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QUEERING THE MONSTROUS FEMININE: LESBIAN VAMPIRES, FOLKLORE, AND
TRAUMA IN SHERIDAN LE FANU'S *CARMILLA*

by

EMILEE CALAMETTI

Under the Direction of LeeAnne Richardson, PhD.

ABSTRACT

The discussion regarding vampire history is a popular topic among scholars dating back earlier than the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rise of Gothic literature and is echoed within early Gothic texts. Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* deserves a secure place within the literary canon for its pull on the genre's connection to the female image, while preceding Bram Stoker's *Dracula* by twenty-six years. Not only does the novella demonstrate a crucial development in the genre, but it also disrupts social norms of Victorian women by queering the title character as well as the heroine. While the connection this novella has with the Gothic is clear, Le Fanu's motivations behind the text have not been adequately analyzed. Many argue his motivation stems from political fear, but this thesis investigates the deeper connections between vampiric lore and Le Fanu's past personal traumas in his creation of a queer, monstrous, female vampire.

INDEX WORDS: Vampire history, Gothic literature, Queer vampires, Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, trauma

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by

EMILEE CALAMETTI

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

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2021

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mom who fought COVID-19 and won, the graduate group chat that kept my mental health stable, and to those who love Gothic literature as much as I do.

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This thesis was brought to life by the help of my director, LeeAnne Richardson, PhD., and the help from my committee members, Tanya Caldwell, PhD. and Marilyn Richtarik, PhD. These strong, intelligent women took my love for the Gothic and helped give it a voice. They have helped me achieve a place in academia I always dreamed of having.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla*, published in 1872, needs to be recognized as both a canonical and innovative Gothic text. The novella occupies a critical moment in the development of the Gothic novel from Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe's now-canonical eighteenth-century novels in which women are the primary victims of monstrous passions. Le Fanu instead places the monstrosity of vampirism onto his female antagonist Carmilla, while also queering his two main characters, thus showcasing two powerful women in a society that considered them powerless. Throughout the text, Carmilla's relationship with the heroine, Laura, develops slowly, evolving into a very intense bond between the two women. Although Le Fanu did not produce the first vampire novel, he deconstructs the male vampiric image and places the women within the novella in a place of power. By doing this he exhibits the freedom of Carmilla and Laura's transgressive relationship and their independence. While *Carmilla* aligns with the preexisting attachment the Gothic has with the portrayal of women as monstrous, seductive creatures, Le Fanu produced an innovative portrayal of strong, independent women characters.¹ This thesis will explore the literary, biographical, and folkloric history behind *Carmilla* and analyze the novella itself using a queer, feminist perspective based on my research findings to demonstrate *Carmilla's* importance to the development of the Gothic genre, as well as potential motifs in Le Fanu's personal life that led him to create a queer, female vampire. I argue that to understand the late-Victorian Gothic properly, *Carmilla* needs to be considered part of the canon.

Le Fanu draws on literary precedents, but he also employs biographical details from his own life and the Irish folklore that he was immersed in while he was writing. This project will

¹ This attachment was later reconstructed by the male vampiric image developed by Stoker's *Dracula*.

outline the significant reasons *Carmilla* deserves a place in the literary canon in relation to how we think about the development of the Gothic genre. Existing scholarship on Le Fanu's work demonstrates that Le Fanu's *Carmilla* paved the way for Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Yet scholars do not fully recognize Le Fanu's contribution to Gothic literature. Some of his novels, such as *Uncle Silas* (1864), are praised for their mystery and contribution to the genre, but *Carmilla* falls under the shadow of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. This thesis will look past those claims by arguing that *Carmilla* can also be analyzed using a feminist lens that highlights the novella's connections between vampire lore, Irish folkloric beliefs, and trauma in Le Fanu's life. Le Fanu uses the female queering of vampirism as a way to express his anxiety about the possibility of being haunted by a banshee and also as a metaphor for the death of many women in his life. His distinct approach in the creation of his queer, female antagonist and protagonist is deeply rooted in personal trauma he experienced while also connecting to the folklore he immersed himself in. Although Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is a clear response to the novella and overshadowed Le Fanu's creation of a queer, monstrous antagonist, this analysis of *Carmilla* shows how the categorization of Le Fanu as a minor writer is inaccurate and demonstrates the necessity of further scholarship on his work.

Le Fanu's depiction of vampirism in *Carmilla* is, in part, influenced by Dom Augustin Calmet's 1751 dissertation *Traité sur les apparitions des esprits et sur les vampires ou les revenans de Hongrie, de Moravie, &c* (*Treatise on the Apparitions of Spirits and on Vampires or Revenants of Hungary, Moravia, et al.*), as are texts by many other Gothic novelists who contributed to vampire fiction. Scholars such as Paul Barber and Robert Tracy note that Le Fanu's novella echoes Calmet's work on vampire lore during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Calmet addresses aspects of vampirism including how people turn into vampires, how

to kill a vampire, and, most important, different historical records of vampires. Many believed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that vampirism was a diagnosis of the mind and body, resembling hysteria. These details can be seen in *Carmilla* and will help explain why Le Fanu chose to portray the victims of the vampire Carmilla with hysterical, neurotic symptoms. Barber suggests that *Carmilla* is a retelling of one of Calmet's vampire accounts from Hungary. The history of vampirism is essential here to explain not only why Le Fanu's novella marks a critical stage in the development of the vampire canon, but also to explain why Le Fanu chose a queer, female vampire as his antagonist, and why all the young women infected by Carmilla's bite experience hysterical attacks leading to their deaths.

