The Fallen Woman and Victorian Sexual Ethics in *Carmilla*

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Introduction

Gothic literature is a captivating genre that emerged like a ghost from the depths in the eighteenth century. This literary form, that has its origin in Romanticism, becomes a reflection of societal anxieties and cultural transformations, as stated by Shrabani Chakraborty, "Victorian literature grew up as world moving with many features. It was complicated and multidimensional, which consists of huge changes among romance and reality." (296). It delves into the complex and darker aspects of humans and often has creepy settings, mysterious characters, and a high sense of emotional intensity. This dissertation aims to examine how the novel depicts the fallen woman and the process through which women fall and how society intervenes to correct them. Delving into the complex narrative of *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu, the study examines the representation of the fallen woman through the characters of Carmilla and Laura, differentiating the stage of the fallen woman and the process by which they fall. It also explores how society intervenes to prevent women from falling and attempts to rectify their paths. However, it is crucial to clarify that this investigation does not seek to analyse broader vampire literature or the fallen woman in its entirety, but rather focus specifically on this novel and the instances that substantiate my objectives.

Exploring the depiction of the fallen woman in this literary work is relevant because it delves into the narrative dynamics of women's fall and social correction. The study provides insights of the moral and cultural implications fixed in the literary portrayal of female characters. Bringing these issues to the table helps to have a broader understanding of fallen women and the sexual ethics of the Victorian era.

It is fundamental to define that by Victorian sexual ethics I refer to the beliefs and moral principles prevalent in Victorian society. Rooted in a conservative atmosphere, these

values were shaped by societal, religious and cultural influences. Virtues such as chastity were of great importance, emphasising the sexual purity and passivity that defined Victorian women. Any deviation from these preconceived norms led to significant social consequences, namely, being labelled as fallen woman due to Any deviation from these established norms carried significant social consequences, particularly for women labelled as "fallen" due to perceived moral transgressions. The figure of the fallen woman encompasses an individual, whether single or married, involved in premarital sex or adultery against her husband or partner, with her actions becoming widely known and exposed to society. This behaviour promptly subjected her to moral stigma, stigmatising her as reprehensible and despicable.

This dissertation employs a New Historicist methodology to develop these themes. By exploring the novel through this lens, I aim to discover connections between the narrative and prevailing attitudes towards sexuality and the fallen woman in the Victorian period. This approach is useful because it unravels layers of meaning present in the text while also considering historical circumstances, power dynamics, and social norms. While this methodology offers valuable insights, it may fall short in fully developing the archetype of the vampire. To address this limitation, in the second chapter of the dissertation I incorporated a psychoanalytic approach. Psychoanalysis delves into the subconscious and uncovers repressed desires, fears, and motivations. This method complements the previous one because it adds a deeper understanding of how the vampire is used to reveal hidden aspects of female sexuality.

Little has been said about the fallen woman, according to Nina Auerbach "the fallen woman becomes the abased figurehead of a fallen culture; her imaginative resonance justifies the punishment to which she is subjected. But Victorian social reformers found her as painful a presence as do contemporary feminist critics". (31). This suggests that the figure of the fallen woman works as a representation of a society in decline. Her existence has to do with broader cultural anxieties and fears.

Through an analysis of *Carmilla*, this study inquires into the intricate representation of the fallen woman, presenting the complexities of the characters Carmilla and Laura. It carefully distinguishes between the phase of the fallen woman and the gradual process through which these women experience their descent. This dissertation contributes to previous studies by exploring in detail the figure of the fallen woman and the way in which society intervenes to stop the spreading of this character. Furthermore, this exploration goes beyond a superficial investigation and brings a more detailed and nuanced perspective to the existing body of literature on *Carmilla*.

The dissertation will follow this structure: in the initial chapter, emphasis will be placed on elucidating the significance and importance of Victorian society and the concept of the fallen woman as essential frameworks for comprehending *Carmilla*. A key argument will delve into the prevalent visions of women's roles during this period, introducing and examining terms like the "angel in the house" and fallen woman. Furthermore, the chapter will scrutinise Victorian perspectives on sexuality, gender roles, and societal apprehensions.

In the second chapter, I explore Le Fanu's use of the vampiric character as a tool to reveal the obscured facets and aspects of female sexuality. This argument posits that the vampire serves as a manifestation of the darker desires in human sexuality that often go unrecognised. Furthermore, the study will be debating themes of lesbianism and the active role in courtship of Carmilla, illustrating how these elements are employed to bring forth the concealed layers of female sexuality within the vampire archetype.

In the third chapter, I aim to establish Carmilla as a symbolic representation of the Victorian fallen woman. This exploration will dissect three crucial facets, sexual ethics, social contagion, and death within *Carmilla*: the fallen woman and the falling woman. The initial segment delves into Carmilla's defiance of Victorian sexual norms, akin to the fallen woman,

building upon the foundation laid in the first chapter. Subsequently, the examination of social

contagion delves into the perception of the fallen woman as a societal disease. Finally, the

thematic exploration of death aims to unravel the multifaceted symbolic layers it carries

within the narrative.

