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# Transgressing Victorian Social Norms: Queer Vampires in Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

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## Introduction

From its first appearance in Slavic folklore to modern literature, the vampire has been a captivating monster that challenges social norms, threatening to destabilize social order. In this dissertation, I will aim to prove that in gothic literature, the vampire became a conduit to embody Victorian anxieties about sex, monogamy, the bourgeois family, gender roles, and homosexuality, that were associated with fin de siècle concerns. To do the previous, I will focus on the vampires of Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* since they are admirable works of literature that encompass the vampire as a threatening, "queer" other. Furthermore, I will attempt to comprehend what these embodiments, that were brought forward through otherness and fear, were intending to do, and what their purpose was. This topic is worth discussing, not only because it can serve as a rich analysis of how social concerns can be explored through literature, but because there is an existing gap of research when it comes to the purpose of the vampire embodying queer "otherness".

To accomplish a thorough investigation, there are some key concepts that I deem important to define. The first concept is "Queer". According to William Sayers, the word "queer" by the early sixteenth century used to mean "Strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric, in appearance or character." (17), however, by the late nineteenth century, the word "queer" was established as a slur for queer individuals (Sayers 19). Nonetheless, during the eighties, the word was reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community (Bernstein 1-20), and it took the modern meaning of "relating to a sexual identity or gender identity that is different from traditional ideas about sex and gender" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary Online). In chapter one I use the term "queer", as understood by its original definition, to refer to peculiar individuals that deviate from "normality" and challenge

monogamy. In chapters two and three, I employ “queer” to mention characters that display sexual and emotional desire that diverges from heterosexuality. Lastly, I deem it important to delimit “heteronormativity”, which has been defined as the “enforced compliance with culturally determined heterosexual roles and assumptions about heterosexuality as ‘natural’ or ‘normal’” (Habarth 1).

Throughout my investigation I will carry out a comparative approach, from a historicist perspective, focusing on gender studies. This methodology is well suited for my research, since it will allow me to identify links between the Victorian period as a historical process, to gothic literature and the message that monstrous others convey about gender and sexuality. However, its limitations rely on the possible lack of evidence when it comes to authorial intention, and the social mindsets of the time.

About vampires and queerness, there are some very relevant works which inspired, as well as challenged, my interpretation. Christopher Craft identified gender inversion in *Dracula* through the vampire’s mouth, which he argues blurs the binaries of gender. Ardel Thomas asserts that the “queer other” had been demonized in gothic literature through monstrous others in works such as *The Beetle*. Lastly, even though Mondal does not focus on queerness, she argues that the vampire’s bite often implies sexual connotations, which aided my argumentation about how the bite, through sex, created a space where gender divisions become unrecognizable. Although these authors had rich arguments, none interpreted vampires as transgressors of monogamy or the bourgeois family. My thesis of chapter one, to my knowledge, is a new take on the vampire as a transgressor of social

norms. Furthermore, I bring forward the interpretation that the vampire's embodiment of anxieties has the purpose of establishing the bourgeois family as a pillar to Victorian England, the importance of gender divisions, and reinforcing Victorian homophobic ideals. And lastly, I propose that Le Fanu's *Carmilla* portrays lesbianism as an undetected threat, due to homosocial female friendships.

The structure of this dissertation will be divided into three chapters. Chapter One will address the vampire as a monstrous other that threatens the bourgeois family, however, in *Dracula*, the menacing is done through non-monogamy and female sexuality, whereas in *Carmilla* the family is challenged by lesbianism and Laura's sexual liberation. The second chapter will approach the vampire as an embodiment of Victorian anxieties about the fluctuation of gender. I will argue that not only do *Dracula* and *Carmilla* perform gender in an ambiguous way, but they also invert the gender binary by subjecting men to passivity, and women to sexual dominance. Lastly, in chapter three I will argue that both literary works comply with the homophobic Victorian ideas and norms of their time; *Carmilla* is depicted as a lesbian predator that spreads an "illness" that kills only young women; while Stoker created *Dracula* as a vampire that displays sexual desire towards all genders, and threatens to turn others into monsters like him. It is important to note that all chapters address female sexuality as a growing anxiety of Victorian England, and chapters two and three focus on the bite as a "queer" vampiric space.

## Chapter I: The Vampire as a Sexual Monster

Born mostly from eighteen-century Southeastern European folk tales, vampires have been portrayed as charming, fanged, undead<sup>1</sup> creatures that prey on humans to feed on their blood and possess the capacity to transform individuals into a monster of their kind (Melton 30-31), however, the traditional Slavic vampire was depicted as dumb, rosy, plump and bloated (Barber 2). Differently from other monsters such as Mary Shelley's grotesque, and deformed living creature in *Frankenstein* or Stevenson's disfigured alternate, evil persona in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, modern vampires are seductive, charming monsters, who transgress the binaries of life and death, gender, and sexuality. Not alive, but not quite dead, vampires rise from their coffins and exist in unconventional ways: they defy established gender norms and most display romantic and sexual desire towards members of all genders. The figure of the vampire was introduced into gothic literature in John Polidori's "The Vampyre" (1816) as a part of a writing contest (Melton 96), later resurfaced in Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), and inspired Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Displaying queer forms of desire, Vampires, as frightening monstrous others, embody Victorian anxieties about monogamy and sex, to ultimately reinforce the cruciality of the bourgeois family as a pillar that ensures the perpetuity, order, and progress of Victorian Britain. However, the challenging of the family is done differently in each literary work: in *Dracula*, female vampires threaten this institution through non-monogamy and female sexuality, while in *Carmilla* the vampire threatens the family through lesbianism, and Laura's sexual liberation.