Le Fanu could also express the trauma he experienced in his life through a queer, female voice. In the novella, vampirism is presented as an affliction that can be cured by a medical doctor, and the characters, primarily the male doctors and fathers, often relate vampirism to the psyche, viewing it as a mental illness.² In this, Le Fanu could have been drawing from his life experiences: many of the women Le Fanu cared about died prematurely. Le Fanu's wife suffered from increasing neurotic symptoms according to reports during 1856, including hallucinations and paranoia, which could have influenced the hints of psychosis in *Carmilla*: each woman infected with the bite of Carmilla eventually begins to experience hallucinations, paranoia, and a severe decline in health, as we see in Laura and Bertha. After his wife died in 1858 from a supposed "hysterical attack" that has not received much evaluation, Le Fanu did not produce any novels until he lost his mother in 1861. Later that decade, one of his close correspondents also

² During the nineteenth century, hysteria was the most common diagnosis for women. Mark Micale argues that "doctors during the latter half of the nineteenth century matter-of-factly considered hysteria the most common of the functional nervous disorders among females" (Micale 497)

died. This domino effect of deaths of the women in Le Fanu's life could have impacted the way he portrays women in *Carmilla*.

Scholars believe Irish folklore is a big part of the Sheridan- Le Fanu family, which connects to the trauma Le Fanu experienced, the banshee in particular. Legend says that these female Irish "fairies," sometimes called the *si*, are sinister and crave human beings, similar to vampires. They often crave children but do not hesitate to prey on men and women. The *si* lure their victims away to live a "half-life" under the earth. Reading Le Fanu family memoirs, Patricia Lysaght discovered that Le Fanu's paternal grandmother "refers to the banshee being heard at the Sheridan residence at Quilca, Co. Cavan on the occasion of the death abroad of Mrs. Frances Sheridan" (Lysaght 124). Scholars can trace the origin of the banshee as far back as the 1300s in Ireland. She is known as the Irish Death Messenger and is not a welcome guest in any Irish household. She wails or cries beneath the window of a family to alert them that a family member will soon perish. The banshee lingers and eventually takes them to their death. Carmilla's resemblance to the banshee is evident and can explain why Le Fanu felt justified to take on the voice of a queer, female character. Carmilla's character is an echo of what is happening in Le Fanu's life while also acting as a metaphor for his trauma. He has created this female, vampiric image to symbolize the banshee haunting his family, and the female victims of Carmilla are symbolic of the young women Le Fanu has lost. The connection between the female banshee preying on the women in Le Fanu's family and Carmilla preying on young women supports a queer, feminist reading of the text.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

Robert Tracy's *Oxford World's Classics* edition of *In a Glass Darkly* (2008)—the collection in which *Carmilla* appears—is my authoritative version of the text. This edition includes research on Le Fanu's background, establishing connections between his life and the portrayal of the vampire Carmilla. Tracy also includes exceptionally detailed notes that highlight various possible inspirations for Le Fanu's work. Scholars have tended to focus on the “otherness” of the novella, but the feminist aspects need further analysis. Some scholars argue that his motivation stems from political and social anxiety due to the uproar in Ireland during the nineteenth century. I am more interested in why Le Fanu would create a female character and turn her into something monstrous. I believe Le Fanu's motivation for the novel was personal based on the details in his biography by Gary Crawford and the notes Robert Tracy includes in his Oxford edition of the text. Elizabeth Signorotti's feminist critical approach to the novella's disruption of patriarchal standards will be used heavily in my queer, feminist reading of the text. This will act as a main critical voice in my argument. Le Fanu's development of vampirism is more significant to the study of vampire lore and the Gothic than Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, given the latter text's re-sexualizing and re-gendering of vampirism.

Existing scholarship tends to look at *Carmilla* through a political and historical lens or uses the novella to analyze “more significant” vampire fiction. Despite its queer female antagonist, the novella has inspired less scholarship on the queer or feminist aspects of its narrative than *Dracula* has. Many scholars cite Le Fanu's *Carmilla* in Lacanian and Freudian readings of other texts, beginning with *Dracula* and moving forward in time. Still, there is a lack of scholarship on *Carmilla* itself. Some existing criticism does, however, address the overall depiction of gender and sexuality in the text. Gabriella Jönsson published a compelling argument

looking at the queer, female aspects of *Carmilla* along with Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire* (1976). Elizabeth Signorotti does a thorough feminist reading of the text, discussing the transgressive relationships within Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Stoker's *Dracula*. Scholars have also used psychoanalysis to analyze the maternal in *Carmilla*. Angelica Michelis points out the lack of mother figures in Gothic fiction and argues that the maternal is the "specific horror evoked in the tale" (Michelis 21). Much of the scholarship on *Carmilla* explores the political fear and anxiety Le Fanu felt during this time. Anglo-Irish landowners experienced social isolation and political deprivation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many felt their hold on Ireland was slowly slipping away. All of the existing criticism of *Carmilla* has informed my reading and understanding of the novella. A queer, feminist reading of the text further illuminates while supplementing these approaches—it does not supplant them.

Le Fanu uses the supernatural to his advantage to queer his antagonist and her victim Laura. Carmilla, as a character, works against patriarchal norms in Victorian society by being strong and free from male restraint. It can appear as a consequence of her freedom that Carmilla is cursed with the monstrosity of vampirism. Marilyn Brock argues that "through such use of the supernatural, Le Fanu Gothicizes lesbianism; Carmilla is able to vamp a potential good English mother because Laura is mesmerized by her aggressive sexuality" (Brock 122). Carmilla deviates from social norms, and we get two very distinct images of Victorian women. While Carmilla is working against the patriarchal hold, Laura, as Brock says, can be seen as having the makings of a "good English mother" throughout the story.³ At the same time, she contemplates

³ Brock defines this portrait of a "good English mother" as a derivative of the angel—one of Nina Auerbach's feminine categories explored within *The Woman and the Demon*. Brock states that the angel is an "ideological creation that was reinforced by Victorian Society's "medical gaze" as Foucault calls it in *Birth of the Clinic*" (Brock 121). The "medical gaze" refers to the notion that

and struggles with her feelings for Carmilla, but she does not necessarily express these feelings as bad.

