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Exploring the Portrayal of Queerness in Gothic Literature:  
Sexuality and Gender Identity in *Carmilla* and *The Picture of  
Dorian Gray*.

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## Introduction

Queerness has always been a present in society, whether it is represented by sexual preferences, or as an identity, and while it is something that goes out of what is considered normal, and by consequence many times rejected by society for not following societal norms, it is a reality and it is present in many forms and areas. In this dissertation I will aim to delve into how Queerness was represented during the Gothic period literature, the different implications it had and how it represents a large portion of people that do not adhere to what is seen as the norm.

To do this, I will be focusing on the works of Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Both works have storylines with hints or characteristics that include homosexuality and different views on gender norms, giving an insight on the diverse ideas that were present in society at the time and different portrayals that carried different intentions by the authors and their use of queerness in their texts. I think this topic is worth being discussed in literary studies because it highlights the difference that the context of a text can have in its interpretation, and how authorial intent can sometimes have a completely different idea compared to what the readers will eventually have as the primary understanding of their text decades after they are published.

To start off the analysis, I will need to explain some key concepts and the meaning they have taken in this approach. First the term "Queer" will be used with the definition by Eve Sedgwick in *Tendencies* "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (8) So,

Querness will be used as a term to refer to those who do not stick to the binarism of gender or sexuality and go out of them, not conforming to the expectations set these areas. Then, gender will be used in the binary understanding of gender: male and female, and relate it to the differences that are expected to both genders and their respective societal norms.

Then, the term “heteronormative” will be used in accordance with Habarth: “enforced compliance with culturally determined heterosexual roles and assumptions about heterosexuality as ‘natural’ or ‘normal’” (1). That is, to refer to relationships that go out of the expected norm of heterosexuality and are not between men and women, breaking the rules of what is considered the “norm” in both *Carmilla* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The term will be used to refer to different aspects that go out of this norm.

The methodology will be analyze the texts taking into consideration the factors present at the time of writing and how they differ with the understanding and societal cues we have in modern times that differentiate our understanding of these texts in comparison to how they were read at the time of publication or in comparison to how the authors originally intended for us readers to interpret their writings. By using secondary sources that give a glimpse into the understanding of sexuality and gender during the Victorian Period, the context of the authors and their personal ideologies and intent when writing these stories I aim to highlight the differences between the understanding of these texts during their original context and the idea we have of them today with the advances in society’s views on gender expectations and sexuality, as well as the different resources available nowadays such as a broader knowledge in multiple areas and easier access to it. By taking elements of queer theory that allows for an analysis that digs into the novella's exploration of non-normative sexualities and traditional

gender roles, I will shed light onto the intricate portrayal of homosexuality and gender within the restrictions of the Victorian era's social norms.

As for the possible limitations of the texts, it is difficult to completely understand the ideologies of the authors, as these were topics that at the times were subtly approached, I have to take into consideration different factors and try to formulate an idea of what their intentions and ideas at the time were, giving us a deeper insight into the stories and how they were shaped by many factors regarding the authors that are now long gone and we can only construct their thinking by investigating their context and taking clues from other writing and their representation from when they were alive.

The analysis of Queerness in the texts has been done before, with the vampire being a key image in gothic literature and it also being closely related to homosexuality, it is not surprising that the relation is often studied, but taking authorial intent into consideration, it changes the perspective that texts like *Carmilla* can have. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is also a common subject of study, but mostly interpreting the situations without taking fully into consideration the context and the underlying tones present in the writing.

Sexuality and Gender Identity plays a challenging role when it comes to exploring the portrayal of queerness in Gothic literature, as, even with an author being conservative, or other Queer himself, they both adhere to societal standards to some extent for their approach to the topic and contrast in their ideas as to why they stick to certain societal norm and why they cross the boundaries with others, using this contrast to further display the different points of views that were present at the time and how they have evolved into modern understanding of these topics. The analysis will start of with interpreting *Carmilla* and the

use of the different aspects of lesbianism on it and how it relates to authorial intent and Sheridan Le Fanu's views on the matter, by analyzing the different aspects of the story, these being: lesbian desire in the main couple, rejection of this desire and a repressed sexuality present in the story. Continuing with an analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where the different characters will be analyzed by themselves to see what they represent and how they are expected to change society's views on their gender identity and sexuality, also showing a repressed sexuality like the characters in *Carmilla* but with a different lens to emphasize their differences as well as their similarities. And lastly, the interpretation will conclude by analyzing the reception that both texts had at the time of publication, how these views have evolved and how the text contributed in changing and shaping said views.