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<sup>1</sup> As discussed in Stoker's *Dracula*: "'UnDead! Not alive! What do you mean? Is this all a nightmare, or what is it?'" (195), vampires are Undead because they have been revived from death, but they are not completely alive, walking between the boundaries of life and death.

## Monstrosity and Otherness

In nineteenth-century gothic literature, a monster was a frightening creature, often, but not always, grotesque, that embodied ‘otherness’. Monsters, whether ghostly apparitions or a mad scientist’s creation, were immoral, deformed, and deviant, and they crossed the boundaries of socially accepted behaviour. The Victorian perception of an “other”, that is, members of marginalized groups, such as lower-class individuals, women, homosexuals, immigrants, and gender-non-conforming people, often produced anxieties that would take the shape of monstrous others in gothic literature (Thomas 150). For example, Claesson argues that in *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Dr Jekyll was a part of the respected upper class, while in contrast, Mr Hyde, the monstrous alternate personality of the protagonist, described as downright detestable, was from the “murderous lower class” (343), which represented the fear of the criminal man, and the heinous crimes that were allegedly committed by the brutal working classes. Furthermore, according to Judith Halberstam (1993), *Dracula* reflects the antisemitic ideologies in Victorian Britain, since the count embodies harmful Jewish stereotypes, reflecting the British fear of reverse colonization<sup>2</sup> (333-352). Therefore, vampires, as a part of those who deviate from social norms, transact social fears and anxieties about race, class, gender, and sexuality.

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<sup>2</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, there was an impending fear concerning “reversed colonization” within Victorian Britain. According to Arata, a cultural sense of guilt arose in English individuals after their brutal imperial practice of colonization, which led English Victorians to be afraid that the colonized “other” would come back and colonize them as a punishment (108-109). Furthermore, alongside Judith Halberstam’s interpretation, it is important to note that Bram Stoker was an Irish man, and Ireland had been colonized by the British Empire for a long time, which could mean that Stoker was either afraid of “reverse colonization”, or that he felt like “the colonized other”, and he created *Dracula* to embody said anxiety.



## Female Vampires: The Destabilization of Monogamy and the Bourgeois Family

In Victorian Britain, the bourgeois family was formed by a monogamous, heterosexual, religious union of a man, a woman, and their children (Armstrong 109). This entity was considered the foundation of civilization, and it carried all the force of tradition and it distinguished England from other less stable and moral societies (Wohl 10). Furthermore, the family was also considered to be the mean to achieving individual fulfilment, and its preservation was the key to achieving social harmony, order and progress (Armstrong 104). Thus, this institution was so essential to Britain's progress that anyone that transgressed or threatened its stability, was immediately eradicated, or as Armstrong argues, "...most Victorians regarded anything else but the self-supporting, monogamous, paternalistic, heterosexual household as abnormal expressions of sexual desire that it was culture's business to suppress." (109).

Vampires, especially female Vampires in Stoker's *Dracula*, embody Victorian anxieties about sexual desire outside of marriage, ultimately reinforcing the idea that any individual who challenges the monogamous bourgeois family, must be punished and eradicated to avoid social disorder. To illustrate, Johnathan Harker in the count's castle encounters the opposite image of the bourgeois family. It is revealed that Dracula lives with three female vampires, companions that he admits to loving (Stoker 39), and he encourages them to pray on Johnathan once he is "done with him" (40). It is important to note that the vampires' praying is sensual, and the bite, as I will argue later on this chapter, is inherently sexual. Thus, not only is Dracula seemingly polyamorous, but he encourages his wives to pursue other men as well. However, the horror of this monster goes

beyond their transgression of the “normal” bourgeois family, since their ultimate goal is to turn Harker into a non-monogamous being like them and destroy his family unit. To begin with, the three female vampires are described as deliberately voluptuous (49), bending over him, and one of them places her lips on his neck. As they do this, Harker is met by thoughts of lust, wishing to engage sexually outside of his marriage to Mina. Through his journal, he narrates that:

There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips. It is not good to note this down, lest some day it should meet Mina's eyes and cause her pain, but it is the truth. (38)

Harker’s narration reflects both his repressed sexual desire and craving for non-monogamy. Johnathan is longing in an agony of delightful anticipation (38), but he is also deadly afraid of said encounter, perhaps because it is improper. It is important to note that his fiancé Mina is only an afterthought, since he only regrets this interaction once he is writing it down, but it could be argued that this is due to the vampiric hypnosis he is under, which blurs his “moral”, monogamous self. Therefore, the vampire is used as a conduit to express anxieties about the capacity of overtly sexual women, who are depicted as “monstrous others”, to threaten the bourgeois family by seducing men into non-monogamy.