1.2 Thesis Outline

The first chapter of my thesis will elaborate on the historical, biographical, and folkloric contexts of *Carmilla*. Many scholars, including Calmet and Barber, have significant works on the historical accounts of vampires that I will use as references in my analysis of Le Fanu's novella. I will also use the existing scholarship to argue for Le Fanu's place in the development of the Gothic that should give him a firm place in the literary canon. Understanding the historical context of vampirism and previous scholarship will demonstrate why biographical content and folklore are vital factors in Le Fanu's novella. I will bring in nineteenth-century discourse about women's hysteria to further support my argument on the creation of Carmilla and Laura's characters. Scholars have not discussed that the deaths Le Fanu experienced in his family assist in explaining the potential "why" when it comes to Le Fanu's creation of the character Carmilla. His motivation for the novel intertwines with Irish folkloric tales relating to a banshee, and scholars such as Lysaght have noted that the Sheridan Le Fanu family was haunted by this Irish Death Messenger. Carmilla acts as a non-traditional banshee within the novel as she preys on the Karnstein family line. This first chapter will create the base of my argument and give the needed background to understand the connections I will make in Chapter 2 regarding potential motifs for Le Fanu's queer, female vampire.

"female sexuality needs to be monitored or it would burst uncontrollably, harming benevolent social structures" (Brock 121).

The second chapter of my thesis will look at *Carmilla* through a queer, feminist lens, while highlighting the main aspects I analyze within Chapter 1 regarding Le Fanu's traumatic history having such a distinct part in the characterization of Carmilla. I will first explore the connection the Gothic has with women as this is a crucial aspect for Le Fanu's connection to the genre. I will use different critical works, including work by Elizabeth Signorotti, to further connect these aspects. This chapter will use evidence of Irish folklore, deaths in Le Fanu's family, and vampiric history to support my theories behind why Le Fanu created the character he did. While looking at the life of a male author seems strange in relation to a feminist reading, there is much of Le Fanu within *Carmilla*, most of it relating to the death of his wife and other female relatives. There are subtle, yet evident, connections between Calmet's historical accounts of vampires and the novella, which also uses Carmilla's character as a banshee-like image. These similarities between Le Fanu's real life and the one he created in his novella will be highlighted and looked at in depth within this chapter. The transgressive relationship that develops between Carmilla and Laura goes against Victorian social norms, making this text a crucial development within the genre. Evidence from the text will be presented to support my argument. The Gothic has always had an attachment to the female image, and I will use this attachment to support my critical reading of the text.

1.3 *Carmilla* at a Glance

The novella begins based on the accounts given by the protagonist and heroine Laura while living with her father in Styria. The collection of narratives was put together by an unnamed source, who explains that Doctor Hesselius has included elaborate notes that reference his essay on the strange events that follow. The unnamed narrator in the Prologue is publishing the case

“simply to interest the laity” (Le Fanu 243). The stranger found the case and wanted to re-open what Doctor Hesselius had started, but the informant (i.e. Laura) had died during the time that had passed.

Unlike vampire novels before Le Fanu’s, the vampire antagonist in *Carmilla* is a woman preying on other women rather than men. Laura’s first encounter with the mysterious figure readers come to know as Carmilla happens at an early age of around six years old. It is not until twelve years later that Laura meets this mysterious stranger again. During this time a series of unforeseen murders are taking place to the women of the area surrounding the home Laura and her father live in; one of these happens to be General Spielsdorf’s niece and ward, Bertha. The General is not only a close confidant of Laura’s father but also a prospective husband for Laura, as her father hints at within the latter half of the novella, although Laura dismisses the idea. The General describes something monstrous having taken Bertha’s life and vows not to rest until he puts an end to the madness that has fallen over the town.

Laura’s father insists on taking Carmilla under his care when discovering her carriage had crashed not far from their home, which sets the relationship between Laura and Carmilla into full effect. The two women become visibly taken with one another, and Laura’s need for male guidance lessens as her need for Carmilla grows stronger. It is not until the second traumatic encounter with Carmilla, that Laura begins to make connections between what she is experiencing and the mystery behind Carmilla’s actions. She tries to tell her father what is happening, but neither he nor the male doctors he’s employed take Laura seriously. Laura does not appear any less taken by Carmilla, but she does express feeling frightened and unwilling to tell her father of any future events that transpire for fear of mockery and judgment.

This fear leads to the drastic decline in Laura's health after being bitten by Carmilla. By this point her father begins to take notice and employs yet another male doctor to observe her. He advises she may have fallen victim to a vampire bite, and we learn the General received the same news regarding Bertha before she died. Laura, the General, and her father go in search of the Chapel of Karnstein, the family of Laura's mother, making Carmilla a very distant relative of Laura. The General retells his findings on the journey regarding Carmilla's vampiric nature and swears to rid the town of her monstrous ways. He convinces Laura's father but does not convince Laura that Carmilla is a monster.

They arrive at the chapel, and the General fails the first time at killing Carmilla. It is not until they look in her tomb that they find her and kill her using traditional vampire lore methods. Laura, too, dies sometime after, but the ending of the novella is left quite open with room for interpretation regarding Laura's death. While both the women do die, we know from the lore that Laura inevitably will rise from her grave as a vampire, as will Bertha, continuing Carmilla's vampiric lineage.

1.4 Expected Result

With my findings, I hope to add critical evidence to the literary discussion around Le Fanu's novella and bring light to key factors of the text that are shadowed by historical scholarship and comparisons to Stoker's *Dracula*. The biographical, folkloric, and literary history in this novella is a key factor in determining its importance to the Gothic genre and the creation of a queer female vampire. This thesis will highlight the many potential motifs behind Le Fanu's creation of a queer, female vampire who disrupts the patriarchal rule within a society

ultimately controlled by male figures. The strong female portraits in the novella make *Carmilla* essential to the literary canon.