## Chapter I: Authorial Intent in *Carmilla*.

The novella *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu, delivers a diverse representation of queer elements throughout the development of the relationship between the title character and Laura, a young girl living in a secluded area whose life completely changes after the apparition of Carmilla. Written during the Victorian era amidst a surge of Gothic literature, *Carmilla* is a novella that subtly navigates taboo same-sex desires within a context of societal repression. Le Fanu's intent appears to lie in the exploration of forbidden desires, particularly those concerning female homosexuality. This Queer representation is mostly shown throughout the text and will be analyzed through the sexuality of the previously mentioned characters, as well as the gender performance that Carmilla takes in their relationship and the perception this creates on Laura.

In analyzing *Carmilla*, we delve into the intricate layers of authorial intent, dissecting the deliberate use of narrative devices, character development, and symbolism to unravel the social commentary crafted by the author. Although the author's intention when it comes to the inclusion of this same-sex relationship is not clear, it is undeniable that the queer elements of the story play a key role when it comes to the development of the plot, making *Carmilla* a novel where depending of the point of view of the reader, the queer elements may have different meaning as to what was originally intended by the author, as he gives a biased approach due to societal taboos of the time and his own personal ideologies, but suggesting a deep emotional attachment between the protagonists and challenging heteronormative interpretations of relationships.

With *Carmilla* featuring so many straight-forward lesbian elements, blurring the lines between what is considered 'symbolism' and what is not, it is not hard for the reader to find



themselves wondering what the intention of including a lesbian couple as the main narrative in the text, and taking into consideration the author's personal views and context in which the text was written, I will try to give an understanding of his intent by making use of homosexuality in his novella, by taking elements of queer theory that allows for an analysis that digs into the novella's exploration of non-normative sexualities and traditional gender roles, I will shed light onto the intricate portrayal of female homosexuality within the restrictions of the Victorian era's social norms.

### **Lesbian Attraction Throughout the Novel.**

The novel is narrated through the perspective of Laura, so her own personal vision of same-sex desire is very prominent when setting the tone of the novel, one not so favorable when it comes to the perception of homosexuality. In the Victorian period, societal expectation was against the thought of same-sex couples, like expressed by Ari Adut in *A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde*, where argued that "The Victorians held homosexuality in horror" (214). We can understand that although it does not represent the opinion of everyone, but rather gives us a stereotypical glimpse into the Victorian way of thinking, it also gives us an idea of how homosexuality was perceived by most of society at the time.

One of the most prominent aspects of queer representation in *Carmilla* is the exploration of lesbian desire between Carmilla and Laura. The intense bond they develop goes beyond a friendship and is portrayed through passionate descriptions of physical intimacy, glances, and their constant declarations of love, starting from the second they first meet as teenagers.

The novel opens up with Laura narrating her first encounter with Carmilla during her childhood, saying this was the first time she experienced fright, as it was not something

present in her life until this point, and setting the tone as to what Carmilla will eventually come to represent for her by being desirable and how this went against societal norms at their time period, and shaping what would become her perception of Carmilla during the first part of her life.

In the following chapters, I can see Laura's interest in meeting Carmilla grow after she hears praise about her physical appearance and leading to the moment she finally sees her and gets to meet her: 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 of what I was thinking. It was pretty, even beautiful; and when I first beheld it, wore the same melancholy expression. (259) Laura does remember Carmilla's face very vividly from their encounter during her childhood, where Carmilla nurtured her like a mother figure, which could be considered as a factor to her initial attraction to her, but some interpretations like Avipsa Mondal counter argue that: *Le Fanu* does explore the intimacy between a female vampire and female victim, but the relationship is not representative of one of mother and daughter. Carmilla holds a role of power, but does not act as a parent. She is intimate with her victim, but not in a motherly way. (136)

By getting bitten by Carmilla, she is left scared by this experience, but now this first impression of being frightened by her in the past, quickly turns into a devotion, maybe indicating a possible homosexuality from Laura's part, manifesting for the first time, but something that was part of her all along. As the story progresses, we see their bond developing quickly after this second encounter, and see the first indicators of a flirtatious relationship and their non-normative bond between the two start forming. Since the story is told from Laura's perspective, we can understand her feelings by passages like the following:

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. She pressed my hand, she laid hers upon it, and her eyes glowed, as, looking hastily into mine, she smiled again, and blushed. (259)

While she is a little nervous because of the situation, she still feels a connection or attraction to Carmilla. Following this encounter, we can get a feeling of how Carmilla starts trying to put certain ideas in front of Laura, giving me the idea that it is an attempt to create a sense of shared experience to relate more to Laura and express similar feelings to hers, questioning her not socially acceptable ideas in front of her, as if she did not know that Laura was already feeling attracted in the same way towards her, like the instance where Carmilla says:

If you were less pretty I think I should be very much afraid of you, but being as you are, and you and I both so young, I feel only that I have made your acquaintance twelve years ago, and have already a right to your intimacy.