Another example of how vampires transgress the boundaries of monogamy, challenging the bourgeois family, is Lucy Westenra, who could not avoid her vampiric transformation due to her overtly sexual nature. Throughout the novel, Lucy expresses a desire to engage in several relationships at the time: “Why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and

save all this trouble? But this is heresy, and I must not say it.” (54), which fell out of what was morally and religiously expected of her. Since Victorian women were presumed to experience no sexual desire (Stage 481-482), Lucy’s non-monogamous fancying of men is promiscuous, and she poses a threat to the monogamous bourgeois family. Thus, because of her impropriety, when she turns into a monstrous vampire, she cannot be saved (Armstrong 114).

### **A Vampire’s Bite: Victorian Sexual Morality and Anxieties**

To middle-class Victorians, sex was a topic that people were reluctant to talk about. Even though many individuals engaged in sex out of wedlock, prostitution, and premarital pregnancy (Michie 110), sex remained a taboo topic because chastity was a matter of respectability (Altick 175). In simple words, respectability was the “social approval elicited by conduct that conformed to the Evangelical mode.” (Altick 174-175), and it resulted from the merge of Utilitarianism and Evangelicalism, which created and rationalized what came to be known as middle-class values (165). Within said values, it was commonly accepted that sex out of wedlock was sinful since it was considered a spiritual encounter of bonding, with the sole purpose of reproduction (Melody 21). Thus, sex was reserved for monogamous, heterosexual marriage, and anything outside of that was considered deviant. With the previous in mind, it is possible to argue that Victorians were bound to be sexually repressed and anxious about sexual matters.

Beyond its charm and beauty, which evoke sexual thoughts in its victim, the vampire’s bite is also an essential depiction of Victorian sexual repression. Avipsa Mondal argues that “...the bite is more than just a method of attack; it is the means by which the author explores sexual roles,

gender relations, and human identity.” (133). She demonstrates this by elucidating sexual undertones present in Polidori’s “The Vampyre”: Ianthe, a woman, is found with blood in her breast, not only on her neck, implying that the attack had a sexual connotation (134). The vampire’s bite is undoubtedly sexual in nature, but not only because it often denotes the sensual touch of necks and breasts, or because it is heavily loaded with sexual undertones, but rather because the bite in and of itself resembles sexual intercourse.

The bite of a vampire bears semblance to reproduction and pleasure. The penetration of the victim’s skin, with sharp teeth, arguably, and in some cases, resembles the act of phallic penetration (Craft 107-133), in which the exchange of bodily fluids, the attacker’s and the victim’s blood, mirrors intercourse. To illustrate, in Dracula’s castle, Johnathan Harker described feeling a “languorous ecstasy” (39) while waiting for the female vampires to bite him, or as the creatures utter, “kiss” him. While he lay quiet “the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there” (39) tickled the sensitive skin of his throat, and he felt “soft, shivering touch of the lips” (39) getting increasingly nearer to him. This passage is charged with sexual undertones, and they evoke his fear of engaging in sexual misconduct or losing his respectability.

Differently from Stoker’s work, in Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, the vampire’s bite is sexual, but not necessarily penetrative. For instance, Laura describes her bodily sensations when dreaming, which are presumably memories, or the exact occurrence, of Carmilla’s bite:

Sometimes it was as if warm lips kissed me, and longer and more lovingly as they reached my throat, but there the caress fixed itself. My heart beat faster, my breathing rose and fell rapidly and full drawn; a sobbing, that rose into a sense of strangulation, supervened, and turned into a dreadful convulsion, in which my senses left me and I became unconscious (Le Fanu 282).

In this passage, several elements hint that Laura and Carmilla are having a sexual encounter. The description of “warm lips kissed me, and longer and more lovingly”, describes a sensual encounter building up to a climax. The subtext of teasing, convulsion and strangulation resembles that of an orgasm, in which Laura is dreadfully convulsing. However, differently from the female vampires’ “hard dents”, Laura describes the bite as a caress, which can be interpreted as non-penetrative sexual stimulation. The horror arises not only from sex outside of wedlock but from intercourse without the involvement of a penis. A lesbian couple cannot fulfil the social mandate of reproduction, nor of marriage. Thus, Carmilla’s lesbianism threatens the bourgeois family.

Furthermore, Carmilla’s bite embodies anxieties regarding female sexuality and the destabilization of the bourgeois family. Laura’s “orgasm” and challenges the notion that Victorian women did not often experience sexual passion during sex, which conflicts with the dynamic that sex was not an act of enjoyment for women, but of reproduction. A sexually liberated, unmarried woman breaks the mould of the submissive Victorian woman (Hughes), which made bourgeoisie families possible. In fact, Armstrong argues that “...an individual's ability to subordinate female desire to feminine taste and morality, whether in one's lover, wife, daughter, or oneself, depended

the quality and perpetuity of domestic life. On these in turn depended the quality and perpetuity of the nation.” (112).

Overall, the vampire’s bite, whether penetrative or not, embodies sexual intercourse that threatens to end the social order that the Bourgeois family wants to maintain.

It is important to note that in this exchange, the bite, the vampire is both the giver and the receiver: the vampire sucks the victim’s blood, but in case of transforming them, they transfuse their own fluids onto their subordinate. It is then when the vampire becomes both the penetrator and the penetrated, which blurs the boundaries of sex and gender, which creates a gateway for vampirism to reflect Victorian anxieties about queerness and gender transgression.