Chapter I: Victorian Society and the Fallen Woman

Providing contextual background is fundamental for a study of *Carmilla* because it allows to understand the novel within the broader cultural, social, and literary context of the Victorian era. Comprehend the societal norms, moral values, and expectations prevalent during this period gives a framework for examining the characters' actions and themes of the novel. Additionally, it provides insight into Victorian perspectives on sexuality, gender roles, and social anxieties, helping to unravel the complexities of *Carmilla's* exploration of the fallen woman and its implications.

1. 1. Role of Women in the Victorian Period

The predominant perception of women during the Victorian period suggests one of being obedient, morally pure, and pious. Furthermore, they were expected to fulfil the roles of mother and wife. They were often denied access to professional education and political participation, limiting their influence and autonomy.

The phrase "the angel of the house" has its origins in Coventry Patmore's poem of the same title. It is a tribute to his wife and became synonymous of the Victorian ideal of a perfect woman. He considers her a model for all women and portrays her qualities of devotion to her children, unwavering loyalty to him and submissiveness. These qualities later became defining features of the feminine ideal of the time. The Victorian era gave rise to the ideal of the "angel in the house," depicting women as selfless, virtuous, and devoted to their families, which fits with the description of women according to Shrabani Chakraborty, "She was portrayed as gentle, soft, pure, sacrificing." (295). This belief served as an archetype of femininity reflected and reproduced in the literature and culture of the time. In "The Angel in the House and Fallen Women," Sarah Kühl asserts that the concepts of chastity and innocence

were highly valued and linked to how a woman's worth was measured by her purity. She states: "The more chaste and innocent a young woman and even a wife was, the more she lived up to the ideal" (Kühl 174). The emphasis on chastity and innocence becomes a crucial element because it helps understand the struggles and consequences faced by women who deviate from this ideal. While this statement is accurate, it is also a fact that the Victorian period, while maintaining many gender norms and expectations, also sowed the seeds of women's evolving self-perception regarding their social roles.

The concept of the "angel in the house" represents a sort of straitjacket for women and is closely related to their quest for independence. An example can be seen in the works of George Eliot as well as in authors of the immediately following century like Virginia Woolf. Each in their respective periods critiqued the concept of the "angel in the house" and advocated for women's creative and intellectual independence. As Greenberg astutely points out, Woolf's struggle for women's liberation is closely tied to her liberation from the confines of the Victorian home. Characters like Clarissa Dalloway, about half a century later, embody these feminist ideals and encapsulate the challenges that women with fragmented identities face within a patriarchal society that imposes rigid systems and norms of domesticity and femininity, severely limiting economic and creative opportunities (Greenberg 4). The intellectual scrutiny that women began to apply to their situation dramatically shattered the stereotypical social view that women should be passive and devoid of ambitions.

Culturally, this era is distinguished by a strong sense of moral rectitude. The existing evangelical movement notably influenced the Victorians, emphasising devotion and religious ethics (Rayes 185). These principles had a profound impact on literature, art, and entertainment. In general, women were expected to behave in an angelic and sinless manner (Al-Rahid and Ahmed Al 211). This dominant notion placed significant pressure on women to conform to strict moral, and above all, sexual standards.

In any era, there are adherents, opponents, and those who are indifferent to ongoing discussions concerning ideas, customs, religions, and more. Quoting Christopher Parker, Julie Nash in her article says that "Victorian sexuality is not exempt from these different perspectives that coexist simultaneously. During that era, significant efforts were made both to challenge these proper attitudes and to maintain them". (Nash 561). Both genders participated in this, not just conservative men but also women. This constant representation of positions in favour and against the Victorian behavioural ideal can be demonstrated in the work of Olivia Dobbs and Amanda Pinkin. In their study "Cambridge Women and The Professional World: Navigating Gender Conservatism in The Late Victorian Era," they discuss how some brilliant women, such as mathematicians Charlotte Scott and Philippa Fawcett, or physiologist Marion Bidder, exemplified, on the one hand, that they could challenge the notion that every Victorian woman should dedicate herself to household chores, and child care through their achievements. On the other hand, they also validated Victorian conservatism by conforming to prevailing behavioural norms, which allowed them to maintain their intellectual positions. Even Bidder resigned from her position at Cambridge to eventually become a housewife (Dobbs and Pinkin 158).

1. **2. Carmilla, the Fallen Woman and Femme Fatale**

Sexuality has been a constant aspect of human biology and psychology throughout history. However, it is important to note that any examination of sexuality in the Victorian Era, inevitably involves viewing it through our contemporary lenses, and therefore with a certain degree of bias.