Setting the tone for what she also wants Laura to think about her, but blurring the lines as to whether Laura had these homosexual feelings of her own accord or by the power of Carmilla, who seems to just now be starting to push these ideas onto Laura. These passages can be seen as an attempt by the author to make their relationship seem as something forced, we do not know if these feelings are natural to Laura, and we start to get the idea that they are just being pushed by Carmilla.

### **Rejection of homosexuality.**

Also, these feelings are not always so clear for Laura, although she openly manifests her interest for Carmilla, there are also times throughout the story where she feels confused and conflicted about this, expressing her contradictory feelings: "I did feel, as she said, drawn towards her, but there was also something of repulsion" (260) In this line, we understand that Laura is repulsed by her feelings towards Carmilla, but not really repulsed by her as a person, making us doubt whether the feelings she has towards this person of her same-sex are genuine or if they are of some supernatural nature, as we do not know whether Carmilla is simply pushing these ideas by words to her, or her supernatural existence has something to do with their attraction. Whatever the case, the outcome is always the same, in Laura's words: "the sense of attraction immensely prevailed." (261)

The relationship between the two girls continues evolving with constant courtship, especially from Carmilla's side as most of the compliments coming from Laura we get to see when she is thinking for herself. Their relationship is also filled with questioning and uneasiness, as we really don't know anything about Carmilla's past, which is portrayed as something that weighs on Laura, as she wants to know more about her friend and tries to get Carmilla to tell more about her, but Carmilla always ends up deceiving Laura, continuing with her mysterious facade, further adding a burden to their same-sex relationship. Laura also continues to sometimes reject in her mind the advances Carmilla made on her, but she can not seem to physically take action to stop these interactions: "Her murmured words sounded like a lullaby in my ear, and soothed my resistance into a trance, from which I only seemed to recover myself when she withdrew her arms." (264) She wanted to refrain from certain actions by Carmilla such as kisses, but Carmilla's words left her in a trance like state that made her unable to do something to make her stop, adding to the interpretation of this attraction being something supernatural.

### **Carmilla as a Reflection of Laura's Repressed Desire.**

In various instances, Laura expresses how she feels like their relationship is not right even though she does like Carmilla, which aside from the standard interpretation of her being repulsed by Carmilla's monstrous nature, could also be interpreted as a reflection of internalized homophobia, since she feels rejection towards her lover without a real explanation, even calling her own feelings a "paradox". (264) One could also argue that This internalized homophobia can be seen when Laura mentions she is writing more than ten years in the future of the events:

I now write, after an interval of more than ten years, with a trembling hand, with a confused and horrible recollection of certain occurrences and situations, in the ordeal through which I was unconsciously passing; though with a vivid and very sharp remembrance of the main current of my story. But, I suspect, in all lives there are certain emotional scenes, those in which our passions have been most wildly and terribly roused, that are of all others the most vaguely and dimly remembered. (264)

Here we see Laura trying to justify the feelings she had at the time with the supernatural existence of Carmilla, or her sensing the presence of an evil supernatural being, but considering the fact that she did not know anything about Carmilla's nature when this was happening, and although she felt conflicted with her, her feelings were still romantic in nature, we can associate this repulsion that confused her with the fact that all these feeling are being caused by a girl .

This can be further proved by passages where Laura tries to find a socially acceptable explanation for her feelings: “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?” (265) The internalized homophobia is seen here as Laura's only explanation for her feelings towards Carmilla, her behaviour and the love story they are living is that she is a "boyish lover" in disguise, and even though she says and understands her hypothesis has flaws, she is just trying to justify her feelings towards this creature. Bram Dijkstra in *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* shares about Carmilla's and Laura's relationship: “It becomes clear that Carmilla, even if she is real, is a mirror image, the photographic negative of Laura, the fashionably invalid young narrator. She is Laura's erotic primal nature made flesh.” (341) Carmilla represents a manifestation of Laura's suppressed desires, her unexpressed erotic nature and primal nature, mirroring Laura herself in an unconventional manner.