## Chapter II: Gender Ambiguity and The Vampire

To understand the relationship between vampires, as monstrous others, to the transgression of gender roles, it is important to understand what “gender” is, how its construction was delimited for Victorians, and how vampires challenged these notions. In this chapter, I argue that the vampires of *Dracula* and *Carmilla* became a conduit to embody social anxieties about the stability of gender, and the potential its fluctuation had to destabilize the Victorian patriarchal system. More specifically, not only do *Dracula* and *Carmilla* perform gender in an ambiguous way, but they also invert the gender binary by subjecting men to passivity, and women to sexual dominance. These Victorian works ultimately reinforce the idea that the “queer other” is a threat to the patriarchy, and that they should be eradicated.

### Gender Theory: Performance and Fluidity

The arduous task of determining what “gender” is has been carried out by several scholars throughout history. Simone de Beauvoir was one of the first intellectuals to discuss the concept of “gender” in her book *The Second Sex* (1949). She argued that “One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman” (Beauvoir 283), meaning that although there are biological differences between the sexes, women become “women” due to societal circumstances. Furthermore, early queer theorist Judith Butler (1988) argued that gender is “an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519), which she argued to be a “performance” that is not continuous and seamless, but rather fluid and arbitrary (520). Seven years after Butler’s

work, gender theorist Kate Bornstein in *Gender Outlaw* (1995) revisited the concept of gender fluidity, and she concluded that gender can either be “ambiguous”, which means that the performance of gender can be transgressed, non-rigid, and non-definable (51), or “fluid”, which alludes to an identity which is based on the refusal to remain one gender or another (52). Bearing the former in mind, and understanding that gender is “tenuously constituted in time” (Butler 519), it is logical to argue that the construction of gender varies throughout time, and that the performance of gender conveys a different meaning according to its historical context.

### **Victorian Constructions of Gender: Spheres and Limitations**

In Victorian Britain, gender roles and performance were determined by a patriarchal gender system that stemmed from industrialization, religious beliefs, and middle-class value systems (Schneider 147-150). During the early nineteenth century, gender division was prominent due to the dichotomy of private and public spaces. The public sphere, concerned with paid work and politics, was a masculine space, whereas the private sphere, concerned with domesticity and family, was a feminine domain (Digby 195). However, this division was not arbitrary, but it rather stemmed from the Victorian notion that it was “natural” for each gender to belong in said sphere. To illustrate, In *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), a nineteenth-century moral guide about the “nature” and obligations of men and women, John Ruskin insisted that “The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender” (82), whereas a woman’s power is “for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision” (82), and he clarified that women’s “ordering” should only take place within the private space of the domestic, since the



home is “the woman’s true place and power” (83) since it is compatible with “wifely subjection” (82). He also argued that it is men’s duty to conquer, claim and compete outside of their homes (82), while women, as innocent beings (101), must stay back and praise men (83), never rising intellectually above their husbands (84). Thus, during the Victorian period, the feminine was arguably associated with subjection, whereas masculinity was deemed to be the active dominance.

### **The Queer Other in Gothic Literature**

Due to impending and rapid social change associated with the role of women in society, and the “apparition” of homosexuality, gothic novelists became interested in engaging in gender discourse through their works. During the 1880s and 1890s, movements such as “The New Woman Question<sup>3</sup>”, and the “Decadence Movement<sup>4</sup>” led to a heated discussion about gender roles and identity in the periodical press, which gothic novelists decided to partake in (Davison 126). The rising anxieties about gender, and its fluctuation, were embodied by “monstrous others” in gothic literature (Davison 126). For example, according to Thomas, Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897) is an exemplary case of the Victorian Gothic demonising the queer ‘other’: “...the queer

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<sup>3</sup> The “New Woman” was a fin de siècle phenomenon of the nineteenth century. Sometimes the “New Woman” referred to a feminist activist, a social reformer, a female poet, or a suffragette (Ledger 1). At other times, the “New Woman” was a fictional construct that responded to the women’s movement (2). In general, due to the limitations of the domestic sphere, the “New Woman Question” was a reaction to the gendered restrictions imposed on women: many women were starting to remain unmarried (162), pursue higher education (17), and worked outside of their homes (17-19), and this made Victorian society to grow anxious about their place in society.

<sup>4</sup> The “Decadence Movement” was an artistic and literary movement that professed a disdain for morality and social values (Ingelbien 1). By the end of the nineteenth century, due to the New Woman Question, the fear of “reverse colonization”, and homosexuality scandals, such as the trial of Oscar Wilde (1895), many Victorians considered this moment as “decadent”, since morality was being questioned and challenged (Showalter 150-170). Elaine Showalter also argues that “decadence” was a euphemism for homosexuality, due to the belief that homosexuals could contaminate and threaten heterosexuality (171).

Gothic monster is an Egyptian figure that constantly fluctuates across the gender spectrum (most characters wonder if ‘it’ is male or female) as well as shape-shifts across species categories.” (Thomas 150). Thomas argues that the monster of *The Beetle* “challenged traditional notions of ‘natural’ gender identity and boundaries.” (126), embodying anxieties about the destruction of heteronormative relationships, and the gender binary (126), since the monster kisses, and forces nudity, upon English men and women of all social classes.