Nina's Auerbach study explains the fallen woman's attitudes and her depiction. She analyses how these females are illustrated and the cultural implications surrounding their

narratives. Additionally, she explores themes related to morality, societal expectations and gender roles prevalent in the Victorian period, providing an understanding of women in literature and society during that time. In the Victorian era, the concept of a fallen woman, in broad terms, referred to a woman, whether single or married, who committed premarital sex or adultery against her husband or partner, and whose action was known and exposed to society. This sexual act immediately branded her as despicable. In the case of a married woman, she was considered unfit to continue caring for her children and husband, leading to her expulsion from the home. For unmarried women, they were deemed unworthy of courtship and gallantry by any suitor, and thus, they were forced to live with guilt and rely on the charity of a patriarch, if not sent away to avoid disgrace. Furthermore, the situation, especially for married women, meant that upon leaving their husband's financial support, they had few options for survival. They could leave the city and seek a new way of life to atone for their sins. This might involve residing in the suburbs, living in poverty under a bridge, or achieving some degree of economic independence by becoming a prostitute, "practicing one of the few trades available to Victorian females" (Auerbach 31). The latter option became the iconic representation of the fallen Victorian woman.

During the Victorian period, the desire for forbidden pleasures, such as heightened sexuality understood as lust, straddled the line between what you should be and what was hidden inside you. Sexuality takes shape, then, through sexual desire as an essential component in Carmilla's story. We can appreciate this in this passage: "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.'" (Le Fanu 264). As we can see, there is a clear expression of sexuality in the narratives. These passages come and go throughout the text, manifesting as expressions that attempt to explain

the seduction or enchantment that Carmilla exerts over Laura, and how she futilely tries to resist the seductive force of sexual awakening.

On the other hand, Anderson suggests that the presence of heightened, disturbing, and, therefore, unconventional female sexuality, as seen in *Carmilla*, can be related to a concept that emerged a century later but bears a striking resemblance: the femme fatale. To understand this, we should first recognize that divorce, single motherhood, extramarital relationships, and prostitution, among other things, gradually became more accepted, if not entirely, as the twentieth century progressed, thus diminishing the figure of the fallen woman. This intertwines the ideas of female sexual desire, the fallen woman, and the femme fatale, all carrying a negative connotation, in stark contrast to the Victorian ideal of the "angel in the house". As a result, we see a transition, both in literature and in reality, from the fallen woman to the femme fatale, both headed towards an inevitable tragedy from which only death seems to offer possible salvation.

Quoting Mario Praz, Teresa Fitzpatrick argues that the femme fatale embodies various archetypes, such as the praying mantis, a vampire, a siren, or a promiscuous courtesan. She also emphasises that the notion of sexual cannibalism and predatory instincts is a central and prevalent attribute of the fatal woman (Fitzpatrick 4). As we can see, Carmilla embodies this description, she is literally a vampire and she sustains herself by feeding on her victim's blood and lures them with her seductive charm, making her a prime illustration of the fatal woman.

As we can see, in simple terms, during the Victorian era, if a married woman did not stay at home to care for her children and household, she was considered a bad woman. On the other hand, when a young, unmarried woman gave in to her partner's sexual desires before marriage, and this became public knowledge, she could easily be labelled a prostitute, a term used interchangeably for any single mother, a woman involved with a married man, or models

posing for painters and artists (Kühl 172). The expanded stereotype of the "fallen woman" effectively marginalised women from society.

In "The Rise of the Fallen Woman," Auerbach mentions this: "the Victorian imagination isolated the fallen woman so pitilessly from a social context, preferring to imagine her as destitute and drowned prostitute or errant wife cast beyond the human community" (Auerbach 33). Indeed, this concept depicted women who strayed from the rigid social norms of chastity and purity that characterised the Victorian era. Joan D. Peterson suggests that 'she defied the prevailing assumptions about female nature and was dangerous insofar as she threatened to undermine the moral and sexual idealism in which attitudes toward women were grounded' (Peterson 4).

In essence, it is important to remember that Victorian society was built on deeply ingrained beliefs held by both men and women. These beliefs proposed that women's sexuality should remain secret and repressed. The notion of the "fallen woman" subverted all values that portrayed women as idealised, almost asexual beings, expected to stay within the confines of the family home. Although Carmilla hides her sexuality from the view of others (family and servants), maintaining secrecy. On the other hand, she subtly exposes her sexual desire when alone with Laura, fitting with the notion of "the fallen woman".

Chapter II: Sexual Taboos Through the Vampire

In the previous chapter, I described the fallen woman as a married individual, perceived negatively if she deviated from the societal norm of staying at home to take care for the children. The same happened when a young unmarried woman gave into the sexual desire of both herself and her partner before marriage, and this was public knowledge; she could easily be considered a "prostitute", a term used interchangeably for any single mother, a woman involved with a married man, sex workers, or models who posed for painters and artists (Kühl 172). As expressed in the first chapter, with the expanded stereotype of the "fallen woman," women were segregated from society.

