male vampires — but still accepting human traditions and family values in terms of gender. In effect, these vampire women sub-consciously decide to adopt human conventions, and they don't appear to be as strongly feminist as you'd expect.[...]There is a return to traditional gender role stereotyping, even though these are very powerful beings.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, if we look at the series *Twilight*, the messages of the movies are, at best very ambiguous, at worse anti-feminist according to many critics.

After her encounter with the vampire Edward, Bella's life completely circles around him, going as far as putting her life in danger when he leaves her. As a human, she is a passive and insecure girl whose activities besides school are cooking and cleaning for her father. When she is given power through her transformation as a vampire, it is after being married and a mother, which gives the impression that the means for a woman to gain power and agency is by following gender conventions and get married, having intercourse only after this marriage and having children. This representation of the female vampire abiding by proper gender conventions offers an interesting contrast with the hyper-sexualized villainess archetype. Most movies of the twentieth century, often inspired by Carmilla, were anti-feminist because of the demonization of female sexuality through the portrayal of a dangerous, seductive female vampire. However, here, it is quite the opposite. The female vampire represents out-dated gender conventions which are shown as positive, since the female vampire is the

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28 <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/features/how-has-the-modern-picture-of-a-vampire-changed-from-bram-stokers-original-426198.html>

heroine with whom the reader/viewer is supposed to identify. A surprising treatment of this figure for the female vampire does not represent here transgression and liberation of conventions but, on the contrary, conformity to human boundaries of sexuality and gender. Fortunately, we can not put all the 'paranormal romances' in the same anti-feminist basket, but since *Twilight* was such an enormous success, it has changed the modern perception of the vampire profoundly, making the popular perception of the female vampire as being less threatening, but also as experiencing less agency.

However, during the last decade, the cinema has offered more positive representations of the female vampires; they are often more nuanced and better rounded characters. In movies and TV-shows, The female vampire used to be often represented as a one-dimensional character, portrayed as a seductive villain leading men to their demise. One might think of Dracula's sisters-brides and other Santanico Pandemonium<sup>29</sup>, whose sole purpose is to be sexy *and* frightening. This character is, in addition, disempowered and destroyed by men before the end of the movie. She represents the threat of the liberated female sexuality and, therefore, is both characterized as alluring and dangerous until she is tamed or destroyed, often with a phallic instrument. However, we have seen that the vampire changes to embody the anxieties of its period of creation. Since women's sexuality is less a cause of anxiety nowadays than their will to gain power in society, the symbolism of the female vampire has had to evolve too. Thus, directors have proposed different representations of the female vampire; in those movies, there is a tendency to portray the female vampire as, above all, a powerful and independent woman.

From 2003 to 2016, the movie series *Underworld* has experienced incredible success (despite a very negative reception from the critics) and introduced another view of the female vampire; the warrior heroine. In a world where vampires and lycans are at war, we follow the female vampire Selene, a strong hunter of Lycans. Selene is characterized by her power and independence and is a very competent warrior. She is a killer, but she believes herself to be avenging the death of her family until she discovers she has been lied to. Therefore, she is not confined to the archetype of the vampire villainess and seducer who is only motivated by her bloodlust; she has goals, relationships, understandable motives. Yet, the movies still make the female vampire an unnecessary-extremely sexy woman<sup>30</sup>, and this eventually puts Selene back into a more traditional female role in the last movies, in which she is a mother. However, the series still planted the seeds of the trend of the *badass* female vampire, far from the inoffensive female vampire of *Twilight*.

Neil Jordan's *Byzantium* (2012) offered another vision of the female vampire as well. An adaptation of Moira Buffini's play *A Vampire Story*, it relates the story of a vampire Clara and her daughter Eleonore. In the

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<sup>29</sup>Character of Robert Rodriguez's *From Dusk Till Dawn*

<sup>30</sup>Selene wears a very tight suit of leather.