### **The Bite and Gender Ambiguity**

As discussed in Chapter One, the bite can be interpreted as a metaphor for sexual intercourse, however, its relation to gender ambiguity relies on the fact that during this sexual encounter, the vampire does not have a fixed gender role. When biting their victims, the vampire assumes a penetrative role, piercing the neck of their subjugate, however, as the blood of the victim is sucked by the monster, the vampire becomes the receiver of fluids, arguably taking the passive role of receiver. If the bite resembles sex, then the vampire is both the penetrative man and the passive woman, blurring the binary of gender. Similar to my interpretation, author Christopher Craft argues that the mouth of the vampire resembles a sexual organ (109), which obscures the “masculine” and “feminine” categories of gender. He argues about *Dracula*’s bite that:

Luring at first with an inviting orifice, a promise of red softness, but delivering instead a piercing bone, the vampire mouth fuses and confuses what *Dracula*’s civilized nemesis, Van Helsing and his Crew of Life, works so hard to separate—

the gender-based categories of the penetrating and the receptive, or, to use Van Helsing's language, the complementary categories of "brave men" and "good women". (109)

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Craft's interpretation is also applicable to Carmilla's bite.

At the beginning of Le Fanu's novella, Carmilla's bite is evidently constructed as penetrative, since it is described as "puncturing needles" that inflict great pain on Laura (246). However, as time goes by, her bite is described as a "fixed caress" (246) that, and as argued in chapter one, brings her great pleasure in a non-penetrative way. Thus, Carmilla is not only fluctuating between the gender binary because she is both penetrative and receptive but because even the penetrative function of her "puncturing" bite fluctuates, reinforcing the blur of gender binary.

Overall, the bite serves as a space where sexual gender roles are no longer distinguishable. However, the horror of the vampire is not only its monstrous gender ambiguity, but its capacity to turn other "proper" men and women into "queer others" like themselves.

## **Passive Men and Dominant Women: The Bite as a Tool for Patriarchal Destabilization**

The vampires of *Dracula* and *Carmilla* are notable for diminishing men's power, by rendering them submissive, and empowering women, turning them into dominant and sexually liberated beings, which threatens the Victorian gendered patriarchal system. The element of fear is not only related to Carmilla's and Dracula's ability to subject and physically overpower men, but also to their ability to create a world where "ideal" women are no longer recognizable, and men cannot do anything to protect them.

The ideal Victorian woman was submissive, chaste, and modest (Hughes), just like Mina Harker, but the female vampires living in Dracula's castle are voluptuous, sexual, and dominant. When they try to bite Johnathan, they are the dominators, and he becomes the subordinate: arching over his unresponsive body, they seductively try to bite him, which, to his dread, makes him feel "the agony of delightful anticipation" (38). As he becomes aware of his desire, he is frightened, not only because they were horrifying, but because he was being lustful in a submissive position, which betrayed the principle of his gender: he became the passive sexual partner. If Mina, his partner, were to be converted, she would become a monstrous other, that, just as Dracula and the female vampires, would transgress gender norms, and would embody Victorian anxieties about the fluctuation of gender, or as Craft puts it: "Dracula presents a characteristic, if hyperbolic, instance of Victorian anxiety over the potential fluidity of gender roles." (112). Not only this but, during one of Dracula's attacks, he intrudes into the Harker's room, and Johnathan is said to be

under the influence of a “stupor” known to be produced by the vampire (263). The protagonist is described to be “On the bed beside the window lay Johnathan Harker, his face flushed, and breathing heavily as in stupor.” (262), as Mina is held down and forced to drink Dracula’s blood (262). The image of Johnathan laying unresponsive in the bed is evidently passive: as he is “flushed”, denoting weakness, and as a transgressor enters his home, he is unable to be the “natural defender” that Ruskin deemed men to be. Not only this, but this passage is great evidence of the count's fluctuation within the gender binary: Dracula “conquers” Harker’s space, and he attempts to reproduce, like a woman, with Mina. Thus, Dracula’s vampirism allows him not only to blur the binaries of gender, but to subjugate men, and to empower women, by transforming them into dominant and sexual female vampires.

In a similar manner to Dracula, Carmilla manages to deceive men, preying on their women, and rendering them useless to defend them from her bite. To illustrate, Carmilla's first known victim was Bertha, General Spieldorf’s niece. He reveals having been tricked by a “fiend” (249) that infiltrated his home: “I thought I was receiving into my house innocence, gaiety, a charming companion for my lost Bertha.” (249). Arguably, it is Carmilla’s perfect performance of femininity, which Victorians believed to be inherently innocent (Ruskin 101), that allows Carmilla to blend into Laura’s social circle without raising suspicion. Not only does she manage to fatally bite Bertha, but she is also capable of stopping General Spieldorf, a man who is supposed to physically overpower her, from hurting her: “Before I could utter a scream, he struck at her with all his force, but she dived under his blow, and unscathed, caught him in her tiny grasp by the wrist.” (312). Carmilla, similarly to Dracula, subverts men’s masculinity, by deceiving and outsmarting them, to “conquer” the feminine space that they are supposed to protect.