2 CHAPTER 1

2.1 A Brief History of Vampiric Lore

During the seventeenth century, reports of vampires resurfaced in Europe, causing suspicion and fear. The mysterious thought of the undead has always been around in many ways throughout different cultures. Still, it wasn't until the seventeenth century that stories began to reemerge in eastern Europe of people returning after death to haunt their relatives and drain them of their blood. The undead were found back in their graves, and the only way to put them down for good was to cut off their head or drive a stake through their heart. According to Paul Barber, these precautions taken to assure a vampire's death derive from the folkloric beliefs of many cultures. Some cultures, such as the Gypsies and ancient Celts, believed cutting off the head of a corpse and burying it separately hastened the decomposition process, which would decrease the chances of the reanimation of the body. Some people believed that piercing or puncturing the heart of the body helped with the soul's departure. The vampire becomes "bloated," and this puncture allowed for a direct route the soul could take to exit the body (Barber 158). Other accounts, according to Barber, explain that different cultures would stuff strong smells, like garlic, into the eyes or mouth because vampires were bothered by strong fragrances. Other cultures would take a stake and pierce the tongue or bind the mouth shut to inhibit the vampire's ability to suck the blood of others (157). Some Romanian folkloric beliefs describe, "The blood of the staked vampire is said to spurt high into the air... The vampire has two hearts, and the second of these, which enables him to live after death, causes the blood to gush forth" (159). This aspect of Romanian folklore is why many would cover the corpse before piercing the bloated body to prevent unwanted contagions expelled upon death that transmitted diseases.

The emergence of reports regarding vampire infestations in towns throughout eastern Europe inspired eighteenth-century scholars to uncover the mystery of “the vampire,” writing articles with different theories about the cause of what appeared to be an unnatural phenomenon. Perhaps the best-known historical analysis of vampirism is Dom Augustin Calmet’s *Traité sur les apparitions des esprits et sur les vampires ou les revenans de Hongrie, de Moravie, &c* (*Treatise on the Apparitions of Spirits and on Vampires or Revenants of Hungary, Moravia, et. al.*) (1751). Calmet analyzes the concept of vampirism and different cases during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including one of the most famous: that of Arnold Paole. Scholars of our time, like Paul Barber and Robert Tracy, turn to Calmet’s analysis to make sense of vampire lore and vampires in literature like *Carmilla*. These analyses allow for a deeper understanding of what people believed to be essential to recognize the signs and symptoms of vampirism and to rid the world of the monstrous creatures.

Calmet addresses historically recorded cases of vampires in his 115-chapter dissertation. His work acts as a vampire encyclopedia analyzing different circumstances or events that took place and what could have caused each one. He offers insight into magical beings and practices while also not denying any truthfulness of what he heard from the witnesses by holding trust in the those that gave their testimonies in his work. According to Calmet, vampires are “men who have been dead a considerable time... who leave their tombs, and come and disturb the living, sucking their blood, appearing to them.... often causing their death” (Calmet 247). The name vampire, or oupires, signifies a leech in Slavonic. He offers that the only way to get rid of them is to “disinter them, cut off their head, impale them, burn them, or piece their heart” (247). These elements are seen within vampire fiction and the Gothic. In Chapter 5, he recalls a case from Asia of a young girl named Philinium, the daughter of Demonstrates and Chariton. She left her

grave every night for six months until the townspeople noticed her nightly appearances. They set out to investigate the vault where Philinium had been laid to rest and found her family's corpses arranged in their places, but they couldn't find her body. Calmet refers to delusion or demons to explain the resurrection of these women throughout history.

One of the most famous cases recorded and analyzed by Calmet, according to Kathryn Morris, is by Johann Flückinger in his *Visum et Repertum* (1732) of Arnold Paole. Flückinger reports being sent to the village of Medvegia in southern Serbia to investigate reports of vampires killing people by sucking their blood. Morris explains,

Paole had been troubled by a vampire while serving as a soldier in Turkish Serbia....

Twenty or thirty days after his death, complaints began to circulate that Paole had killed four villagers and harassed many more. Paole's body was exhumed and it was discovered that "he was quite complete and undecayed, and that fresh blood had flowed from his eyes, nose, mouth, and ears..." Recognizing Paole as a true vampire, the villagers drove a stake through his heart (Morris 182).

The discussion surrounding this report from 1730-1740 shows that people believed the victim was either brought back to life by demons, that the events had been illusions, or that disease and natural phenomena could explain everything around the time witchcraft hysteria was beginning to slow down. The execution of witches was on the wane, and, as witch lore decreased, vampire lore increased. Witches were traditionally female and mythicized as sexualized servants to the devil. At the same time, vampires became increasingly masculine, but vampire lore did begin with a female image as early as the sixteenth century in Hungary.

Le Fanu gained much of his inspiration and vampire knowledge from Calmet's 1751 dissertation, as did many Gothic novelists who contributed to vampire fiction. Barber suggests

that *Carmilla* is a retelling of one of Calmet's vampire accounts from Hungary. Calmet's report was related to him by a priest traveling through Moravia. The priest accompanied M. Jeanin to a village called Liebava to gather information on a famous vampire that had caused a commotion in the village a few years prior. Witnesses told the priest that a notable inhabitant would disturb the people's beds at night after coming out of the cemetery. A Hungarian stranger passing through town claimed he could put an end to the vampire. To follow through with this claim, he waited at a church to observe the vampire's movement and the timing of his entrance into the town. Once the stranger saw the vampire come out of his grave, he hurried to gather the linen garments the vampire had left on the ground before he went into the village. The vampire returned to find his clothes missing, so he began to climb to the top of the church, but the stranger quickly threw his clothes down and cut off the vampire's head.

The story told in Le Fanu's novella about the mysteries of the Chapel of Karnstein is quite similar and reads,

A Moravian nobleman, who happened to be traveling this way, heard how matters were, and being skilled...in such affairs, he offered to deliver the village from its tormentor.... He ascended, shortly after sunset, the tower of the chapel... from whence he could distinctly see the churchyard beneath him.... From this point he watched until he saw the vampire come out of his grave, and place near it the linen clothes in which had been folded, and then glide away towards the village to plague its inhabitants. The stranger... came down from the steeple, took the linen wrappings of the vampire, and carried them up to the top of the tower... When the vampire returned from his prowling and missed his clothes, he cried furiously to the Moravian, whom he saw at the summit of the tower... who beckoned him to

ascend and take them... The vampire... began to climb the steeple... he had reached the battlements of the Moravian... descending by the winding stairs, the stranger followed and cut his head off (Le Fanu 307-308)

Before Sheridan Le Fanu's novella, there were many vampire tales with women as main characters, or antagonists, that he could have drawn from for inspiration, but this Hungarian account, as Barber has identified as well, is quite similar to the story told within the novella about the abandoned town that was previously inhabited by vampires. Le Fanu turns the nobleman into a Moravian nobleman as opposed to a Hungarian stranger passing through town, although the priest retelling the original account to Calmet was a priest traveling through Moravia. These minute details play a significant role in demonstrating where Le Fanu got much of the inspiration for his novella.