This could also give us an insight as to what the author ideologies were when it comes to same-sex relationship, even though some question the reason as to why Carmilla targets women, since it is not something characteristic for vampires in general, like stated by Helen Stoddart in “‘*The Precautions of Nervous People Are Infectious*’: Sheridan Le Fanu's *Symptomatic Gothic*”: “Carmilla's particular distinction is that, unlike Dracula, she is exclusively drawn to members of her own sex, thus sharpening her threat to the nuclear family, so central to the progress of the bourgeoisie as a class.” (28) Where she argues that Carmilla was a threat to the moral values of society at the time the story was written, proving how the author's inclusion of a same-sex couple was done with the purpose of using lesbianism as a source of horror. This aspect has also been studied by people like Gina Wisker in her essay “*Devouring Desires: Lesbian Gothic Horror*”, where she states:

Feminist and queer theorists and critics might be troubled by the conventional critique of *Carmilla* as deviant, disgusting, to be exorcised from the family home, marginalised. It is a tale constructed by and valorising conventional patriarchal values which condemn lesbianism as a form of vampirism. (126)

Further showing how the author's view on the lesbian relationship between Laura and Carmilla is not deemed as a positive element of the story, considered by many as a story that portrays homosexuality as a negative aspect of the concept of vampires and its implications.

One thing I could still argue, whether we agree with the idea of *Carmilla* being a good representation for lesbian relationships or not, is that this story gives us a representation for homophobia, or at least a good example of the negative connotations homosexuality and lesbianism had at the time, with Carmilla, who takes a more active role as a lesbian girl that expresses her feelings towards another girl, taking form as a monster and a source of horror, with the girl she falls in love with being depicted as a victim of hers.

In conclusion, in Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, the exploration of taboo same-sex desires within Victorian social repression is manifested through the intricate relationship between the protagonists, Laura and Carmilla. The novella subtly navigates the complexities of forbidden desires, particularly those centered around female homosexuality. Throughout the text, Le Fanu crafts a narrative that challenges heteronormative interpretations of relationships, presenting a layered portrayal of queer elements. The intense bond between Laura and Carmilla goes beyond friendship, manifesting through passionate descriptions of physical intimacy, glances, and love from their initial meeting as teenagers.

The narration from Laura's perspective offers a window into societal expectations and the rejection towards same-sex relationships during the Victorian period. Her internal conflict and confusion regarding her attraction to Carmilla embraces the societal taboo surrounding homosexuality, leading to a portrayal of internalized homophobia. Carmilla's mysterious nature and the ambiguity surrounding her intentions add depth to the exploration of non-normative sexualities. The portrayal of their relationship, at times perceived as forced or influenced by Carmilla's actions, blurs the lines between natural feelings and supernatural influence, further complicating the narrative.

Le Fanu's inclusion of Carmilla's exclusive attraction to women, presents a threat to societal norms, symbolizing lesbianism as a source of horror and deviance. This depiction aligns with the conventional patriarchal values of the time, condemning same-sex relationships as aberrant and monstrous. Ultimately, the novella serves as a reflection of the negative connotations associated with homosexuality and lesbianism during the Victorian era. Carmilla's characterization as a monster and the victimization of Laura within their relationship shows the societal fears surrounding same-sex desires. While interpretations of *Carmilla's* representation of lesbian relationships may vary, the novella remains a testament to the societal homophobia prevalent in that era. Le Fanu's narrative gives readers a text that deeply reflects the societal views on homosexuality, one with mostly negative connotations, but that still works in giving queer readers a story that can resonate with them.



## Chapter II: Queer-coded Characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) is characterized by its inclusion of various themes, such as self-reflection, physical beauty and the inclusion of queer coded characters. With Wilde himself being known as a gay man, with rumors during his lifetime about his homosexuality, and even serving jail time due to gross indecency, it is not hard to understand how his personal experiences with homosexuality and views on the matter are reflected in the characters or how this influences his writing. With the author being gay himself, and being known for trying to find homosexual symbols to represent said identity, such as his iconic green carnations, it is not hard to see how *The Picture of Dorian Gray* most likely was used as a tool in an attempt to transform societal attitudes towards homosexuality or views on male bonds. Jeff Nunokawa in *Gender and Sexuality* says that “the effort that Wilde describes in his famous novel to immortalize homosexual desire in the portrait of the young man who incites it, may be read as an effort to reverse a mid-Victorian tendency”. (126) Suggesting that Oscar Wilde did try to push societal boundaries when it comes to views on homosexuality, even though in a discreet manner. While Oscar Wilde may not have been an activist for his sexual orientation in the modern sense and understanding of it, his personal life and the themes present in multiple of his writings suggest an understanding of queer experiences, and being someone inclined to favour these realities.

With the presentation of Lord Henry and Dorian Gray and their relationship, the author makes the reader question the heteronormative expectations existing and to view an example of the complexities that human desire and identity can have, and how sticking to these rules so strictly can end up causing harm. Wilde explores and critiques certain aspects of gender and sexuality while subtly including his experiences and perspective as a queer person.

