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# CARMILLA'S SUPREMACY AS A SOCIAL PREDATOR

Class and gender in Victorian society

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## Introduction

Ginna Wisker (2016) comments that “Vampires are creatures of myth and cultural metamorphosis” for disruption and critique of the feared and desired, as invasion and sexuality. Their folklore remains popular until the present day, despite their long ancient roots. They are who we think about on Halloween or when we hear the word “fangs”. People usually think of Dracula when asked about vampires, but they hardly ever acknowledge the presence of female vampires, because women tend to be displayed as victims (Nina Auerbach 1997) more than the protagonist predator in dark literature. However, there is the theory that the very first vampire was in fact a female one: Carmilla. The story of *Carmilla* is set in the old Victorian society of the nineteenth-century, in the southern area of Austria, Styria. Among the topics that are conveyed in *Carmilla*, there is one on how she is presented in the story as a social predator of young women, which will be the focus of the following work. Consequently, it is necessary to carry out an analysis that includes aspects of social bonds, demeanor, gender, and class.

The importance of studying Carmilla as a social predator lies in the fact that it gives a deeper understanding and perspective on our character, Carmilla. It is not only about the vampire as a predator, but also about how she resources her social abilities of human nature in order to approach the victims. Furthermore, studying the vampire as a social predator gives the opportunity to build a broader network of topics and themes that

enfold the character of Carmilla, especially those that are not intrinsically related to her vampiric nature.

There are some key concepts that need to be addressed given that they are essential for the development of the analysis. Such concepts are class, gender, social bonds, and age. When talking about class, it is as simple as thinking about the classic social classes within each of the cultures around the world: low, middle, and upper class. The one of interest for the matter of the following analysis is the upper-class one. Upper classes are the closest to having absolute power or control because of their prestige and economic situation, especially during Victorian times, where social status and hence power was crucial to subsist. In fact, in Le Fanu's novella, the upper-class serves as a route of entry for Carmilla to approach the prospective victims, alongside a strategy that the vampire uses to act over the other characters. Another concept to address is gender, the second crucial one in the analysis. Humans have been divided into two polarized genders: male and female, where the male gender have acquired most if not all the advantages a person can have, as well as an adjudicated idea of generic superiority that situate them above women in the hierarchical social structure. However, females during the Victorian period started breaking their limitations and attracting more attention as active characters that are tied to being as superior as men, an aspect that is reflected in Carmilla.

An important factor in human life is that of social bonds, life is about building relations with others. The connections among people open doors for many; more significantly when there are shared areas or interests. As for the case of this analysis, social bonds are key for the vampire to accomplish the predator acts; the strategies Carmilla uses are these relationships she establishes with others, specifically those that belong to the upper classes. Alongside all the factors described, there is one of importance in *Carmilla*: age. As closer in age two people are, they tend to get on better, and interestingly, all the victims are close to the age of Carmilla in her human shape. Age defines the type of relationship the predator establishes with each character.

Nevertheless, in most of the studies about *Carmilla*, the major focus of attention lies on issues of sexuality, vampirism, and the supernaturalism that surrounds the character and her victims. Most of the time authors develop their lines of investigation on these three aspects relating them to manipulation, which is one of the great features Carmilla has. Usually, studies connect manipulation with her vampiric shape, they give it a seductive connotation and even refer to how gender and sexual orientation can get affected by the predator's skills because of her supernatural nature. However, few are the research that connects the social status of Carmilla with the manipulative aspect, alongside her vampiric nature; if there is attention to her class or society, it is merely to offer context, but not as a main field of discussion. As it is, the following work will analyze how Carmilla relies on her social skills more than on her supernatural powers to approach her

victims without being noticed, and temporarily manipulates them, as well as other characters. The most advantageous source of power for our predator is the possession of social skills granted by being an upper-class member, which allows her to capture her victims easily. Therefore, the discussion expects to go beyond the recurrent themes of research and to contribute to the literature of the novella with further ideas regarding social class and skills, respectively, focusing on how a female aristocratic vampire gains superiority by resourcing her social position and abilities.

The following dissertation is composed of three chapters, which will discuss how aristocracy, power dynamics between genders, and the natural hierarchy between predator and prey deepen Carmilla's supremacy as a social predator. The first chapter focuses on the vampire's blood ties with the main victim, Laura, and the homosocial bonds established throughout the story. The second chapter explores the power struggles between the male and female gender, and the consequences it has on the characters involved. Finally, the last chapter focuses on the hierarchy between Carmilla and Laura through the discussion of their intimacy, and the manipulative techniques the vampire applies to the girl. Throughout the discussion, the aim is to demonstrate what makes Carmilla the perfect social predator, with the focus on her social aspects mainly, despite her supernatural essence.