While this story in Hungary is one inspiration Le Fanu drew from for his novel, Judith Johnson notes that "Le Fanu's lesbian vampire Carmilla [is] possibly based on Countess Elizabeth Bathory" (Johnson 75). Elizabeth Bathory was not only a Hungarian noblewoman, who lived in Transylvania during the late 1500s until her death in 1614, but a serial killer believed to bathe in the blood of virgins to retain her youth. Stories highlight her having vampiric tendencies like this one while partaking in torturing and murdering hundreds of young female servants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Johnson's connection uses the aristocracy of Carmilla's former self, Countess Karnstein, to make a possible connection to historical figure Elizabeth Bathory, among other things that are similar between the two women. Charlotte Wells notes, "Bathory slaughtered more than sixty young girls and drank their blood, believing it would restore her youth" (Wells 354), making her the first known "vampire" in

history. However, the term “vampire” didn’t make its way into western European languages until the late seventeenth century (Wells 354).

During the nineteenth century, novels such as *Carmilla* linked vampirism to the feminine by using beautiful, seductive women as their novels’ antagonists. Many vampire novels also put women in monstrous roles, as seen in Stoker’s *Dracula*, while male characters take more heroic roles. This is evident in *Carmilla*, as Laura’s father and the General, in the end, stake Carmilla. Le Fanu took the typical portrait of female vampirism—a beautiful woman preying on men—a step further by making his antagonist not only a female vampire preying on women but queer. Carmilla preys on beautiful young women and takes an extra liking to the protagonist and narrator of the novella, Laura. According to Gina Wisker, “The female vampiric body is associated both with monstrosity and the desire for beauty” (Wisker 154). This observation about the female body is also evident in Barbara Creed’s theoretical approach in *The Monstrous Feminine*. She goes into detail on the “seven faces of the monstrous feminine,” and among these seven is the vampire. Vampirism in literature took the form of the reports from the seventeenth century as being illusory, caused by disease or mental illness. These connections could explain why nineteenth-century women’s hysteria is seen above other causes within the novels, including *Carmilla*, published during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The monstrosity of vampirism was attached to the feminine before the time of *Dracula*, paving the way for the attachment the Gothic has with the image of women, allowing Le Fanu to queer his Gothic female antagonist in *Carmilla*. As I’ve noted previously, vampirism can be used as a metaphor for class and racial anxiety, as is argued for Le Fanu’s work, but a feminist reading of the text cannot be ruled out; Johnson argues that we should not “obscure its use as a metaphor for anxiety over gender and power conflicts” (Johnson 76). There is a link between vampirism and female

sexuality, given its association with “menstruation and sexual fluids” (Johnson 75), which is supported in the sharing of blood action invoked by vampires. There’s a sort of sexual nature seen here that Le Fanu uses to his advantage by having Laura tell the story, leaving Carmilla as the feared “Other” to the reader.

2.2 Inspiration through Trauma and Death

The trauma Le Fanu experienced throughout his lifetime is echoed in his work. Specifically, *Carmilla* projects his trauma upon the women in the story. Le Fanu endured the deaths of many close female associates before he died in 1873. These traumatic events are essential to understanding both why Le Fanu created a queer, female antagonist and protagonist in his novella and why he integrated such strong female characters within the text. Many scholars record Le Fanu’s life as uneventful, leading him to turn to horror stories. Christine Longford writes, “Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu... was born in Dublin... and spent most of his life there. It was the life of a writer, uneventful though he wrote stories of mystery and horror” (Longford 41). M. R. James also notes in one of his many lectures on the Irish Gothic writer that Le Fanu’s life was “easily dismissed: he came of an old Huguenot stock, lived all his days in Dublin, and died in 1873—a widower” (James). In my view, though, Le Fanu’s life, with its constant encounters with death, was anything but “uneventful.” He used *Carmilla* to address many of the underlying traumas he experienced.

Much of the scholarship on *Carmilla* explores the political fear and anxiety Le Fanu felt during this time. Tracy considers Le Fanu’s work to be among the best within the Gothic genre and uses the motif of political fear and anxiety as a basis for his critical introduction of *In a Glass Darkly*. He suggests that Le Fanu’s characters “in their helplessness... may, in fact,

represent his response to Irish events, in which his own class seemed less and less capable of preserving the power and privileges which it had once enjoyed..." (Tracy vii). Anglo-Irish landowners experienced social isolation and political deprivation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many felt their hold on Ireland was slowly slipping away. This theory, among others, is elaborated on by Gary Crawford, who addresses the anxiety within Le Fanu's writing. Crawford suggests, "There is surely in the Irish works a sense of anxiety about the Anglo-Irish Protestant domination of the country, and this anxiety often appeared creatively in tales of dissolute families and ghosts and vampires" (4). Le Fanu's writing of Gothic tales can be viewed as a way to release "society's collective guilt" (Crawford 4), but I argue that, while Le Fanu may have had social guilt centered around his Protestant beliefs and domination within Ireland that link to the death and violence he witnessed, writing *Carmilla* was an outlet for the female family deaths he endured leading up to its publication in 1872.

Sheridan Thomas Le Fanu was born in Dublin, Ireland, into a celebrated literary family. The first full biography of Le Fanu was published in 1995 by Gary William Crawford. He highlights the importance of family in Le Fanu's life, emphasizing the women in it. He notes,

Le Fanu was, as shown in W. J. McCormack's biography, devoted to the women in his life. Le Fanu was very close to his mother up to her death in 1861, and his sister Catherine was also a confidante. Catherine was ill most of her life and died in March 1841 [at the age of 27]. The women in Le Fanu's life, his mother, his sister, and his wife, no doubt influenced his fiction, because Le Fanu's female characters are the focus of most of his later fiction and there is a strong obsession with death (Crawford 6).