Furthermore, Carmilla, closely to Dracula's female vampires, displays ardent sexual desire, which she brings forward in a masculine manner. During some "mysterious moods" (264), Carmilla resembles the "boyish lovers" (265) that Laura had read about in old story books: she would draw Laura near to her, murmuring in her ear, and kissing her gently on her cheek (263), uttering "'You are mine, you shall be mine, you and I are one for ever.'" (264). Carmilla's straightforward affection is such, that this interaction provokes a sense of gender confusion in Laura, who is trying to rationalise why such a feminine girl would act like a courteous knight: "I had read in old story books of such things. What if a boyish lover had found his way into the house, and sought to prosecute his suit in masquerade...I could boast of no little attentions such as masculine gallantry delights to offer." (265). Laura's confusion about Carmilla's gender is so strong, that she ponders about her companion's physical appearance, concluding that there is an incongruence between her languish demeanour, which she perceives as feminine, and her masculine moments of gallantry: "Except in these brief periods of mysterious excitement her ways were girlish; and there was always a langour about her, quite incompatible with a masculine system in a state of health." (265). This gender fluctuation is what makes Carmilla such a threatening other to the patriarchy: if she were to successfully transform her victim, Laura would turn into a sexual, possessive, and masculine female vampire that intends to subvert other women's femininity, who would no longer belong in a gendered system.

### **Corrective Death: Eradicating the Queer Other**

An important element of Le Fanu and Stoker's works, is the meaning of the vampires' death. Carmilla, Dracula, and the three female vampires all die at the hands of respectable, middle-class, men. Baron Vonderburg, the descendant of a famous vampire hunter, appears to correct Carmilla's deviation by piercing her heart with an arguably phallic stake (315). Van Helsing, who found the tomb of the three sisters, drove a stake through their hearts, dissolving their "voluptuous beauty" (342-344). Lastly, Harker decapitates Dracula, avenging the subversion of his masculinity (350). The vampires undergo violent deaths because that is the ultimate message of the works: those that transgress the divisions of gender and threaten the patriarchal system, must be eradicated so that the world of normal relations can be restored (Mondal 108). However, it is also relevant to note that due to its boundless fluidity, the vampire not only transgresses gender, but it also ventures into queer desire that challenges heteronormativity.

### Chapter III: Vampirism and Queer Monstrosity

In both *Dracula* and *Carmilla*, vampires display monstrous queer desire, which is depicted as predatory and pathological. Even though there is no certainty about authorial intention, I will argue that both Le Fanu and Stoker's works comply with the homophobic Victorian ideas and norms of their time; *Carmilla* is depicted as a lesbian predator that spreads an "illness" that kills only young women; while Stoker created *Dracula* as a vampire that displays sexual desire towards all genders, and threatens to turn others into monsters like him. Both literary works operate to demonize and justify the punishment of the queer individuals that deviate from heteronormativity.

#### Victorian Homophobia: Abhorrent Homosexuals and Invisible Lesbians

By the end of the nineteenth century, homosexuality was considered an appalling, deviant sexual sin that had the ability to corrupt and contaminate individuals exposed to it, especially women (Adut 223-225). The reproach of homosexuality was such, that the Labouchère Amendment (1885), which criminalized homosexual acts where sodomy could not be proven, went into effect (Adut 224). However, As noted by Adut, eminent legal scholars deemed sodomy as a "disgrace to human nature" (223), but lesbianism was never criminalized in England (223). In fact, according to Elaine Showalter, the lesbian identity was not clearly defined or recognized, so much so that English legislators refused to include lesbianism in the amendment because it was "too deeply disturbing to even forbid" (119). In general, the Victorian belief was that homosexuality was a misdemeanour, and an abhorrent, indecent behaviour (Showalter 14), whereas lesbianism was rather invisible (119-120). Overall, queer desire was deeply reproached and marginalized, but



in different manners; homosexual men were punished by law, and lesbians were not even considered as existing entities.

### **Demonizing Homosexuality: The Predatory Queer Vampire**

To begin with, there are several passages where Carmilla is affectionate towards Laura, in a way that implies lesbian attraction rather than friendship. To illustrate, Laura narrates about Carmilla “She used to place her pretty arms about my neck, draw me to her, and laying her cheek to mine, murmur with her lips near my ear” (Le Fanu 263). This interaction resembles the closeness of a romantic couple, since Carmilla’s body language bears semblance to a lover wishing to kiss their loved one, murmuring in her ear, and drawing her close. Not only this, but Laura pays great attention to Carmilla’s beauty, which is what an infatuated person does when looking at someone they are attracted to. Furthermore, Laura describes that Carmilla would press her closely, in her “trembling embrace” (264), kissing her softly on her cheek (263-264), and it would feel like “the ardour of a lover” (264). However, these encounters were not necessarily consensual. For instance, Laura narrates that about those “foolish embraces” (264), “I used to wish to extricate myself; but my energies seemed to fail me.” (264). This passage depicts Carmilla as a sexual predator, holding Laura down and forcing her to receive her affection. In addition to this, as Laura says, “Her murmured words sounded like a lullaby in my ear, and soothed my resistance into a trance, from which I only seemed to recover myself when she withdrew her arms.” (264) a possible interpretation is that she is under the influence of vampiric hypnosis because the effect of her “soothing” ends when Carmilla physically lets her depart. However, it is important to note that there is an undeniable ambiguity when it comes to this interaction. Since vampiric hypnosis is not

explicitly stated to be taking place in this passage, perhaps Carmilla's "soothing" is effective because Laura is attracted to her, and her voice brings her comfort. Either way, Laura clearly expresses her wish to remove herself from that situation, which makes Carmilla a sexual predator that is forcing her affection upon her, which ultimately demonizes lesbianism.