## **Chapter One: Aristocracy**

Carmilla was born in a family that had belonged to the upper class in their society since ancient times according to the narration, meaning that she has always been an aristocrat even before her vampiric transformation: ““And this was once the palatial residence of the Karnsteins!’ These rustics preserve the local traditions of great families, whose stories die out among the rich and titled” (46). With aristocracy in their favor, vampires can represent a threat to social order (Ardel Haefele-Thomas 99), because they can enjoy a high social rank which allows them to take advantage of any situation. The vampire Carmilla, by being part of the aristocracy and hence possessing socioeconomic and political perks, already gains great respect from others, especially those from lower classes. It is Carmilla’s social status that clears paths to achieve her vampiric purposes, which in this case are principally linked to lurking upon young women from aristocracy by creating bonds with them.

### **Bloodlines**

Most members of the aristocracy belong to that social stratum by blood, meaning that generation after generation their families have enjoyed that position. Leonore Davidoff (1979) comments that traditionally most aristocrats came from patriarchal families where: “The adult middle-class (or aristocratic) man . . . was seen as the Head of the social system as well as the Head of his household” (89), and hence probably the most significant and powerful member of the family. Yet, in “Unnameable Desires”, Amy Leal



states that in *Carmilla*, “bloodlines” play an important role as an alternative regarding patrilineal power structure in Victorian times (43). For Carmilla, bloodline sets the difference between the vampire and her family, and the traditional aristocrats of the story. She comes from an aristocratic matriarchal family whose maternal prestige permits the vampire to have power among her aristocratic peers and gain their respect, regardless of the gender: she is as respectable as a man would be. Moreover, as far as we are concerned, there is no mention of male members by blood in Carmilla’s family who can socially represent the family as the norm states. Instead, the only information concerning the countess family is that of her mother and the ancient connection with Laura, which is also on her mother's side: “I am descended from the Karnsteins that is, mamma was . . . The family were ruined, I believed, in some civil wars, long ago” (23). This helps direct the focus to women being aristocrats because of the mother’s family influence, and not the father.

Only after Laura points out her genealogical information, we can identify the relation of Carmilla with the family because she responds to Laura’s words acknowledging to be descended from the Karnstein family (23). We need to look upon bloodline because Karnsteins’ blood ties merely by antiquity can result in a threat to the masculinity of the men in the novella since the females carry generations of high reputation, respect, and the ability to endanger rationality of men and captivate them with their beauty and innocent look. General Spielsdorf expresses this matter at the ball, where

he describes that Carmilla's "features were so engaging, as well as lovely, that it was impossible not to feel the attraction" (40). By engaging that mesmerization in other characters mindless of their gender, she can blend in easily in the victims' environments as she achieves the permission of the family's head: the father; even before introducing herself. However, most importantly Carmilla can blend in with her victims because her surname permits her to attend aristocratic balls and gatherings. David Hey (2000) argues that families become aristocratic and therefore prestigious mainly by their fortunes, for which its members likewise earn recognition, as the case of the Karnstein women. Hence the Karnstein family, here represented through Carmilla, can take advantage of its reputation to break through the conventional male parameters of society, even if the surname has no regular continuity: "It is *hard* that they should, after death, continue to plague the human race with their atrocious lusts" (46) (emphasis added). The General addresses the situation as difficult because he as well as Laura's father have been fooled by females, and knowing they let the vampire enter their homes out of compassion may hurt their pride and masculinity.

The contrast between bloodline and male influence and even appearance must be also addressed. The minimum although crucial male participation implicitly reflects a certain amount of female superiority in the power structure. In her study, Leal argues that the suppression of Laura's surname challenges the patrilineal system "in which women have social and economic identity through the name of their fathers or their husbands"

(38). For Laura's father, even though he belongs to the upper class, and the evident fact that he is a man, he still lacks the prestigious reputation and social status that Carmilla seems to enjoy, as his wife's family also did and continue doing through words of mouth: they are "by no means magnificent people", they have a "small income" and the father is a foreigner English living in Styria (3). He did not carry onto his wife's family reputation because surnames trace male lines but not female ones (Hey 101). The weight of prestige and reputation relies on the family name where women are to take their husbands' surnames, and not the other way around. Laura's mother must have done this with her husband's unknown surname; thus, the maternal surname "Karnstein" loses continuity, especially when offspring are females like Laura. The father is part of an upper class but if he had taken his wife's surname, he would probably have more presence within aristocratic environments. However, it was hardly plausible because it would have been almost as if renouncing his position as the family Head and its social representativity, as if he were renouncing the norm itself.