In this chapter, I will explain how the use of the vampiric character allows Le Fanu to reveal hidden aspects of female sexuality. This encompasses the examination of sexual desires, as well as the exploration of lesbianism in an era as rife with taboos as the Victorian period. I will adopt two distinct approaches, the historicist and psychoanalytic. While the historicist approach delves into the contextual and temporal dimensions, the psychoanalytic perspective adds depth to the exploration of the archetype of the vampire. This endeavour aims to offer a comprehensive understanding by combining historical context with psychological knowledge about the vampire.

The conception of the vampire and its evolution is crucial to understanding its presence in Le Fanu's work. Firstly, it is important to mention that, despite numerous studies on folkloric vampires and literary renditions, the pivotal moment marking the transition from a folkloric monster to a literary figure remains untold. In approaching this, I will consider the German literature of the mid-eighteenth century as the initial realm where the vampire figure underwent adaptation from Central European folklore and superstition, becoming integral to literary works. According to Heide Crawford, the figure of the vampire in the first German

works represented "a variety of social fears, anxieties, and taboos in their physical and

personality traits and in their interactions with the mortals they encounter" (Crawford 15).

This is important to mention because it states that the vampire is a transaction of societal

concerns and fears that goes beyond folklore.

2. 1. Sexual Desire

I have already exposed that female sexuality in the Victorian Era is a subject

concealed behind the idealisation and exaltation of extreme femininity through the concept of

the angel in the house. Therefore, the vampire provides an opportunity to examine what lies

hidden behind fears, something that, when explored, must be concealed from the gaze of

others because it does not align with socially imposed norms.

An intriguing aspect of the vampire concept is the perception of the myth ingrained in

people's minds, as Kimberley suggests:

> In Jungian terms, the vampire itself is one of the main
> archetypes of the human psyche and is sometimes referred to as one
> of the images associated with the archetypal character, 'the Shadow',
> one of the most negative of all archetypes. So the image of the
> vampire is embedded into the collective unconscious of all human
> minds as a result of its emotional and psychological significance to
> human beings, thereby explaining its continuous presence in myth
> and literature (3).

This perspective partially provides reasons why the vampire symbolises hidden emotional

aspects and offers explanations for the negativity associated with certain human actions, like

the sexual behaviour of a woman.

Now, to strictly focus on the sexual realm, I want to highlight a quote from Kate

Buckley with which I agree, and I intend to elaborate on it further. It is important to mention

since it emphasises how the vampire serves as a representation of the fear that surrounds

individuals who resist assimilation into reality and as a metaphor that embodies the fears and

anxieties of society. In this quote, the vampire is revealed as a portrayal of sexuality as dark

desires that humans refuse to acknowledge:

> Human communities have emphasised the importance of assimilating into the social norms of each region throughout the world, and the vampire came to represent fear of those who refused to assimilate, symbolising a host of societal anxieties about sexual, religious, and cultural nonconformity (9).

Additionally, Kimberley in Rickels' words later explores the vampire archetype as an

expression of repressed sexuality through a Freudian lens:

> Freud's attitudes towards the vampire myth would likely be typical of his 'dream analyses', whereby any kind of dream imagery implies some form of unconscious sexual wish fulfilment. For instance, Freudian psychoanalysis claims that "morbid dread always signifies repressed sexual wishes… the vampire is a kind of phantom projection produced by the medium's desire to be possessed, controlled and vampirised" (3-4)

This underscores the significance of the vampire myth in resembling Freudanian

terms, linking it to hidden sexual desires in the realm of the unconscious. The idea that

vampires are a projection of the desire to be possessed and controlled, emphasises the notion

that this figure conceals tabooed facets of human sexuality. This proposes that at a

subconscious level, individuals desire the existence of entities that exercise control and

dominance over them. In that sense, Carmilla assumes the role of dominatrix, while Laura

assumes the role of submissive. The reader is forced to consider whether they are inclined to

be like Carmilla and take a position of control or like Laura who ultimately wants to be

controlled by the vampire.

The vampire subverts, for instance, the concepts of virtue and purity, going against the

Victorian expectation of feminine moderation. Carmilla's seductive behaviour contradicts the

Victorian belief that women should be passive, pure, and chaste. Her words and intimate

actions challenge the prevailing image of the ideal woman.

Furthermore, the presence of eroticism in Le Fanu's vampire story progresses through the pages, at times subtly and at others much more overtly. In this regard, we have already seen how Victorian society is framed by strong moralistic social control. It is important to note that this perspective has persisted throughout various historical periods and is likely to endure due to the inherent inclination of human nature to delineate norms regarding appropriateness, as has been the case in epochs past. That same nature, full of emotions where nothing is black or white, is revealed. Despite society's efforts to portray it otherwise, it unveils itself as an infinite spectrum of hues of grey upon deeper scrutiny.