Similar to Carmilla, Dracula is also portrayed as a sexual predator that displays queer desire toward his victim. During one of the first days of Harker's stay, Johnathan decided to shave his face, but as Dracula suddenly entered the room, he startled and cut his face (Stoker 27). The Count's reaction to seeing Harker's blood is quite telling about his desire: "When the Count saw my face, his eyes blazed with a sort of demoniac fury, and he suddenly made a grab at my throat. I drew away, and his hand touched the string of beads which held the crucifix. It made an instant change in him, for the fury passed so quickly that I could hardly believe it was ever there." (28). If the bite denotes sexual intercourse, as I argued previously in this dissertation, then Dracula's desire is inherently queer, as he wishes to partake in that manner with Harker. The count's desire is also violent and non-consensual, since he swiftly "grabs" Johnathan, with the purpose of sucking his blood. It is interesting to account that Dracula only stops because he is met by a symbol of Christianity: the crucifix. This is remarkable, because Dracula is being stopped for his queer "sexual sin" (Adut 223) by God. Not only this, but in a later chapter, Harker encounters three seductive female vampires who prey upon him, trying to bite him, which causes the count to become extremely irate and possessive over Johnathan. When the count catches them in their attempted contact, his eyes are "positively blazing" (39) with unimaginable "wrath and fury" (39). He uttered to them "How dare you touch him, any of you? How dare you cast eyes on him when I had forbidden it? Back, I tell you all! This man belongs to me!" (39). In this passage, Dracula

arguably displays sexual possessiveness, angry at their touching, kissing, and biting of him. This scene is not only about the count defending his victim from other predators but of a queer desire of “loving” Harker (40). After being “hurled away” (39) by the count, the female vampire protests ““You yourself never loved; you never love!” (40), to which the count responds in a soft whisper, after looking attentively at Harker’s face (40): ““Yes, I too can love; you yourselves can tell it from the past.”” (40). There is, then, an evident queer desire displayed in this passage: the count believes he is capable of “loving” Johnathan, the way he loved the female vampires before.

### **Vampirism as a Queer Illness**

The fear inflicted by the vampire is not merely about its “otherness”, but rather about its ability to infect others with its transgression of normality. The “illness” passed by the vampire does not only take the victim’s life, but their conformity to monogamous marriage, gender norms, and as addressed in this chapter, their heterosexuality. Arguably, it is not surprising that Le Fanu and Stoker chose the vampire, whom they both portray as queer, as a monster that passes down a deadly illness, since, during the Victorian period, homosexuality was considered a medical problem, a mysterious physiology, a pathology, and a disease (Showalter 14). Then, the horror of this monster is its ability to prey on heterosexual beings and transform them into queer others. In *Dracula*, professor Van Helsing expresses, even though not explicitly, such concern “But to fail here, is not mere life or death. It is that we become as him, that we henceforward become foul things of the night like him, without heart or conscience, preying on the bodies and the souls of those we love best.” (219). This passage suggests that Van Helsing’s fear was not just about turning

into a vampire, but rather living in sin, since, and as I have argued throughout previous chapters, these monsters embody all that is unholy: rampant sexuality, ambiguous gender performance, and queer desire. However, this connection I believe is made much clearer in *Carmilla*.

The connection of vampirism as an illness to queerness is evident in Le Fanu's work. *Carmilla*, who throughout the novel exclusively preys on and seduces women, is revealed to have had a "passionate and favoured lover" who was a Moravian nobleman (318). This disclosure is relevant because it conveys that before being a vampire, *Carmilla* was a "normal" heterosexual woman, and she only "turned" into a lesbian once she succumbed to the vampiric illness.

### **Different Endings: Unruly lesbianism and Eradicated Homosexuality**

By the end of *Carmilla*, it is apparent that Laura has been permanently affected by Laura's seduction. Even though her father took her to Italy to "recover" from her illness (319), or to undo *Carmilla*'s damage, she narrates that "...the image of *Carmilla* returns to memory with ambiguous alternations- sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw at the ruined church; and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of *Carmilla* at the drawing-room door." (319). The fact that Laura still holds *Carmilla* through fond memories, despite the negative ones, suggests that she has been permanently transformed by the vampire's queer corruption. Moreover, her "reverie" of hearing *Carmilla* in the drawing room implies that her image still lingers in her psyche and that perhaps Laura still desires to see her, which presents

the possibility that Laura became attracted to Carmilla, and not everything was due to vampiric hypnosis.