In the beginning, the narration subtly indicates the Karnsteins' position by describing the *proud* family of Karnstein, now extinct, who once *owned* the equally desolate chateau" (3) (emphasis added). With the description of "proud", we can conclude that the Karnsteins were quite recognized among the villagers and classified as prestigious. Moreover, the word "owned" connects to Leal's analysis, because of the relation of the word to the economic power of owning land. The Karnsteins possessed vast lands and

buildings that represented their social status, facts that take strength as the story unfolds and we know more about them. Nevertheless, it is complex to identify this type of power and prestige in Laura's father. Throughout the story, we do not know any other detail regarding him beyond his genetic relation to Laura. We do not spot a name or a surname, and we can only address him as "Laura's father". Given the poor information about his past, family, or even owning, aside from his English provenance, we could presume that he did not have much recognition nor significance among the aristocrat groups. Even when his foreignness in a way excludes him from the local aristocracy, it still results odd considering that he should be part of that social strata because of his marriage with a descendent of an aristocratic family, the Karnsteins.

The Karnsteins maintained their importance in the aristocracy for centuries. Their legacy remained acknowledged for the characters, whereas Laura's father does not hold any social relevance. Although he is the representative of the family in society, as mentioned, the recognition his family has is most likely cause of the ancient history of his wife, and not his own. Hence, aligned to Leal's idea, Laura's identity in society and story is because of the motherly bloodline she shares with Carmilla, who is a Karnstein.

## Female Homosocial Bonds

As an aristocratic individual, Carmilla can create social networks through which she can easily connect with others, and parallelly the elevated status she has permits her to have a certain amount of power over others as well, regardless of their gender. Often, two women being friends seems less dangerous than an heterogenous friendship; for which in that sense, womanhood amplifies Carmilla's power because of the intimate relationships she establishes with other women from the same social stratum as her, women who become her victims later. Carmilla chooses to create deep bonds only with aristocratic women, different from what she does with peasants: ““She? I don't trouble my head about peasants. I don't know who she is”” (19). The vampire detaches herself from peasants because of the lower importance they have as members of society; she only sees them as a source of food. Instead, with aristocratic women like Laura, Carmilla establishes relationships because they inhabit the same social environments, which makes the interaction with the victim easier for the predator.

Elizabeth Signorotti in her study on the transgressive desire in *Carmilla* designates Carmilla's type of relationships as “female homosocial bonds” that “carry tremendous power to subvert or demolish patriarchal kinship structures” (609). Female bonds can be considered as a way women have to empathize with one another, but in the case of *Carmilla*, its meaning and even purpose go beyond female empathy. Instead, the bonds are strategies the countess uses as a vampire to approach those who are going to be her

victims, and principally use them to feed up. For instance, the case of the General's niece Bertha, the first aristocratic victim we know of, according to the novella's sequence: "She . . . talked *like a friend*; she admired her dress, and insinuated very prettily her admiration of her beauty. She amused her with laughing criticisms . . . and laughed at my poor child's fun. She was very witty and lively when she pleased, and after a time they had grown very good friends" (40) (emphasis added). Carmilla approaches this victim by creating trust and intimacy with the girl and others as her uncle, by which the vampire can easily enter the victim's circle. Furthermore, when she carries this harmless, lovely, and friendly behavior, she engages her victim almost effortlessly. This rapid connection with Bertha would have not been possible if Carmilla were a man because she would be immediately framed as a possible suitor to the young Lady. According to Claudia Nelson (1989), strength and physical abilities are attributed to men only (530), and hence they are easily addressed as "the strongest sex". Consequently, for men, it is more difficult to portray a harmless and even friendly image towards women without being perceived as threatening or carriers of second intentions, given the established stereotypical heterogenous relationships where the man is dominant by his physical strength and abilities.

It is different when two women blend in together, since hardly ever women are framed as threats to their same gender. Nevertheless, Carmilla does represent an undercover danger for females, a greater danger than even male suitors, because of the

thirst for blood and female attraction that the vampire has: “I never saw anyone more taken with another at first sight, unless, indeed, it was the stranger [Carmilla] herself, who seemed quite to have lost her heart to her [Bertha]” (40). The female bonds Signorotti mentions reflect the female attraction and consequently the danger Carmilla represents for Victorian men at threatening the heteronormativity where only men hold the stereotypical role of women conquerors by simply bypassing it. The static structures of dominance get lost when Carmilla demonstrates to be able to captivate women as well, something supposedly and conventionally only possible for men. At the same time, Carmilla starts breaking the gender parameters: what is accepted and assumed of and for each gender, where women are truly women when they reside in the domestic sphere taking care of the sick, when they are socially unnoticed, remain silent, and do not attract attention (Sarah Stickney Ellis 1998).