After years have passed since the encounters with Carmilla, Laura states that:

> The vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons. […] 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. (317)

This is consistent with what has been written about vampires and their various representations, where eroticism and repressed sexuality form a structure of archetypal acts. Throughout literary history, vampires have been utilised as symbolic figures that delve into the complex realm of human desires, often serving as a metaphor for the forbidden and the suppressed within societal norms. The incorporation of erotic elements in vampire narratives transcends mere sensuality, offering an exploration of the intricate dynamics surrounding human sexuality and its connection to societal expectations and taboos. In essence, the illustration of vampires becomes a rich tapestry, weaving together themes of desire, repression, and societal norms, forming an elaborated and enduring archetype.

2. 2. Lesbianism in *Carmilla*

Next, I will introduce the notion of lesbianism portrayed in Le Fanu's narrative, which stands out as a distinctive element for vampires, presenting a bold approach for the nineteenth century.

Upon closer examination of Le Fanu's work, the story subtly and overtly conveys that women can experience passion and sexual desire, which is thus not exclusively limited to men. Furthermore, it goes beyond, depicting these emotions directed toward another woman, as exemplified in the narrative. To illustrate this concept, I provide the following quote showcasing the lesbian relationship between the main characters:

> She kissed me silently. 'I am sure, Carmilla, you have been in love; that there is, at this moment, an affair of the heart going on.' 'I have been in love with no one, and never shall,' she whispered, 'unless it should be with you.' (Le Fanu 273)

This passage suggests a lesbian tone between Carmilla and Laura. Carmilla's denial of having been in love with someone else and saying that she might only experience love with the protagonist, implies a romantic and intimate connection.

The "angel in the house" represented by Laura is tempted by feelings and emotions that disturb her, gradually leading her towards a moral abyss. She acknowledges it herself, yet she is unable to overcome the enchantment of forbidden eroticism. Two women seemingly of the same age and just emerging from adolescence, both beautiful and belonging to non-working classes, progressively give in to mutual attraction, though for different reasons. Laura discovers erotic desire as a woman for the first time, and Carmilla because her existence depends on that seduction.

The narrative shows us that this vampire engages erotically only with young women, particularly those considered to possess a higher social status, dismissing older women like

the maids, the nurse, and the governess present in the story. Le Fanu's portrayal of lesbianism turns to the vampire as a figure capable of exploring and exposing female passions.

2. 3. Active Role in Courtship

The character of Carmilla boldly challenges the Victorian ideal that women should be passive by embracing sensuality. This transition moves from a covertly friendly approach veiled by sensitivity and affection to explicit seduction characterised by strong sexual undertones and dominance. As Amy Leal suggests, Carmilla embodies a departure from expected Victorian female passivity, engaging in a spectrum of interactions that range from subtle closeness to overt, sexually charged seduction and dominance: "Carmilla's passion for Laura not only threatens her life, but also the power structure of Victorian society" (Leal 38). In contrast, Laura assumes a more passive role in courtship, being courted while Carmilla takes on an active role in approaching her. Laura, instead of actively pursuing Carmilla, finds herself being courted. Her passiveness aligns with societal expectations of women as objects of pursuit and as asexual beings, since she does not express romantic interest. Conversely, Carmilla interrupts this courtship dynamic and takes an active role. She takes the initiative to approach Laura, thereby challenging the prevailing norms of feminine passivity.

Homosexual love, as gleaned from the preceding reading, was a taboo subject in that era. It was a love that no one dared to speak its name, and, for instance, Queen Victoria herself did not believe it existed, or at least, if it did, she perceived it as potentially and sexually problematic (Leal 38). However, Carmilla, being a vampire appears as a supernatural desire, as well as the non-existence of vampires, grounding her actions in a characteristic inherent to vampires: "vampiric desire in its pure state ignores all distinctions of species, person, and sex" (Haggerty 1421). Therefore, through the character of Carmilla, Le Fanu is

allowed to discuss taboo themes within the framework of the supernatural narrative, ultimately reinforcing prevailing social norms.

As exposed, the horror literary genre evidently grants a certain freedom to construct the character of Carmilla. Le Fanu is well aware of this as he shapes the identity of this vampire. While she appears human, possesses emotions and feelings, and behaves like one, she ultimately is a monster, an animal disguised in sensitivity—a cat-like creature, eager, hungry, and insatiable for enjoying human blood. From this, it follows that although the story can unveil feminine erotic aspects and a lesbian relationship between the two main characters, it nonetheless continues to represent it as evil, the reprehensible, something to be fought against and completely eradicated. The norm ends up being strengthened by its own act of transgression.

Chapter III: Decay and Deviance: *Carmilla* and the Fallen Woman

As we saw in the previous chapter, Carmilla's character boldly contradicts Victorian sexual ethics, embodying a unique and unconventional personality that expresses her sexual desire and seduces Laura through subtle yet evident actions.