Since recovery was not effective for Laura, I believe that Le Fanu's message is that lesbianism was unruly within Victorian society, due to its invisibility. Sheridan presents the lesbian predator as a threat that has yet to be detected and can provoke irreversible damage on the proper heterosexual girl. Carmilla is unseen as a menace due to Victorian homosocial female friendships<sup>5</sup>: pretending to be Laura's companion, she infiltrates into her home and "turns" her into a sapphic that will think fondly of her even after realising she is a monster. This disorderly behaviour, however, is corrected by Stoker in *Dracula*.

Even though Stoker is unable to "undo" the queer effect of Carmilla, he reshapes the vampire into a monster that he can actually eradicate: the queer man. The ending of the novel is narrated by Harker, who states "Seven years ago we all went through the flames. And the happiness of some of us since then is, we think, well worth the pain we endured. It is an added joy to Mina and to me that our boy's birthday is the same day as that on which Quincey Morris died." (351). In this passage, it is evident that the heterosexual patriarchy has been restored. Harker and Mina are finally married, forming a perfect bourgeoisie heterosexual family, which gives them a son who

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<sup>5</sup> During the Victorian era, female friendships were encouraged and held in high regard, because it was believed that they were a space for women to learn how to be good wives, "feminine ways of loving", and cultivate selflessness (Marcus 39). Furthermore, some friendships were even called "female marriages", and they were seen as a variation of the heterosexual married couple, due to the domestic ideal of two women cohabiting (12). However, as Marcus argues, female friends and sapphic lovers could express affection in the same manner, without there being a clear distinction between the two (29) which created a gateway for homosociality to grow into homosexuality, without there being social reproach (31).

will continue their legacy. Mina submits to her role of wife and mother, avoiding becoming a monstrous sexual other like her friend Lucy Westenra, and Harker reclaims the masculinity that Dracula stole temporarily from him. However, and differently from Carmilla, Dracula's death did work, because he did not manage to transform Johnathan into a queer other like himself. The eradication of the queer man, just like Victorian society attempted to do through law amendments, manages to keep the status quo.

The connection of queerness to an illness spread by the vampire had the purpose of demonizing the queer individuals of Victorian society. The ultimate message is that queer people are carrying an illness capable of corrupting others if not contained, and just like the vampire that is violently killed in the end of the narrative, the queer other must be punished for defying heterosexuality. Nonetheless, Le Fanu and Stoker approached the elimination of the queer vampire differently: While Stoker completely obliterates Dracula's queer influence on Harker and his friends, by restoring the patriarchal order, Le Fanu ends the novella in an ambiguous manner, which implies that Carmilla's lesbianism permanently infects Laura.

## Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation I have proposed that the vampire threatens to destroy important systems that ensure social order and prosperity; through non-monogamy, lesbianism, and female sexuality, the vampire is able to break the stability of the bourgeois family; through gender ambiguity and inversion, these monsters threaten to subvert the patriarchy; and by infecting queerness into their victims, the vampire poses a menace to heterosexuality. It is important to note that all arguments are linked to each other to a certain degree; if the vampire destroys heterosexuality, there is no bourgeois family, and consequently, there is no patriarchy; if these monsters destabilize the family, then there are no gender roles to keep men and women separated by spheres. One simple act of vampiric seduction is able to subjugate men to passivity, turn women into dominant beings, and create sexual desire outside of monogamy. Thus, the vampire's death becomes necessary, since it destabilizes an interconnected system, in which, if one-piece falls, all the others follow.

However, as it happens in every investigation, some arguments stand stronger than others. I recognize weakness in the portrayal of *Dracula* as a "queer other" since there is not enough evidence to claim that the count ever bites Harker. One could argue that the passage where he grabs his throat is merely about Dracula's thirst for blood. Another claim that could be refuted is the portrayal of Carmilla as a sexual predator. Since Laura is still infatuated with Carmilla by the end of the book, when vampiric hypnosis has no way of reaching her, does that mean that Carmilla never really forced attraction upon Laura? There are certainly non-consensual interactions between

them, but if Laura remains waiting for Carmilla's return, then perhaps Le Fanu's work is not a story about the "queer other", but of a journey of self-discovery.

Generally, it is noteworthy that this investigation was formulated upon a scarcity of updated material, which limited my formulation of arguments and topics. I was not able to locate sources, proposals or arguments that addressed vampiric non-monogamy, or Dracula's queer desire for Harker, therefore, my interpretations are new and require scrutiny. Furthermore, a topic I wish I could have included is the connection between vampirism, homosexuality, and sexually transmitted diseases. Due to the Contagious Diseases Act (1864), I thought there ought to be a connection between the queer vampires' blood transfusions, and the "vampiric illness". However, due to limited resources and time, I decided to focus on arguments that I could develop properly. Lastly, I believe that there are many more associations to the vampire, that I did not get to explore, that could be brought forward in future investigations. Some of those questions could be: what is the relation between incest and vampirism? And how does it reflect Victorian concerns about this matter? How did "decadence" relate to other monsters and their transgressions? These questions could lead to meaningful investigations.

Even though I did not manage to address every topic I was initially interested in, through an in-depth investigation, I concluded that vampires are intricate monsters that can be studied through many perspectives and lenses. The construction of the vampire is confusing and hard to decipher, but once it becomes an object of study, it can reflect the rich connection between literature and history, and the complexity of human desire.



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