In “The Arts of Repression”, William Veeder states that in *Carmilla* there is an “alienation from male authority” that becomes an essential characteristic of the life that is filled with men at the moment (203). Nevertheless, Carmilla does not alienate herself from this male authority, but she challenges it with her manipulative skills. She fools everyone in the schloss by showing herself as a fragile damsel in distress that needs saviors, which activates Laura’s father’s chivalry and the empathy of the adult women of the house. Furthermore, Carmilla also challenges male authority by doing what she is not supposed to, attracting women, Laura, with who she creates a parallel world, separated from the

father's authority. The relationships between Carmilla and her female victims withdraw the starring presence from men along with the power they have enjoyed for centuries. In addition, the fact the vampire belongs to a very ancient and high class provides her with social power and respect from lower, equals, and even male counterparts. Carmilla is not an ordinary aristocrat, she is the Countess Karnstein even when no one knows it; whereas the only two significant men we find in the story, Laura's father and General Spielsdorf, do not seem to possess a status even when belonging to aristocracy, an issue General refers to at the ball: "It was a very aristocratic assembly. I was myself almost the only 'nobody' present" (39). In that social space, the General himself plays down his persona, being a male figure with some position; different from Carmilla who in no instance of the story lowers her position and value as an individual.

Throughout the novella, in the vampire, we meet a bewildering personality, different from the stereotypical submissive female behavior. Carmilla is quite daring, bold, seductive but delicate mannered, with a dominant aura when attracting the victims in their intimacy. Owning such characteristics makes her defy male protagonism because she takes over the whole scenario in the story. Thus, as previously commented, she exceeds male characters in the story regardless of her vampiric nature.



## **Chapter Two: Power Struggles**

Being part of the aristocracy gives Carmilla position and power which allows her to position herself above other women, and more interestingly, other aristocratic men in the story, such as Laura's father and General Spiesdorf. Carmilla is a social predator that deceives and socially challenges the power dynamics of men by camouflaging herself as a beautiful and defenseless lady. There is ignorance presented in the men of the story, which serves as an advantage that Carmilla uses to temporarily invert the power chain in the homes she arrives at.

### **Ignorance**

We see Carmilla's power over the male characters in two aspects: the charming personality she possesses to manipulate them, and the apparent ignorance the General and Laura's father have regarding their daughters' situation, even when there is enough evidence that demonstrates something odd is occurring to them. As it happens in the case of Laura's father when the doctor tells him that Laura's blue spots on her neck are symptoms of a cold (35). Rather than continuing questioning what did the marks mean, or how they appeared, the father decides to believe the medical reason he receives since for him, the scientific explanation for such abnormalities is the only answer that exists, not giving space for more speculations on the source and meaning of those blue spots.

One would think that by being the head of their homes, Laura's father and General would notice when things are becoming too difficult for them to handle. However, it has been demonstrated through the story that even though they seem to be intelligent and well educated, neither of them is capable of noticing Carmilla's actions until the end of the story, or, in the case of the General, when Carmilla has already committed murder. Both men have a naturalistic worldview, meaning that their first attempt to answer queries and justify any abnormality would be searching for a scientific reason rather than consider any supernatural thought, which would have taken them to the root of their daughters' sicknesses earlier. According to John Tosh (1994), one of the "key concepts" associated with Victorian men and their "manliness" is the intellect they have (180), that is, how intelligent they can be, and usually, intelligence is related to the reason which provides support for them to avoid supernatural ideas, because it would not be smart of them to even consider it as an option. For instance, when Carmilla disappears during the night, the questions Laura's father asks are focused on sleepwalking (32), because for him, there is no other alternative beyond a physical disorder. The father's blindness to Carmilla's supernatural identity gives her the freedom to do anything she pleases given that he is incapable of perceiving her true nature.

The male character's ignorance of the supernatural is also directly related to the feeling of chivalry felt when they meet Carmilla and her mother. In the study about the arts of repression in Carmilla, Veeder argues that the gentlemanliness of the General

Spielsdorf, and Laura's father is the reason for ignorance, since both men feel the need to help damsels in distress: Carmilla and her mother (204). The idea of becoming the men of the hour by saving the damsels in distress presents to both of them the opportunity to show the feeling of chivalry they possess since they demonstrate to themselves as well as other characters the true gentlemen they are, by accepting helpless female strangers in their houses. This at the same time, is the cause that dooms their families, given that Carmilla is aware of that feeling and she takes advantage of it by presenting herself as a daydreaming woman in distress. This can be seen, for example, when Laura's father agrees to take care of Carmilla after the carriage accident (10), as well as when Carmilla's mother asks for the General's help regarding her daughter's health at the ball (42). The blindness that both men seem to have about the odd situation they are dealing with, permits Carmilla to intrude in their homes as a young aristocratic lady who uses her defenseless looks like an advantage to bond with them and the other members of the schloss. Simultaneously, because of the perks of being accepted by the families, she is capable of continuing hiding her supernatural nature. Hence, Carmilla enjoys the benefits of being accepted in the circle without being discovered until the end.