nineteenth century, Clara has turned Eleonore into a vampire to save her life after she is raped. By doing so, she has usurped a male privilege since only male figures were authorized to become vampires..<sup>31</sup> Today, Clara has become a prostitute to provide for her daughter, while Eleonore continuously writes their story. When their secret is endangered by Eleonore's teacher and her new friend, Clara kills the first and attempt to kill Eleonore's friend too when a vampire brotherhood arrives to kill them. For those women, becoming vampires is a means of survival. The female vampires are here represented as victims, whether it is as a nineteenth century woman forced into prostitution or as a female vampire whose life is threatened by male vampires. The question of power is crucial here since Clara might represent the male anxiety of a woman who wants her share of power and who, even worse, can share this power with other women too. It is very noticeable too, that the female vampire is not punished at the end, the two women being able to finally live their eternity on their own terms. However, the female vampires of *Byzantium* never use their power to act against the males who have hurt them and try to kill them. They are always hunted, and it is a male vampire who eliminates the others at the end of the movie.

Yet, in 2014, the female vampire appears finally as a staunch opponent to male oppression in Ana Lily Amirpour's movie *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*. The unnamed protagonist is a strong and powerful female vampire who wanders at night in the streets of Bad City. With her chador floating behind her, she looks like some sort of superheroine who possesses the power of life and death over the humans she stalks. The Girl here is not the frightened victim going home late at night, but actually, the predator who roams the city to kill the bad men; dealers, women abusers and other criminals who have corrupted their world. In this movie, the female vampire is represented as a heroine with a mission. She helps the poor, the prostitutes, the oppressed by cleaning the streets from its criminals. As a predator and heroine, she embodies the powerful and independent woman who uses her power to help other women as well.

If the female vampire has not become yet a real feminist icon as the witch, for example, the trend of representing the female vampire as both sympathetic and powerful coupled with the growing number of female directors, particularly in the fantastic/horror genre, might indicate that the female vampire is starting to undergo once again, a kind of metamorphosis in its popular representation. As a powerful and independent female vampire, it seems only logical that Carmilla should reappear in numerous adaptations today. While the female vampires cited above have been created in this century, Carmilla is a particular character since she has been created in a whole different period, and yet, she remains a relevant figure of empathy and possible identification for the contemporary reader and viewer. If we consider the thematics of the novella, many elements are already there to be exploited in modern adaptations to approach questions of female sexuality and gender conventions. As a queer powerful and independent woman who has the ability to share her power with other women, she is a

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<sup>31</sup>Humans does not become vampires through biting but by going into a secret magic place, 'the healing shrine'.

fascinating figure from a modern feminist perspective. This female vampire can embody actual modern anxieties. We have seen that in *The Unwanted* (2014), *Styria* (2014) and the web-series *Carmilla*, she was represented as a queer and sympathetic character while the antagonists are homophobic males. The date of releasing of those movies are noticeable since it coincides with the period of advancements in LGBTQ rights.<sup>32</sup> This representation of *Carmilla* as a complex queer character reflects a change in our society since the lesbian female vampire used to be mostly portrayed as a villainess.

But another way of representing *Carmilla* as a figure of female empowerment and independence might appear. The most recent representation of *Carmilla* in *Castlevania* offers a new representation of *Carmilla*, closer to the book's character, in the form of the powerful and independent vampire noble opposing the whole patriarchal structure with her female vampire community. Once again, the female vampire echoes actual anxieties; *Castlevania*'s *Carmilla* may be seen as the representation of women's ambition and desire for power in society and her female vampire entourage seen as the reflection of the worries created among men by a stronger sense of solidarity between women since the #metoo movement. If *Carmilla* and her vampire sisters are not depicted entirely as sympathetic, their motives are still understandable and they seem to be unstoppable forces against men. As seen above, those thematics, which are at the core of Le Fanu's novella, of female empowerment and female solidarity against patriarchal rule have not been really explored yet, but works such as *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* or *Castlevania* seem to indicate that such thematics are already starting to spread.