In this final chapter, I will argue that Carmilla can be interpreted as a symbol of the Victorian figure of the fallen woman. To do so, I will discuss three relevant dimensions, namely, sexual ethics, social contagion, and death in *Carmilla*: the fallen woman and the falling woman. In the first section, I will state that Carmilla challenges Victorian sexual ethics in a similar way to how the fallen woman opposes existing social norms. Then, social contagion will examine how the fallen woman is also viewed as a kind of pestilence or plague. Finally, I will explore death within *Carmilla* and how it shows complex layers of

symbolic meaning, particularly intertwined with the figure of the fallen woman archetype

portrayed by Carmilla and the potential fate that looms over Laura.

3. 1. Sexual Ethics

Carmilla's disdain for the prevalent morality mirrors the challenge to social norms

posed by the fallen woman. The female vampire, with the power to seduce through her

charms boldly contradicts Victorian sexual ethics, exactly as the fallen woman does to

prevailing social norms.

This concept primarily hinges on Carmilla's ability to destroy one of the Victorian

era's sacred pillars: the innocence of young girls. In the Victorian era, preserving the

innocence of young women epitomised purity and moral rectitude. Carmilla disrupts this,

acting as an agent of corruption, challenging societal norms and highlighting the vulnerability

of cherished values in the face of external influences. The perversion of her lascivious acts

torments guardians who witness, under their protection, the corruption of innocence and the

life of their loved ones, right before their eyes, unnoticed, with consent, under their very

noses. In General Spieldorf's letter, for instance, he reflects on his own foolishness in not

recognizing the danger. He uses the term "fiend" which suggests that the individual who was

welcomed was cruel and evil. It also implies that his house of innocence was invaded by this

evil being who seemed to be a charming companion for her daughter:

> Before then I had no idea of her danger. I have lost her, and
> now learn all, too late. […] The fiend who betrayed our infatuated
> hospitality has done it all. I thought I was receiving into my house
> innocence, gaiety, a charming companion for my lost Bertha.
> Heavens! what a fool have I been! (Le Fanu 249).

While the immediate suggestion of this passage is regarding the loss of life, the quote can be

interpreted in the broader context of the falling women, which I denote the process of

contagion. The act of falling involves a woman's transformation from a state of virtue to a morally compromised and potentially fallen position. The character, in this case, did not become a fallen woman since she met death. Nonetheless, she underwent the process of falling, illustrating the contagion and spread of the disease.

For instance, by seducing Laura, Carmilla deliberately transgresses the sexual ethics of Victorian society. She undermines the symbolic purity of the castle as a home, an integrity represented by Laura. Despite Laura's awareness of a certain contradiction in her sexual awakening, she cannot escape Carmilla's grasp, gradually moving towards her potential fate: becoming a fallen woman. This feeling of inevitability is demonstrated in this passage when Laura says: "I did feel, as she said, 'drawn towards her', but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed" (Le Fanu 260-261). This passage implies that Laura is teetering on the precipice of becoming a fallen woman. Despite feeling a conflicting mixture of attraction and repulsion, her overwhelming allure toward Carmilla prevails.

Similarly, the fallen woman, with her lack of decorum and active pursuit of sexual desire, distances herself from her duties of bearing an heir. The fallen woman, the adulteress, the "prostitute," knowingly staining the moral values upon which Victorian society is built, faces the rejection of all. She fully embraces the temptation of the forbidden. In other words, her desire outweighs respect for morality, eventually revealing her transgression, just like Carmilla.

As a result, both the vampire woman and the fallen woman, with their actions, transgress the sexual ethics of the time.

3. 2. Social Contagion

The idea of a mysterious disease spreading without apparent cause, and thus contaminating, is repeatedly exposed in *Carmilla*. Notably, this affliction is metaphorically associated with lesbianism, signifying the transgression of heteronormativity portrayed as a social illness. Furthermore, the fallen woman is also metaphorically considered a societal ailment. In a social context, the fallen woman is regarded as a contagion, contaminating established norms and expectations, such as a woman's duty to produce heirs. In essence, both lesbianism and the fallen woman are metaphorically depicted as social diseases, challenging and corrupting prevailing norms through their perceived deviations from entrenched social standards.

The vampire not only seduces Laura slowly but also, in the meantime, plunges the nearby village into a collective tragedy with the sequence of deaths of girls and young women, causing great upheaval in the population. In the following quote this fear is demonstrated:

> 'Assume, at starting, a territory perfectly free from that pest. How does it begin, and how does it multiply itself? I will tell you. 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. This happened in the case of the beautiful Mircalla, who was haunted by one of those demons. (Le Fanu 101)

This passage represents the societal fear and paranoia surrounding a perceived pestilence. The narrative implies that, starting with a pest-free territory, the progression of this evil begins with the demise of an individual, who, under specific conditions, transforms into a vampire. This spectre then haunts the living in their sleep, leading to their death and then their transformation into vampires. The case of Mircalla serves as an illustration of this ominous process. Nonetheless, while the quote implies an apparent inevitability in the advance of evil,

it is important to acknowledge that, by the end of the novel, the story resolves with the

successful halting of the pest, indicating that the initial fear was not an uncontrollable force of

malevolence. The multiplication of negativity erodes the foundations of what is established,

hence the fear that surrounds its spread.