As it is, the combination of her physical features and the already discussed social skills she portrays are helpful resources to reinforce the image of an innocent young lady that secretly takes advantage of what her appearance offers in order to manipulate the members of the schloss and therefore concrete her objectives: drain the blood of her

victims. Truly, the problems could have also been avoided if the men in charge of the homes would have chosen not to help strangers from the beginning. This movement once again proves Carmilla's intelligence as well as her incredible power due to her ability to manipulate not only young girls but grown men to let her into their houses and into the lives of their daughters.

### **Loss of Power**

The initial ignorance the men of the story present about Carmilla's nature ends up being a problem not only for the young girls under their care, but also themselves when it comes to the power they naturally inherited by being men. During the short period of time the vampire visits their homes, there is a power inversion in the sense that they do not have full control of the situation anymore and with that, Carmilla demonstrates how skilled she is to the point of unbalancing a structure that has been existing at the schlosses.

The power dynamics between Carmilla and the other characters allow seeing the superiority of the vampire, where she constantly demonstrates power over her victims. This is the basis of the issues Laura and the people living in the household must overcome: an imbalance in gender roles as a result of Carmilla's presence in the house. The vampire's presence endangers the established order in terms of gender dynamics.

According to Sezer Ikiz's (2012), Carmilla embodies the characteristics of the changing gender dynamics in Ireland in the Victorian time, in which women sought to break the traditional standards expected from them (148). As it is, by reading Laura's words, one can see how Carmilla fits in Ikiz's description when she exhibits an unusual behavior around Laura; more specifically, the moments in which declarations of love are involved. Rather than behaving as a passive female character whose main aim is to be rescued, as she does in other moments of the story, being an example when Madame Perrodone helps her to enter the castle since she is unable to walk by herself (11); at least when Carmilla is seducing Laura, she demonstrates her ability to adopt an active role by showing glimpses of having an extrovert personality when she talks with the human girl. For Laura, Carmilla's "extraordinary manifestations" (17) of love are expressed with so much passion that it is capable of erasing any offense Laura could feel against her (16). The fact that the vampire is able to overshadow Laura's suspicions by manipulating her feelings demonstrates how powerful she is due to the fact that she achieves such an important action only with the use of beautiful words. This means that Carmilla is not only more powerful than others in terms of social abilities but also in attitude since during these encounters she is the one handling the situation by manipulating Laura. Carmilla is supposedly around the same age as Laura. Nevertheless, at first sight, we can tell they differ deeply. Carmilla's presence reflects an aura of superiority that is not present in Laura. The countess is more mature, and she seems to be much more experienced than the other girl; later we know it is because she is many years older than Laura, but it is hidden in her forever young vampiric shape. One can also identify Carmilla's outspoken side when it

comes to her intimate encounters with Laura, where her confident demeanor arises. She is daring, and bold; and that is the attitude she shields with the looks of a young lady in distress and defenceless, so no one in the house discovers what her presence really does. However, deep inside Carmilla is still a predator that attacks her victims.

Carmilla's innocent demeanor gives her enough power and superiority to have a different effect on the men in the story as well. Their presence is inevitably weakened to the point of losing their power in their own homes, as with Laura's father. One important aspect that reflects his temporary lack of power in the novella is the fact that he is nameless. Leal states that the absence of male names in the novella illustrates Carmilla's temporary dominance over the male characters in the story, which is even greater than her dominance over women (38). Contrary to General Spielsdorf, who at least has a last name, Laura's father is mentioned by her ninety-one times throughout the novel, and yet, no name is given to the man, whereas Carmilla possesses not only one but three versions of her name. Leal's idea is evidenced when we consider the situation of Laura's father. Unlike Madame Perrodone or Mademoiselle De Lafontaine, Laura's father is never properly introduced through Laura's narration, a logical situation considering they are father and daughter. Nonetheless, since the young girl is writing her experience to a receptor out the picture from the schloss, it seems odd that she dedicates a few lines to two women that are not even considered part of the family: "*Madame Perrodone*, a native of Bern" and "*Mademoiselle De Lafontaine* ... a 'finishing governess'" (4) (emphasis added). It is not only the fact that Laura never provides a name to her receptor but also the fact that under

any circumstance it is obtained the name of her father. Not when he meets with the doctor nor in the encounter with the General, who could have had the possibility of greeting him using his name or surname considering that among the two already existed a friendly bond.

Regardless of the reasons why Laura's father is nameless, inevitably his position seems endangered when we notice that even people from lower classes possess a name. There is the example of the two women who take care of Laura alongside another character that appears only once in the whole story, the gardener: "*Martin* says that he came up twice, when the old yard gate was being repaired" (emphasis added) (28). Martin, whose presence is irrelevant to the plot of the story, is presented by Laura with a name that distinguishes him from other servants. While her father, who besides being a person of her care is also the head of the house, remains nameless. Moreover, Laura's father ends up being affected by the temporary power Carmilla executes over him indirectly: she, an aristocratic young woman identifies herself with more than one name, being the cases of Mircalla, Carmilla, and Millarca; and he, an aristocratic man, hardly appears mentioned as his daughter's parent, without a name or even surname as reference. He seems reduced as if we are dealing with a secondary character rather than the head of the schloss, father of the protagonist and the key character that allowed the predator into his household.