This trend of empowered female vampires, the actual enthusiasm for powerful female monsters and the renewed interest for Le Fanu's novella thanks to the web-series *Carmilla*, is a fertile ground for a representation of *Carmilla* that would be closer to Le Fanu's character and for faithful adaptations of the book and its main thematics. Besides, an adaptation of Le Fanu's novella, directed by the female director Emily Harris, will soon be released and is another indication of the new interest for this book and its female vampire. Since the very aspects of *Carmilla* that makes her monstrous for the male characters of Le Fanu's novella – her queerness, her power, her independence – is what makes her nowadays, a figure with whom the reader/viewer can identify or at least sympathize with, no doubt that she will find a permanent place in our cultural landscape as Le Fanu's book is slowly being rediscovered as an essential work on its own and not only the book that preceded Bram Stoker's.

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<sup>32</sup>In 2014, homosexual marriage was authorized in every US state and was authorized the year before in France.

## Conclusion

In this work of research, I attempted to demonstrate that Le Fanu's *Carmilla* was, ultimately, about female empowerment and confrontation of this female figure against an established patriarchal structure, rather than a mere lesbian vampire romance as it is often overlooked today. Numerous are the critics, theories, and analyses on Le Fanu's work, but the reappearance of *Carmilla* in our cultural landscape has not been explored yet in depths, while I believe it to be natural since the thematics of the book reflect very contemporary anxieties.

Almost 150 years after its publication, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* has found a new audience, especially among the feminine readers thanks to the recent adaptations of the book, and its female vampire is becoming a literary icon in her own right. However, *Carmilla* is often approached as a story about female sexuality and desire, and while it is essential, the thematics of the novella are far broader than that. Indeed, the question of female sexuality is preponderant, but power is always at the centre of the events and relations between the characters. In a story where the female characters evolve in an apparently male-dominated world, it appears that the balance of power is far more complicated than it appears. Therefore, to demonstrate why *Carmilla* can be seen as a figure of female empowerment, I have drawn the reader's attention to the elements of the novella which showed the length of her power and how her opponents are made unable to measure the menace she represents for them, until the end of the novella. I have also underlined the importance of female solidarity and community in the novella, which is often overlooked by critics. Yet, it seems incredibly important since it makes power, something that is shared and strengthened through female solidarity.

If we consider *Carmilla*'s most recent adaptations and the representation of the female vampire in general, it appears that the actual notions of female power, independence, and community begin to be approached more consistently. I observe that *Carmilla*'s usual over-sexualization in movies leaves place to the representation of her power and independence, making those adaptations more faithful to the preponderant themes of the novella. It may be explained by the fact that today the anxieties felt by a certain part of society regarding women are now less about female sexual agency but rather about women's demands of independence and share of power in society and the possibility of worldwide solidarity between women eased by media and social networks. Female empowerment and independent community are two key elements of Le Fanu's novella, which makes this book an interesting reading, pregnant in questionings, exceeding the simple lecture of the novella as a vampire romance.

The pattern of representation of the female vampire is shifting and now; it takes multiple forms where the importance of power is underlined even if some patterns are still very present; the tendency to make the female vampire sexy or her eventual disempowerment through her destruction or restoration in her proper

gender role. To remain a relevant figure of today's anxieties, the female vampire needs to continue its evolution towards a figure of empowerment, portrayed in a nuanced way. Eventually, I would argue that the renewed interest for Carmilla and the powerful female vampire trend is a logical consequence of the trend initiated by *Twilight*, the over-normalization of the vampire, which has made the vampire more sympathetic and less monstrous and therefore, less transgressive. The relevance of the female vampire figure as a reflection of the anxieties about women in society would be, therefore, lessened since she does not threaten to challenge the boundaries and conventions.

The female vampire, being a reflection of a period's anxieties regarding female sexuality, agency, and status in society, it would, therefore, seem interesting to see how the next adaptations of Carmilla will represent her, as we have seen that two trends were revealed lately; one is the sympathetic vampire girlfriend and the other, which seem to be more and more present, is the powerful and independent female vampire who might be less sympathetic but more transgressive, therefore more, significant.

Finally, since we have seen that Le Fanu's novella knows a certain popularity now, we can wonder if this new enthusiasm will open the door to other theories and understandings of the novella. It might also lead to the rediscovery of other literary works featuring female vampires, which have been ignored for long, such as Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897) and its mixed-race female vampire. In yesterday's vampires, we might find tomorrow's wider variety of representations of the empowered woman.

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