Notably, we have to mention that during the Victorian era, when this story was first published, queerness was seen as immoral, and homosexual or non-conforming people were often punished, with sodomy being even criminalized. As a consequence, queer coding in literature became a form of expression for homosexual authors who had to face restrictions when it comes to addressing these topics. By analyzing certain passages of the story that portray queerness, in addition to different interpretations given to the text throughout time, an understanding of the author's life and the context where the novel was written, we will try to conceive a notion of what Wilde's intention when forming this story was.

Even when ignoring the homosexual representation added to the story, it is undeniable how this novel works as a great example of the complexities and limitations present in male-to-male bonds, or how homosocial relationships retain certain characteristics particular to these connections in particular. Duc Dau has argued that: "This homosociality is often accompanied by a homophobia built into the obligatory heterosexuality of male-dominated kinship systems aimed at maintaining male privilege." (287) Which gives a reflection of how masculinity gives some sort of status to the male figure, and when homosexuality gets involved, this masculinity stops being present and thus males look down upon homosexuality. Also, homosocial relationships work in favour to a "male privilege", but once again if homosexuality takes part in it, this privilege over anything deemed as not masculine is lost, something that draws parallels with the novel's author Oscar Wilde and his tragic life, one where he ends up in poverty although being a renowned writer, because of his homosexuality.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the character of Lord Henry has often been interpreted as a queer-coded character. From Lord Henry's depiction as flamboyant, to his particular interest in the title character, Dorian Gray. We can see the author's intention to include a character

that would go against the societal norms that could provoke discussions about his personality and interests that would be considered taboo at the time, but not putting the character in a negative light. The fact that this character is never explicitly said to be homosexual, or any other term used at the time to refer to people with sexual or romantic interest in their same-sex, draws a parallel with society at the time, where homosexuality, although sometimes suspected, would be hidden from most. John-Charles Duffy in *Gay-Related Themes in the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, gives a historical insight of when the term homosexual started being used, when he states: ‘‘we must reconsider what we are doing when we identify and analyze "homosexual themes" in works that predate the invention of homosexuality – a date usually set at 1892, when the terms "homosexual" and "heterosexual" made their English debut in a translation of Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*.’’(327), with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* being published two years before the term started being used, we understand that at the time it was not a word used to refer to queerness, but I would be using the term in modern understanding to represent the same-sex attraction from the novel.

We can understand the character of Lord Henry in particular seems to embody certain aspects of the repression homosexuality suffered at the time, but, at the same time, we can deduce he has an understanding of his feelings and that the character is just keeping them undercover:

I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream—I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy (...)  
But the bravest man amongst us is afraid of himself. (...) The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it (...) It has been said that the great events of

the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also. (18-19)

From this passage, during a conversation with Dorian Gray, we see how the character of Lord Henry displays his thoughts: although not directly expressed in relation to homosexuality, he knows most people are not in a position of full expression and freedom, and acknowledges a “temptation” that can only live in their heads due to social norms, he also suggests these temptations having relation with sins and could be interpreted as homosexual tendencies or desires towards other men, in this case, Dorian. To a certain extent, this passage can be seen as some type of “confession” about his feelings towards Dorian Gray, but since Lord Henry is a victim of repression because of societal expectations, he used coded language that does not directly address the topic.

Lord Henry also seems to not be so in favour of his own marriage, in instances like when he says: “You seem to forget that I am married, and the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties.” (7). He does not seem to have a very positive view on marriage, or maybe his marriage in particular, but it is worth mentioning that he seems to spend more time with males, such as Dorian, and uses much more affectionate language to refer to him, like in examples above, than he does to refer to his own wife.

Similarly, the character of Dorian Gray himself can be seen as queer coded. He is often described, even when it is hard to describe someone’s queerness without falling in stereotypes, with what would be considered physical feminine traits, from his rosy cheeks, to his red lips, applying some heteronormative tones to the story to explain the obsession Lord Henry seems to have with Dorian’s physical appearance “the face of Antinous was to late

Greek sculpture, and the face of Dorian Gray will someday be to me” (12). Even the settings where he is often put could be considered “feminine”, like the use of flowers or floral scents around him, or the fact that he is being used as a model or reference for an artist.

As the story progresses and Dorian descends into a moral decay, he also becomes obsessed with beauty and pleasure, presenting the fear of aging. Dorian Gray represents the restrictive society in Victorian England, where people were forced to suppress their real selves and ideology to live a life within the parameters of what was considered acceptable at the time. Stephen Garton in *The Scales of Suffering: Love, Death and Victorian Masculinity* refers to this, talking about masculinity: “(there were) tensions between the public and the private male self at a time when the codes of Victorian masculinity were focused on the rigorous presentation of a controlled and ordered self.” (54-55) Male figures were expected to act in a certain way in public to maintain their masculinity, even if this went against their true feelings and attitudes.