Carmilla demonstrates to have two skills that make her excel as a predator: her social status and her ability to manipulate others with her outlooks; and these abilities

affect several aspects of the men's lives at their homes: one is their beloved daughter's health, and the subtraction of power they suffer for a moment. Carmilla challenges the power of the men in the story by using her apparent weakness as a weapon. In order to manipulate the men, as well as the rest of the members in the schloss, she portrays the image of the young lady in distress outstandingly. However, the factor that is highlighted the most is the fact that she is more powerful and important than the men because she has a name and social status: two features that are relevant in a society in order to subsist.



### **Chapter Three: Hierarchy Predator and Prey.**

In the past, aristocrats were considered a metaphor of “bloodsucking leeches” because of their power over others (Judith E. Johnson 75). The metaphor empathizes with Carmilla’s case, her aristocratic abilities and perks, as well as her supernatural ones, increase her power being a social predator, which places her naturally above others with ease. Despite being quite a powerful character, Carmilla is selective when it comes to her aristocratic victims. She preys upon peasants as mere sources of food; yet, when she lurks upon her victims, there are some shared features among the victims by which she approaches them. They are defenseless, young, lonely, and innocent girls, as Laura, which allows Carmilla to easily manipulate the victim and reflect the superiority she possesses through her demeanor.

#### **Female Intimacy**

Through Laura’s character, we can witness Carmilla's performance as a social predator because of two main characteristics: Laura is motherless, and geographically isolated from society, away from other aristocrats to bond with, as people of her age. Since the beginning of the story, Laura narrates that her mother had died when she was still a child and that she carried a "solitary" life (4) afterwards, mainly because where she lives is a "very lonely place" (3) and she grew up apart from other aristocratic people, especially people of similar age as her (4). These two characteristics are cause and consequence to

which Veeder refers, he discusses that: “Nothing contributes more to Laura's sense of isolation . . . than her separation from a woman” (206). The separation of Laura from her mother at a very early age must be the most important cause of the girl's loneliness, and hence an advantage that Carmilla uses to approach her. Even when Laura has been in the company of a "good-natured governess" almost since her childhood (4), who took care of her in replacement of the dead mother, Laura still lacks the maternal figure. The young lady is aware the bond she has with her governess is not that of a mother-daughter's: “Madame Perrodon... whose care and good nature now *in part* supplied to me the loss of my mother” (4) (emphasis added). The mother-daughter relationship is “partly” there because Laura knows the governess is not her mother, she does not feel any bond to her governess, for which there is no connection, nor a deep reliance from the young girls towards the woman.

According to Davidoff, during Victorian times the mother position within the household was essential for children because they represented “emotions”, “the Heart” and “tenderness”: women were the “keepers of the Heart in the Home” (89). However, the parental figure Laura has left is her father who does not represent the maternal tenderness Laura craves deep down, and neither should he because he is a man, and stereotypically they are not related to emotions (Tosh 1994), even when he is a good father: “I should have told papa, but. . . I could not bear its being treated as a jest” (27). Laura's lack of intimacy with her father prevents her from confining to him her worries and deep emotions because she knows he would not understand the way a mother would possibly do.

Consequently, Laura is also in need of shelter and affection; she does not find that maternal love in her father and much less in the governess. Moreover, Laura's disconnection from social aristocratic gatherings and outsiders, especially those around her age, makes her innocent and naïve. Therefore, she is vulnerable enough to be malleable and manipulated by others.

Laura had been expecting the visit of the young Mademoiselle Bertha Rheinfeldt, a prospective friend, when the latter suddenly died: "I was more disappointed than a young lady living in a town . . . This visit, and the new acquaintance it promised, had furnished my day dream for many weeks" (6). Laura becomes disillusioned because that visit, as she mentions, would have brought the friendship she had been yearning for in her solitary life. In the midst of her disappointment is when Carmilla arrives in the schloss as a sign of hope for Laura to befriend another girl of her social status and age to have company, and she stays by Laura's endeavor: "I plucked my father by the coat, and whispered earnestly in his ear: 'Oh! papa, pray ask her to let her stay with us — it would be so delightful. Do, pray'" (10). It is an instance in which Laura is lonely, anxious for interacting with others, thus willing to accept strangers easily. When they meet, they befriend immediately, and the empty spaces Laura has in her life, as the lack of mother or friends, permit the vampire to fill them in order to achieve her predator desires or needs. Piya Pal-Lapinski in her comparative study on Dickens and Le Fanu's feminine figures addresses that "Laura's dead mother is not even permitted to be a memory" (86). After Carmilla's arrival, the

mention of the mother is suppressed in some moments, at least until they see the painting of the ancient lady “Mircalla, Countess Karnstein”, where Laura declares to be a mother side descendant (23). Nevertheless, more than a prohibited memory, the mother's figure seems to be left aside because of Carmilla. In a way, she fills the space that the mother left in Laura’s heart, that companion, caring and close figure, even since their very first encounter when Laura was just a six-year-old girl: “She [Carmilla] caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling” (5). At first sight, Carmilla appears as a mother does when children have nightmares, to shelter and protect them. Thus, when they meet again since Laura remembers her, it is easier to accept the outsider lady: “I was flattered by the evident. . . fondness she showed me” (15), even bypassing the fact that Carmilla looks as young as back then.