While living in Ireland, Le Fanu married his wife Susanna Bennett in 1844. During Susanna's illness, Le Fanu would record her dreams and keep them for later use within his fiction. In one of her dreams, her deceased father visited her bedside (Crawford 6). Apparently, she began experiencing neurotic symptoms in 1856, which eventually developed into psychosis and hysteria. Similar circumstances can be found in *Carmilla*, as Laura suffers from the pre-stages of vampirism, and the male medical professionals and her father deem her accounts to be dreams. While Le Fanu uses this common nineteenth-century medical diagnosis within his novella, there is a line between the use of the medical term and the way Le Fanu uses it within the text. Le Fanu did not employ the term to show weakness within the female characters, but to show the ignorance within the male characters. They lack knowledge and depth that the female characters, primarily Laura and Carmilla, have throughout the novella. Le Fanu never faltered in his faith regardless of all the death he endured, but his wife's doubts about religion, according to Crawford, "appear in some of his later fiction" (Crawford 4).

Susanna's struggle with faith is echoed in *Carmilla* through the prescribed hysterical attacks Carmilla's victims experience before their deaths and also the presence of an unholy female vampire. According to Crawford, "The final years of their marriage were clouded by his wife's difficulties" (Crawford 6). Susanna experienced death in her life as well, including her father who died a few years before her own death. Susanna passed away in 1858 after suffering a "hysterical attack" that not much detailed record exists for. Her death left Le Fanu "faced with the most traumatic and tragic event of his life" (Crawford 6). M. R. James adds, "During the last years of his life—and after and in consequence of his wife's death—he became almost entirely a recluse having been before that a very prominent figure in Dublin Society" (James). Le Fanu

produced very little fiction in the years of his wife's psychosis and did not publish any novels until after he lost his mother, Emma Lucretia Dobbin, in 1861.

There is no record, anonymous or labeled, of works published by Le Fanu between 1853 to 1861. Longford argues that Le Fanu wrote two of his best novels, *The House by the Churchyard* (1863) and *Uncle Silas* (1864), right after his wife's death in 1858 (Longford 42). Le Fanu wrote *Carmilla* (1872) during these successful years of his life before his death in 1873. Crawford recognizes Le Fanu as "the first writer to realize that there was an aesthetic of supernatural terror in fiction" (9). This sequence of traumatic deaths in Le Fanu's life is just one of many factors that could have influenced his creation of a queer, monstrous character like Carmilla. This trauma also echoed throughout his creation of our heroine Laura.

2.3 Folklore Influence in Le Fanu's Gothic Tale

Le Fanu found inspiration for *Carmilla* in many things, including Irish folklore. The banshee, often referred to as the Irish Death Messenger, dates back to the 1300s in Irish tales. There are many legends and motifs regarding the banshee, but one detail remains constant in the accounts: the banshee is always female. The Irish Death Messenger roams the Earth, warning people of the approaching death of a loved one. While scholars cannot prove her attachment to certain families directly, manuscripts describe the banshee as continuously "following" particular families, including the Sheridan Le-Fanu family. Le Fanu integrates this attachment the banshee has with his family into his novel *Carmilla*. Carmilla's aggressive nature and ideal victim make her appear very similar to the Irish Death Messenger. James Goho agrees, "[Carmilla] may also be a predatory *sí* lusting after Laura's life" (50). The banshee is described to have vampiric tendencies, like Carmilla, and is often referred to as "a woman of the dead" (Goho 50). These

similarities explain, in part, why Le Fanu chose to make his lead antagonist a queer, monstrous female lusting after an innocent Victorian woman.

Many critics draw similarities between Carmilla's mysterious behavior and the Irish banshee. Both Robert Tracy and I rely on Lysaght's work on the Irish Death Messenger for our discussion concerning Le Fanu's folkloric influence. Tracy notes in his introduction, "As for Laura, Carmilla has apparently watched her for some time. In Ireland, incidentally, the word *follow* is often used to suggest that a supernatural being is attached to a certain family over many generations: 'a banshee always follows the O'Sheerans.' As a descendant of the Sheridans, Le Fanu himself could claim a banshee" (Tracy xi). While Tracy touches on this aspect of Le Fanu's history only briefly, it is a significant factor in the creation and development of the text. It speaks to Le Fanu's personal history, potential anxieties, and the influences on his character. It does not seem a coincidence that Le Fanu created a female vampire preying on women during the time of his life when he could claim a haunting by a banshee (represented as female in Irish folklore) and many important women in his life were dying.

3 CHAPTER 2

3.1 Women and the Gothic

Throughout literary history, there is an association between women and the monstrous as it manifests itself in vampirism. This association has allowed Gothic literature to demonize femininity and prioritize masculinity, as we see in *Carmilla* through the demonization of Carmilla and also within Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Dracula is the primary threat of the novel, but there is a great deal of emphasis put on the three vampire women living in Dracula's castle, who are portrayed attacking Jonathan Harker. Stoker's portrayal of women has often been used to identify a lack of conformity to the patriarchal rule. Marie Mulvey-Roberts argues, "A more common diagnosis for women refusing to conform to the straitjacket of traditional femininity was hysteria, a malady affecting both mind and body, which was often connected to sexuality" (Mulvey-Roberts 110). Symptoms of hysteria are seen in Gothic heroines like Carmilla's victims, primarily Laura. Carmilla challenges Victorian ideals of womanhood. She follows her own rules, making her appear as a threat. The literary form acts as a way to represent non-conforming women within a patriarchal society.