The character works as a critique of societal hypocrisy and the consequences of living a life that does not align with our own true self. The pressure of not being able to act on his own views and feelings can be related to how the character ends up decaying and committing immoral acts, led by his obsession with power and his appearance that everyone, males included, seemed to obsess over.

Even when at times where the author needed to keep vague about certain aspects, like reflected in the following writing by Laura Eastlake:

When asked about the moral of the novel, Wilde did not address conventional abstract notions of Victorian morality but offered an explanation based on the

failure of the male characters to reconcile in one body and in one identity, key aspects of decadent masculinity. Basil Hallward ‘worshipped physical beauty far too much’; Dorian ‘abandoned himself to sensation and pleasure’; Henry Wotton ‘sought only to be a spectator in life’. (215)

He did not directly address how his text could relate to homosexuality, but through the novel, the author makes use of certain devices to deliver his message about Dorian’s image, like in the following:

“Men who talked grossly became silent when Dorian Gray entered the room. There was something in the purity of his face that rebuked them. His mere presence seemed to recall to them the memory of the innocence that they had tarnished. They wondered how one so charming and graceful as he was could have escaped the stain of an age that was at once sordid and sensual.” (108)

Where he attributes the character of Dorian certain power over men, the admiration described is associated with his beauty, but by making use of terms such as “sensual” the intent of homoerotic desire can still be present in the interpretation.

In conclusion, the exploration of queer coding within *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reveals Oscar Wilde's intricate portrayal of sexuality and societal norms in the Victorian era. Embedded within the novel are subtle but impactful representations of non-conforming identities, embodied notably in characters like Lord Henry and Dorian Gray. Wilde's writing hints at unconventional desires and relationships, navigating the constraints of the time without explicit labels or terms commonly used today to discuss queerness. This analysis

delves into the flamboyance of Lord Henry, his nuanced interactions with Dorian, and the societal context that subtly implies desires or repressions, reflecting the complexities of male-to-male relationships within Victorian expectations. Through coded language and character traits, Wilde adeptly critiques the struggles individuals faced in expressing their true selves amidst societal pressures, ultimately questioning the era's hypocrisy and the consequences of repressing one's identity. Wilde's deliberate narrative devices illustrate a broader message about authenticity, desire, and the suffocating effects of conformity in a society that marginalized non-conventional identities.

### Chapter III: Reception of *Carmilla* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

When analyzing a text, it is crucial to try and understand the context in which it was written, and how societal values and views on certain topics can shape the interpretation and acceptance of said story, informing how the stories written could be seen by the readers. In particular, both *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde make use of homosexuality or situations that challenge heteronormativity to deliver their narrative, thus giving valuable insight that help in giving us a glimpse into how societal attitudes towards queerness have influenced the reading of these texts as social views on the matter have evolved while these texts continue being read and analyzed. In addition to this, the question of whether authorial intent remains relevant in the modern interpretations by the readers and their response to their texts crafted, the understanding of these works adds more complexity to the analysis and the meaning such books could take depending on the context in which their novels are read.

*Carmilla* was published in 1872 and made use of a queer character at a time where such topics, both sexuality and by consequence lesbianism were considered taboo for society, as stated by Peter Stearns: “Surely Victorianism and repression were identical where sex was concerned.” (18) but a time where these topics were used allegorically, like in this novel where the use of the lesbian vampire can be seen as a reference as to how society views same-sex relationships, especially those constituted by women. Whether *Carmilla* used homosexual themes with a positive or negative intention, the interpretation stays in the eye of the reader and the impact this novel has had in queer readers, such as myself or the many more that have used this novella as a study tool cannot be denied. Published at a time where the term being used here to describe this story, “queer”, was just being started to be used



with that intention, not being used by heterosexual or cisgender readers, it is easy to see how early readers might have interpreted the text with much more ambiguity in comparison to what people who read this novel today might interpret, consider the contextual clues and knowledge we have nowadays. The text also hints about societal expectations, for example: “Girls are caterpillars while they live in the world, to be finally butterflies when the summer comes.” (270) The use of this phrase illustrates the societal expectation that young women should transform from innocent beings into mature and socially acceptable adults. It emphasizes the pressure for young women to conform to specific societal ideals.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published in 1890, by Oscar Wilde, an author who faced backlash due to his homosexuality and flamboyant persona, even serving jail time due to engaging in homosexual relationships, even being of public consideration at a time where homosexuality was not a topic touched upon, but referenced: “Consequently, Wilde’s homosexuality became common knowledge in many quarters. The press reported his vacations with male companions.” (228) Wilde’s homosexual tendencies were being looked at by society and media, and according to Adut, Wilde was accepted among their society before he was actually convicted for Gross Indecency:

The proclivities of Wilde were, moreover, common knowledge in London for a long time before his tribulations began. Homosexuality was implied in some of his writings and was part and parcel of his public persona. Yet Wilde was the darling of London society. While Wilde’s art was later to be branded as corrupt, his works received considerable critical acclaim and remained very popular across all social classes until the day of his arrest. (214)

Although published twenty years later than *Carmilla*, when it comes to societal views on the matter, not much had changed, as the use of queerness still had to be done by subtly hinting

to it instead of directly addressing it. In addition to this, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* also illustrates some views on society at the time by hinting: “Nowadays people know the price of everything, and the value of nothing.” (42) or “Nowadays all the married men live like bachelors, and all the bachelors like married men.” (151) that criticizes the superficial nature of society, emphasizing its obsession with appearances, materialism, fake relationships and external values over intrinsic worth or moral considerations. It reflects the societal emphasis on superficiality, something that plays a key role in the repression explored in previous chapters.

As societal views towards queerness evolved, especially during the twentieth century, where homosexuality gradually stopped being taboo and started to be considered a reality, and the twenty first century, where queerness has become more socially acceptable, proven by the fact that homosexual marriage is starting to spread and also, readers have started to reevaluate novels like *Carmilla* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to focus more on their use of said homosexual themes. *Carmilla* being read as a piece with lesbian undertones and as a symbol for the exploration of desire and forbidden love through the relation of its title character and Laura, being mostly appreciated for being an early exploration of queer themes, accentuating the impact societal attitudes have in the interpretation literary works can have during different times. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, being read as a symbol of the consequences of repressing one’s true identity, and with a better understanding of the approach of Wilde being a homosexual himself.

Despite all this repression, of course Victorian were aware of the existence of homosexuals, as they have always been present in society, just less visible at certain periods,

despite not being referred to with this particular word at the time, like stated by Jeffrey Weeks:

As the work of anthropologists increasingly revealed from the late nineteenth century, homosexuality had existed through all historical periods, in a variety of different cultures and classes. (...) But what has varied enormously has been the way in which different societies have regarded homosexuality and how those who were engaged in homosexual activities regarded themselves. (212)

At this time was when homosexuality started to be labeled, like mentioned in previous chapters. And figures like Oscar Wilde gaining recognition despite his sexual tendencies being hinted or known by many, in addition to texts with homosexual motives such as the analyzed here being read by many despite including topics not socially acceptable in their pages, represent the slow advance of queerness into society. According to Weeks: "There is some evidence to suggest the emergence of a more recognisable secular male homosexual role from the late seventeenth century associated with an embryonic sub-culture, a particular mode of behaviour (often transvestite) and slang." (213) The nineteenth century was the time where homosexuality as a social actor started to be born.

While both novels tackle homosexuality, the distinction in the gender of the protagonists of both can also play a key role in the development and the perception of said stories, as female homosexuality is not perceived in the same way as male homosexuality according to Weeks:

The death penalty for buggery was repealed in 1861, but this was a prelude not to more liberal attitudes but to harsher ones. The Labouchere amendment to

the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 for the first time made all male homosexual acts illegal; lesbian acts, of course, still scarcely recognised, were ignored. This enactment was a crucial factor in determining twentieth century social attitudes. Nor must it be seen in national isolation. The clampdown on male homosexuality was paralleled in other European countries (...) The most dramatic results of the Labouchere Amendment can be found in court cases (of which the Wilde trial is only the most notorious), in an increase in the incidence of blackmail, and in social ostracism for those unfortunate enough to be caught. But it also symbolises a subtle change in social attitudes towards homosexuality and sexuality generally (213)

Society started to punish homosexuality, even when this meant a new acknowledgement of its existence, something not really happening prior to this time. This also highlights the difference between perception of lesbianism and male homosexuality, with lesbianism taking a back seat in comparison: “Little serious attention has been paid to the study of homosexuality in the past: more is known about male homosexuals than about women: ancient Greece is better understood than nineteenth century London” (218). If male to male homosexuality was just starting to be acknowledged Lesbianism was not even considered.

With this understanding of homosexuality barely being starting to be recognized, we can understand that to society at the time, some of these queer elements present in the stories could be ignored by some, according to Duffy:

A collection of fairy tales is not where one would immediately look for such themes; indeed, although they recognized homosexual allusions in *Dorian Gray*, Wilde's Victorian readers seem to have found nothing untoward about the fairy tales. Hence

the tales could find their way into such unrepachable publications as *The Lady's Pictorial* and continue to be reprinted in children's readers to this day (328-329)

Wilde's readers for the most part did not read his texts with the idea to find these topics within the stories, so without a basis on an understanding of homosexuality, they simply ignored the clues and his novels were even read by kids.