Despite the importance of Laura’s father to the development of the story, the little interaction Laura has with him also makes it easier for Carmilla to steal the young lady’s attention. Signorotti mentions that: “Carmilla supplants Laura’s father in his position as her guide, companion, and confidant” (613); similar to what happens with her mother. Nonetheless, replacing the father's position is more difficult because he is still a present figure, at first reluctant to accept Carmilla: “I hope I have not done a very foolish thing, in taking charge of the young lady” (13). Moreover, when he intervenes when noticing something strange, we can assume that he may present difficulties for Carmilla to approach her prey. One instance is when the visitor is found after a strange disappearance,

which Laura's father questions what it was due to: "My father took a turn up and down the room, thinking. I saw Carmilla's eye follow him . . . with a sly, dark glance" (32)". Carmilla analyzes him to measure possible threats to her objective, but in the end is useless because the father is successfully manipulated by her. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, the father maintains a naturalistic worldview for which he is skeptical of the supernatural, which means that all the explanations he seeks are from a naturalistic perspective; thus, he would not consider the possibility that Carmilla's disappearance at night is due to a supernatural event, as her being a vampire.

The skepticism of Laura's father to supernatural traditions or beliefs is an advantage to Carmilla because she finds ways to entering Laura's world, using aspects and experiences that Laura lacks, as the company of others, especially female individuals, such as her mother or female friends. Because of those spaces in Laura's life, Carmilla can have access to it even more quickly.

### **Manipulation**

Because of the girl's solitude and her state of vulnerability, it is easy for the vampire to gain her confidence and keep her close since she represents what Laura has been looking for the past time: a friend, someone who will be there for her. Carmilla takes

advantage of Laura's weak point to charm her and manipulate her through beautiful words, facial expressions and because the vampire meets all the requirements for friendship.

Carmilla enters the schloss aiming to complement Laura's picture by presenting herself as the company she has been waiting for. Veeder discusses this idea stating that "Carmilla seems equally duplicitous when she mirrors other emotions of Laura's" (212), such as the fear a six-year-old Laura experienced during their first encounter (12), or the feeling of attraction Carmilla seems to feel towards Laura when they conversate for the first time (13). The author refers to this duplicity of the vampire because she needs to convince Laura she is there as a good-hearted friend and not a blood-drinking predator. Therefore, in order to do that, the vampire empathizes with Laura when she refers to the dreams both had years ago and the fears Laura felt when strange events occurred at night: "She confessed that she had experienced *a similar* shock on seeing me, and *precisely the same* faint antipathy that had mingled with my admiration." (15). Using "similar" and "precisely the same", Carmilla does not only mirror Laura's emotions and reaction to the past event, as Veeder states, but she also acknowledges Laura's sayings in regard to their first encounter as something that did occur. Although the adults in the story show distress regarding Laura's well-being, Carmilla ensures to become the only person Laura trusts by expressing how she truly understands the difficult time the mortal experienced.

Carmilla also takes advantage of the innocence of Laura regarding the latter's underdevelopment of social abilities, because of her inexperience with the same and her

intrinsic shyness due to isolation. From the beginning, it looks as if Carmilla is conscious of every detail at the moment she acts, minding Laura's needs for her to feel comfortable. The vampire uses facial expressions that encourage Laura to overcome her shyness and get closer to the predator: "Her smile had softened. Whatever I had fancied strange in it, was gone, and it and her dimpling cheeks were now delightfully pretty and intelligent. I felt reassured and continued more in the vein which hospitality indicated" (14). A smile may be seen as an inconsequential detail, yet it shows the weight Carmilla's appearance has in her performance since she did not need more to generate such reaction in the victim.