Another example of the mysterious disease spreading like a plague can be seed in the

following passage:

> 'She is the poor girl who fancied she saw a ghost a fortnight
> ago, and has been dying ever since, till yesterday, when she expired.'
>
> 'Tell me nothing about ghosts. I shan't sleep to-night if you
> do.'
>
> 'I hope there is no plague or fever coming; all this looks very
> like it,' I continued. 'The swineherd's young wife died only a week
> ago, and she thought something seized her by the throat as she lay in
> her bed, and nearly strangled her (Le Fanu 266)

Similarly, the fallen woman is also viewed as a kind of pestilence or plague. One aspect that

makes her particularly detestable and dangerous is that, in the past, she could have belonged

to that respectable society, was once a member, once shared those values. Furthermore, her

fall has more importance due to her origin, which is the respectable classes. In Lynda Nead in

Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain contends that

> The term "fallen woman' activated significantly different
> associations. To begin with, the notion of "fall' implied that she had
> been respectable but had dropped out of respectable society. The
> term was therefore class specific; unlike the working-class prostitute,
> the fallen woman came from the respectable classes (95)

Both the nobility and the bourgeoisie were considered part of the respectable classes,

complying with social standards of morality and conduct. This shared commitment to

respectability could highlight the broader social consequences and judgments associated with

women labelled "fallen women" who deviated from these norms.

When a fallen woman descends, her fall becomes more significant, as the fact that she

was once in a high position demonstrates that it is possible to fall even from the utmost

heights. It exposes to everyone's view that other members of society can potentially be tempted leading them to fall, like a tower collapsing brick by brick. By corroding its foundations, the structure loses strength and "falls" In other words, it exemplifies the fragility of society, highlighting the possibility of deviating from values. Evil can be latent even within circles believed to be secure, emerging when least expected, contaminating the rest. Laura's relationship with Carmilla, exemplifies the vulnerability of seemingly secure structures. The initial portrayal of Laura as a virtuous young woman establishes a societal expectation, akin to being in a high position. However, as her connection with Carmilla develops, it presents a deviation from societal norms, being a parallel to the descent of a fallen woman.

In brief, both the vampire Carmilla and the fallen woman have the ability to perpetuate their lineage, leading to the multiplication of cursed individuals and, consequently, contributing to the degradation of society.

3. 3. Death in *Carmilla*: Fallen Woman and Falling Woman

The thematic exploration of death within *Carmilla* unfolds with complex layers of symbolic significance, particularly entwined with the portrayal of the fallen woman archetype embodied by Carmilla and the potential fate looming over Laura. Carmilla's eventual death assumes the character of a societal remedy, a deliberate act aimed at restoring equilibrium disrupted by her vampiric influence. As a fallen woman, Carmilla challenges the prevailing Victorian sexual ethics, injecting an element of corruption into society. Consequently, her demise takes on the role of a ritualistic purification, serving to eliminate the perceived threat she represents to the established values of the Victorian era.

On the other hand, the potential death of Laura carries a different layer of meaning. In the event of Laura succumbing to the vampiric fate, it signifies more than an individual

demise, it could signify the spread of the metaphorical contagion associated with the fallen woman. Laura's death transforms into a manifestation of societal deviance, raising critical questions about the vulnerability of individuals to external influences that challenge and undermine traditional norms.

In Le Fanu's story, despite living many years and retaining her youth, Carmilla's fate is sealed in her heart by the stake. The subsequent decapitation and burning of her body are part of the ritual to completely eliminate the existence of an evil being that corrupts. The stake is used as a means of sealing Carmilla's fate and has symbolic meaning as it is often seen as a phallic symbol. It carries connotations associated with power, penetration and control. Its relevance is due to the fact that the stake serves as a metaphorical act of control over the sexual transgressions embodied by the character. The act of putting a stake through her heart is an attempt to repress her sexual expressions.

In the chapter titled "Descending" the protagonist, Laura, recounts the transformative process occurring as Carmilla periodically drains her blood. At this point, the idea that she is progressively falling and that becoming a vampire, therefore spreading the disease is imminent, she says: "Dim thoughts of death began to open, and an idea that I was slowly sinking took gentle" (Le Fanu 281). Laura's realisation suggests her acceptance of entering the supernatural realm and the impending destiny of becoming a vampire. Her vague thoughts about death signal her subtle descent into vampirism.