In conclusion, delving into the depths of literature demands a profound understanding of the societal context enveloping the text. Both *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde use elements of queerness in their narratives, shedding light on societal attitudes toward such themes during their respective eras. Investigating these works has unearthed valuable insights into the evolution of societal perceptions concerning queerness, marking a profound shift from taboo to acceptance. *Carmilla* dared to explore lesbian undertones at a time when such themes were deemed inappropriate, symbolizing societal expectations on female transformation while hinting at forbidden desires. In contrast, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* navigated the constraints of societal repression, subtly addressing Wilde's own homosexuality.

Unveiling societal views toward queerness throughout history, the investigation revealed how texts were reinterpreted in changing social contexts. *Carmilla* is now celebrated for its early exploration of queer themes, while Wilde's masterpiece is embraced as an allegory for the consequences of stifling one's true identity. The nineteenth century marked the emergence of recognition for homosexuality, witnessed by the labeling of homosexual acts, highlighting society's struggle to acknowledge queer existence. The distinction between male and female homosexuality showcased the harsher treatment and societal negligence towards lesbianism.

These nuances in perception illuminate how societal attitudes shaped the reception and interpretation of queer elements in literature, with some readers overlooking these themes due to societal ignorance or lack of recognition. Ultimately, my investigative journey into these texts transcends authorial intent, inviting readers to probe the evolving societal attitudes towards queerness and the resonance of these themes across different eras.

## Conclusion

Through the entirety of this dissertation, I have exposed the different approaches by Sheridan Le Fanu in *Carmilla* and Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. By exploring the different elements and writing tactics these authors made use of to conform their interpretation of Queer characters and the meaning they had to each of them personally.

For *Carmilla*, the most important points to discuss is the different elements that constitute lesbianism in Carmilla's and Laura's relationship, and the analysis of how the author makes use of these elements to put our perspective of their lesbian storyline in certain light that correlates with societal standards and his own view on the matter, with him making us doubt about the veracity of their feelings, and mostly trying to associate the same-sex desire that happens between the main couple as a consequence of the supernatural nature of Carmilla, being displayed as the reason as to why these feelings would be able to develop between two girls. Carmilla's attraction to women, symbolizes her lesbianism as a threat to societal norms, further emphasizing the societal fear and negative connotations associated to homosexuality during the Victorian period.

As for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the analysis was constructed around Oscar Wilde's personal experience as a Queer person, having a more personal connection to these topics and having a different approach when compared to *Carmilla*'s author. The analysis of the characters was done by looking at them being subtly coded in an attempt to challenge societal norms regarding masculinity, same-sex desire and relationships, emphasizing the challenges individuals faced as non-conventional identities during the nineteenth century. Wilde makes use of coded language to imply their queerness without explicitly stating their interest in each

other, probably a realistic approach for queer people at the time. Also making a variety of different approaches through the different characters, such as Lord Henry subtly expressing his desires or Dorian showcasing repressed desires and the consequences these represent regarding societal expectations. I would have liked to further work on Oscar Wilde's views, as his stance as a queer person during the Victorian period gives me many ideas and areas to explore.

In chapter III societal attitudes towards queerness were analyzed and how they influenced the reception and interpretation of both texts, exploring the historical context of them and how they tackle the queer motives, delving into societal attitudes and constraints surrounding homosexuality during their publication period. Also illustrating how societal views towards queerness evolved over time, from repression and neglect in the nineteenth century to increased acknowledgment and evolving interpretations in the modern era. The analysis emphasized differences in societal treatment between male and female homosexuality, highlighting the harsher treatment of male homosexuality and societal negligence towards lesbianism during those times. Also demonstrating the changing reader interpretations, with modern audiences appreciating these texts for their early exploration of queer themes, while historical readers might have overlooked these elements due to societal ignorance or lack of recognition. The changes in the views on these novels through time, made me wonder about how these novels will evolve even further in the future, and if they will be seen as a positive contribution or something that holds back on queer advancements in society's view.

When trying to approach these novels, it was noticeable how there is a lack of sources that provide the historical context or direct opinions about the texts as the time of release,



which is also considerable with the fact that at the time most opinions on these type of media was through speech so there is not much documentation to back the original opinions and views on *Carmilla* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* having to approach the texts from a historical point of view to formulate what a general view on the novels at the time was.

Even when I had to slightly modify certain aspects of my dissertation to fit with reliable material, I think it was still an interesting experience that allowed me to take into consideration different points of views, in this case the author's, their context and motivations to make use of homosexuality when developing the characters for their novels.

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