The manipulation the vampire executes on Laura trespasses any relationship already existing at the schloss. Robert A. Smart (2013) comments that Laura has lived distanced from her father, whose main priorities do not include her directly (17) despite the fact that she grew up with him at the schloss. With this statement, it seems almost as if the father was not involved in Laura's upbringing even when he was. Nonetheless, she did not receive the amount of attention and company that she as a daughter may demand when losing a parent. As Gabriella Jönsson (2006) comments, the vampire is: "all about collapsing boundaries" (44) between a father and his child. Consequently, if we connect Laura's situation with her father to what the author comments in regard to the vampire, we can see that she would take any opportunity to break apart the trust between Laura and her father. This is demonstrated in Carmilla's second visit, when she weakens the already fragile father-daughter relationship. Carmilla takes advantage of the distance between

Laura and her father by showing the former that she truly becomes the vampire's main priority: "Carmilla became *more devoted* to me *than ever*, and her . . . adoration *more frequent*" (29) (emphasis added). As Laura narrates, Carmilla becomes "more devoted" to her "than ever" which only demonstrates the girl how involved the undercover predator is with her. Carmilla being a stranger gives Laura the attention and care she needs even more emphatically than her own father and the rest of the people living with her, including the governesses; even when the vampire does so in order to manipulate Laura, her target prey: "if your dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours" (17). She gives Laura what her father has been incapable of, as caring and loving words: "You don't know how dear you are to me, or you could not think any confidence too great to look for (25). Carmilla's main weapons to accomplish her aim of manipulating Laura, are composed of attitudes and abilities in addition to her supernatural nature.

Even though the final moments of the vampire bring out the end of her life, during her stay at the schloss she proves what she is capable of without resorting to the powers conferred by her supernatural nature. It takes an incredible instinct and intelligence to understand what Laura feels and thinks to offer exactly what she wants and an even higher percentage of abilities to always maintain such a complex image in front of everyone.



## **Conclusion**

The superiority portrayed by the vampire Carmilla while living at the schloss is the result of an amalgamation made between supernatural powers and social abilities, being the second one the main factor for her to perform as an undercover social predator. It has been evidenced throughout the chapters that the importance that such abilities possess is used by the vampire to create bonds with other characters and use those relations against them. First, due to the vampire's abilities, her relationship with the young aristocratic girl was created quickly. Later, their relationship is strengthened with the discovery of a shared bloodline between them on their mother's side. Then, as a consequence of the heterosexual relations the vampire builds, there is a temporal unbalance of power that the vampire benefits from, by getting closer to her victims due to an ignorance presented by the heads of the homes, the fathers. Lastly, inside the close bond between Carmilla and Laura, the immortal lady demonstrates to be superior within her own gender by taking advantage of Laura's emotional estate which she uses to manipulate the young human.

All the sections in the work have as a strong point the exploration of Carmilla beyond her supernatural nature. The social position the vampire owns by her aristocratic origins granted us the possibility to centralize the analysis of the character into one perspective only: her social abilities. That is, how do they create opportunities for Carmilla to live as an aristocratic young lady who secretly takes advantage of the results obtained through her actions that simultaneously permits her to create an intimate bond with her

victims. The perspective of the immortal lady as a social character permitted us to make constant comparisons with other characters in order to exemplify her social skills and how they could affect the lives of the ones living at the schloss. The fact that we dealt only with social aspects, such as gender and power hierarchy, was also a disadvantage for our work since we left behind the second feature that characterizes Carmilla: her vampiric nature. Since the focus of attention remained totally on the social sphere, there were no possibilities to approach how she developed as a vampire throughout the story, which is an essential point to comprehend the character as a whole. Carmilla is complete when both parts of her life are placed at the same level since they complement each other to create this unique character.

As it is, one of the main problems we faced while writing the chapters was the scarcity of studies about *Carmilla* that dedicated their analysis to topics related to the social part of the story. In most studies, rather than being the main arguments to be developed, social points usually were mentioned as a reinforcement and background information in order to explain the presence of the supernatural or seductive spectre in the novella. In addition, the deficiency of material was not only applied for sources focused only on the story but also on other needed knowledge such as information about the Victorian social classes. Regarding this last difficulty, the main problem was that most of the sources required a monetary bonification that was impossible for us to provide. Another obstacle that appeared during the process of writing was the constant mixing of ideas we had between the social and supernatural. We initiated the project visualizing as

the main objective to include both parts of Carmilla's life, hence when we noticed that one of them had to be left aside, it became challenging to not include more information than necessary. Furthermore, thoughts about including comments about the effect Carmilla's mother has on the characters were also dismissed, as well as the mention of the male servants who escort Carmilla and her mother.

Despite the obstacles we found in our path during the composition of this work, we found ourselves enjoying knowing more about Carmilla. Even when at the end of the story she turns out to be defeated by the same men she once deceived, we were able to appreciate the vampire as a character along with the ephemeral image of superiority she showed. Moreover, during our time reading the novella we found ourselves wondering about this mysterious girl and the possibility of acquiring more information about her life before the schloss, what words were murmured to Laura's father by Carmilla's "mother" and most importantly, what would have happened if she had survived to the last encounter against the three men. Truly, just as it happened to the characters in the story, we were also charmed by Carmilla's beautiful appearance and hypnotizing words.

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