In this passage "'Darling, darling,' she murmured, 'I live in you; and you would die for me, I love you so.'" (Le Fanu 273-274), it is implied that Laura's destiny is to turn into a vampire and therefore, become a fallen woman.

In conclusion, *Carmilla* examines the notions of the fallen woman and the falling woman. Carmilla's death serves as both a societal remedy and a form of social punishment,

symbolising the purification of the disruption caused by her influence, which defied Victorian sexual ethics. On the other hand, the potential death of Laura, unfolds as a portrayal of the process through which women descend into the status of a fallen woman. Nevertheless, she does not face the future of becoming a vampire since society intervened in time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by analysing how the novel depicts the fallen woman and the process through which women fall and how society intervenes to correct them, this dissertation proposes the connections that the literary work, *Carmilla,*exposes about Victorian society. That is to say, how Le Fanu uses literary devices to represent the fallen woman and the consequences she faces for deviating from the norms.

The first chapter presents the Victorian societal norms, highlighting the "angel in the house" ideal and contrasting it with emerging feminist ideals represented by figures like George Eliot and Virginia Woolf. The cultural and moral strictness of the period, determined by the evangelical movement, created a significant pressure on women to conform to rigid moral and sexual standards. The concept of the fallen woman is introduced, emphasising the consequences faced by women who defied and challenged the ideals of chastity and innocence, leading them to be rejected by society. Linking these societal expectations with the struggles of women who defied these norms, this chapter lays the foundation for examining *Carmilla*. Additionally, it brings out parallels between the fallen woman and the later femme fatale, utilising Carmilla as a model of evolving notions of female sexuality. Essentially, the chapter weaves together three elements, social constructs, challenges faced by women who deviated from the norms, and advances in notions of female sexuality, situating the background for a deeper and clearer examination of Carmilla's multifaceted symbolism presented in the following chapters.

The second chapter explored the fallen woman archetype in the Victorian Era through Le Fanu's character, Carmilla, disclosing hidden aspects of female sexuality. Using historicist and psychoanalytic methodologies, it traces the vampire figure's evolution from folklore to a complex symbol that embodies societal fears. The vampire becomes a metaphor for repressed

sexual desires. Le Fanu's narrative transgresses Victorian ideals, with Carmilla's seduction disrupting gender norms and emphasising the diversity of human desires, including lesbianism. Carmilla, as a manifestation of feminine eroticism, remains cast as evil, paradoxically reinforcing societal norms through transgression.

The final chapter discusses the exploration of Carmilla's character and her symbolic role as the fallen woman in Victorian society. There are three key dimensions developed: sexual ethics, social contagion, and death. Carmilla defies Victorian sexual ethics by challenging the sacred pillar of preserving girls' innocence, embodying corruption and defying social norms. The second dimension, social contagion, is connected with the previous aspects of lesbianism and the fallen woman. Social contagion is metaphorically associated with a disease in *Carmilla*, exposing the societal fear around the fallen woman as a pestilence. The last dimension, death in *Carmilla*, takes on an intricate symbolism. Carmilla's demise works as a societal remedy, reestablishing the disruption caused by her vampiric influence. Conversely, the potential death of Laura means more than individual death; it signifies the spread of the metaphorical contagion related with the fallen woman. This complex inspection emphasises the interconnected themes of sexual ethics, contagion, and death with previously analysed aspects.

Overall, the arguments discussed in this research offer an exploration of *Carmilla's* narrative through which it is possible to examine how the novel portrayed the fallen woman and the process through which women fall and how society intervenes to rectify them. Moreover, I think the historicist approach contributes to a nuanced investigation of the fallen woman archetype and the vampire figure, adding complexity and depth to the analysis. However, having the freedom to step outside the method, even when it was very useful to my research, gave me the opportunity to creatively make some associations. I believe that this allowed me to strengthen the arguments. The connections that emerged during the

development of the arguments provided me with a certain freedom when it came to reasoning, such as the metaphor of disease and social contagion. Nevertheless, it is important to mention and acknowledge the limitations of this study. One limitation in my arguments stems from the fact that this study marks my initial foray into research of this nature, particularly within an era where I lack expertise. This might limit the depth of connections that can be drawn between various aspects and dimensions. Despite the exhaustive effort invested in sourcing materials for this dissertation, a noteworthy constraint surfaced due to my inability to access different platforms or bibliographic repositories. This limitation, rooted in restricted access, prevented the depth of my arguments.

Today, I hold a deeper appreciation for women's rights. Delving into the study of the Victorian era and the role of women has altered my perception. Observing the transformative changes and bold challenges, like Carmilla expressing her sexual desires, has illuminated the severe marginalisation of women during that time. This newfound understanding makes me cherish elements I once took for granted, such as independence, the freedom to express emotions, and access to education. It also makes me ponder that in two thousand twenty-three, with Victorian eyes, most women would be considered fallen women. This investigation has instilled in me a heightened value for having chosen this topic.

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