The link between hysterical behavior and monstrous portrayals of women is dominant within Gothic literature. It was not uncommon for Victorian women to be dismissed and labeled hysterical both in reality and in literature. The misrepresentation of women is evident within vampire fiction. Gina Wisker argues, "In early female vampire narratives, punishment comes from the forces of order, the right of men to define them as sick, hysterical, wrong, to be managed, constrained, locked up and destroyed" (156). Wisker credits the development of the discourse on hysterical women to American physician Weir Mitchell (1877); he states that "a hysterical girl is a vampire who sucks the blood of the healthy people about her... surely where

there is one hysterical girl there will be soon or late two sick women” (156). Following in this patriarchal social tradition, Le Fanu uses the broad diagnosis of hysteria to describe the symptoms Laura, along with many of the other young female victims, experiences once exposed to Carmilla’s seductive yet fatal vampire bite, but I do not believe he does this to show weakness.

Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley framed the Gothic as primarily a women’s genre. While Radcliffe never wrote a vampire novel, she is often considered to have a strong influence on the creation of the genre. The female image attached itself to the Gothic genre in novels predating *Dracula* by decades. For example, Paul Feval’s novel, *Vampire City* (1867), includes a character that scholars suspect to be Radcliffe, a female vampire hunter. Another example of the female image attaching itself to the Gothic genre is Gautier’s *The Dead Woman in Love* (1836). Unlike most vampire stories mimicking *Dracula* and telling the story of a male vampire seducing women, this story portrays a female vampire seducing a young man. The novel features the *femmes fatales* trope of a beautiful woman leading a man into a harmful situation through seduction. Clarimonde is Romuald’s first love and she seduces him to leave his life with the church. She carries out her life feeding on him. In this way, Clarimonde exploits vampirism’s erotic connotations. This eroticism could explain why the image of vampirism was commonly placed onto women; the male gaze comes to mind here thinking of the creation of female vampires for the visual pleasure of the male eye.

By contrast, in *Carmilla*, Le Fanu changes the formulaic eroticism that presents female vampires as a danger to men by queering his title character, ultimately making her a danger to women. Carmilla is a vampire, but she does not prey on men; she seductively preys on young women. The narrator, Laura, falls in love with her. Laura experiences illusions while Carmilla

feeds on her breasts and, after she is bitten, she falls into a hysterical state. The novella does not go into much detail about Carmilla's victims apart from Laura and Bertha, the General's niece, but it does make clear that each woman experiences hysterical attacks, such as hallucinations, and a severe decline in health after the vampire bites, which lead to their deaths.

3.2 Personal and Traumatic Motivations for the Text

While we can never know why Le Fanu created this iconic queer, female vampire, his personal history seems to have steered him in a certain direction. Indeed, there is a substantial amount of textual evidence to support my theories about Le Fanu's creation of Carmilla's character. Le Fanu echoes his traumatic experiences throughout the plot and in his characters. Carmilla acts as a mirror of the Irish banshee by attaching herself to the relatives of the Karnstein family. She also exclusively targets women, which could be due to the traumatic losses Le Fanu experienced with the women in his lifetime. Laura acts as an example of society's typical Victorian woman and has significant things in common with Le Fanu's wife, who died of a prescribed "hysterical attack" that is still unclear in details. Le Fanu's wife struggled with her faith and with her mental health throughout the last years of her life, much like Laura does after she falls victim to Carmilla's fatal bite. Laura lives the longest after her encounters with Carmilla though, unlike the other victims who reach death within a week or so. These details are overlooked in the scholarship on Le Fanu and should be integrated into the critical conversation surrounding the text.

The novella begins with a Prologue explaining the details of the events to come. An unnamed source has collected a series of narratives by our heroine Laura, as well as a note from Doctor Hesselius regarding the strange events, and put together a sort of case study. To the

stranger's surprise, the narrator of the events (presumably Laura) has died, making it a case unable to be reopened. Le Fanu introduces many of the Gothic genre elements during these first few pages of Chapter 1 in the narrative, including a Gothic chapel, melancholy feelings in Styria, a Gothic bridge, and family estates.

Laura describes her first encounter with Carmilla as “one of the very earliest incidents” she can recollect of her life. She was around six years old, as readers can infer from the memory Carmilla describes to Laura of meeting her. Carmilla says,

I must tell you my vision about you; it is so very strange that you and I should have had, each of the other so vivid a dream, that each should have seen, I you and you me, looking as we do now, when of course we both were mere children. I was a child, about six years old, and I awoke from a confused and troubled dream, and found myself in a room, unlike my nursery.... I heard some one crying; and looking up, while I was upon my knees, I saw *you*—most assuredly you—as I see you now; a beautiful young lady, with golden hair and large blue eyes (Le Fanu 260).

This memory Carmilla has described is quite different from the memory Laura describes earlier. It is seductive yet horrifying to imagine a young girl experiencing what Laura remembers to have happened. She describes the encounter with Carmilla as being “as vivid as the isolated pictures of the phantasmagoria surrounded by darkness” (Le Fanu 248). Laura recalls,

I saw a solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of my bed. It was that of a young lady who was kneeling, with her hands under the coverlet. I looked at her with a kind of pleased wonder, and ceased whimpering. She caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me

towards her, smiling; I felt immediately delightfully soothed.... I was awakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment, and I cried loudly. The lady started back at me, with her eyes fixed on me, and then slipped down upon the floor, and, as I thought, hid herself under the bed (Le Fanu 246).

After this frightening encounter with Carmilla, Laura did not want to be left alone. She describes being in a state of terror the morning after seeing the apparition. An elderly male doctor was called in to give Laura medicine every two days. Her father concludes it was all just a dream and completely dismisses Laura's experience. Laura remembers her father "standing at the bedside, and talking cheerfully, and asking the nurse a number of questions, and laughing very heartily at one of the answers; and patting me on the shoulder, and kissing me, and telling me not to be frightened, that it was nothing but a dream and could not hurt me" (Le Fanu 247). Laura's terror is dismissed and met with joyful conversation. This dismissal was common during the Victorian era. This dismissal by male medical professionals and Laura's father highlights the voice of the patriarchy in Le Fanu's novella.

Laura experiences much death around her to those that she is close to and cares for at the hand of Carmilla. The first death Laura experiences in the novella (not including her mother who died during Laura's childhood), is Bertha Rheinfeldt. Laura describes a future visit from Bertha as "furnishing my daydream for many weeks" (Le Fanu 248) as she was eager to make a new acquaintance. We know from context that Bertha Rheinfeldt was killed by Carmilla, based on the letter written by the General, a close confidant of Laura's father who lives about twenty miles away from Laura and her father. It reads, "I have lost my darling daughter... The fiend who betrayed our infatuated hospitality has done it all... I devote my remaining days to tracking and

extinguishing a monster” (250). The reader understands, having just read about the unwelcome intrusion Carmilla inflicted on Laura, that the General is referring to an attack by Carmilla. The next death to occur at Carmilla’s hand is a young girl who, Laura recalls, “saw a ghost a fortnight ago, and has been dying ever since” (266). Laura continues elaborating on more deaths, including the young wife of a swineherd, who thought “something seized her by the throat as she lay in bed, and nearly strangled her” (266).⁴ This is where we begin to see a trend of female victims at the hand of Carmilla, much like the Irish Death Messenger (described in chapter 1) that hung darkly over the life of Sheridan Le Fanu. They are all young women, much like the most significant deaths Le Fanu experienced throughout his life.

Repeatedly in the text, Laura stresses the great friendship she is developing with Carmilla, and each encounter becomes more and more intimate. From the start, Carmilla’s mysterious nature drives Laura mad. Laura describes only being able to know precisely what Carmilla wants her to: “Her name was Carmilla... Her family was very ancient and noble... Her home lay in the direction of the west” (263). Carmilla would also describe “customs of which we knew nothing” (265) according to Laura, which emphasizes the unknown nature of this supernatural woman. In the latter half of the novella, this emphasis on mystery grows greater when Laura asks Carmilla, “Do you think you will ever confide fully in me?” to which Carmilla responds, “... I am under vows, no nun half so awfully, and I dare not tell my story yet, even to you. The time is very near when you shall know everything. You will think me cruel, very selfish, but love is always selfish; the more ardent the more selfish. How jealous I am you cannot know” (Le Fanu 276). While Laura dismisses this brief but intriguing speech from Carmilla as

⁴ I think it is useful to add that during this scene in which Carmilla and Laura discuss the death of this young woman, Carmilla grows dark and livid, clenching her hands and teeth while trembling. Laura refers to Carmilla’s reaction as “hysteria.”

“nonsense,” I argue the importance of this vague, yet compelling set of information. Much like the mystery behind the Irish Death Messenger and Le Fanu’s wife’s illness, Carmilla, too, is a mystery. Apart from Carmilla’s mysterious vampirism and noticeable vampiric tropes, this mystery with Carmilla could function as a way for Le Fanu to showcase just how in the dark he truly felt, surrounded by death and supernatural beings like the banshee.

Carmilla’s mysterious nature continues to draw Laura in throughout the beginning part of the narrative. However, it is not until Laura meets Carmilla for the second time some time later, upon realizing who she is, that we see a very intimate connection begin to develop between the two women. Carmilla is, at first, described to be “in delicate health and nervous” (257) before we become more aware of who she is. While this description could be looked at as a device to disconnect the reader from Carmilla’s vampiric nature, I believe it is a way to shadow and dismiss Carmilla’s power within society; but, to counter this, I feel it can also be seen as a mask that hides her true identity, which gives her more power over herself and others. While the characters in the novella are still slightly unaware of Carmilla’s predatory nature, Le Fanu uses Carmilla’s charm to seduce Laura into believing she could not be anything monstrous but that she has a certain right to Laura’s feelings. Carmilla says, “I don’t know which should be most afraid of the other... If you were less pretty I think I should be very much afraid of you... I have made your acquaintance twelve years ago, and have already a right to your intimacy” (260). It seems Laura cannot help but feel drawn to Carmilla, which is expected given her vampirism and beauty, but she does describe feeling a sort of repulsion, as well.

We eventually see an even greater connection between Carmilla and the Irish banshee when Le Fanu reveals that Laura and Carmilla are distant relatives on Laura’s mother’s side. Overlooking the incestuous nature of this information, given Laura and Carmilla’s romantic

relationship, we must remember that the banshee would linger and follow certain families. The banshee is described as “attaching” itself to a particular family. There are many hidden connections between Carmilla and Laura as distant relatives. Laura’s mother was of an old Hungarian family. Laura discovers a portrait that reads, “Mircalla, Countess Karnstein (1698)” that had belonged to her mother, and she describes the renewed painting to be a direct image of Carmilla.⁵

The growing intimacy is evident, but it is still unclear why Le Fanu chose to create a female vampire who lusts after the young women of the novella. The best explanation when considering Le Fanu’s personal aspects is the resemblance to the female banshee taking the women in his life and being surrounded by death. Some events that Laura writes seem as if they could have been experiences that Le Fanu also had with his wife before her death. She narrates these events ten years after her encounters with Carmilla and recalls a memory: “Sometimes after an hour of apathy, my strange and beautiful companion would take my hand and hold it with a fond pressure, renewed again and again” (Le Fanu 264). While it is unclear whether Le Fanu is, in fact, calling on inspiration for this novella from his wife or using this novella as a sort of outlet for his trauma, the similarities are present and should be recognized as significant to the novella’s development within the Gothic genre.

3.3 The Protofeminism of *Carmilla*

The publication of *Carmilla* in 1872 acts as a very powerful aspect of feminist commentary before the first waves of feminism in literature were properly established. Female

⁵ Mircalla is an anagram for Carmilla.

voices within the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not uncommon, but expressions of female sexuality were still transgressive and unnerving to society. While Sheridan Le Fanu does, in fact, subject the female image to the monstrosity of vampirism within his novella, he also decides to queer the Gothic female image. The sexual relationship that develops between Carmilla and Laura throughout the novella is evident. The choice to queer the antagonist is used to Le Fanu's advantage for Carmilla's vampirism. She preys on innocent, vulnerable young women, displaying her power and anti-patriarchal role within Victorian society.

One of the significant reasons why Le Fanu's *Carmilla* deserves a secure place within the literary canon is for its contradiction of patriarchal views of women during the nineteenth century. This novella showcases female empowerment that is later disrupted by Stoker's response to Le Fanu's work. This disruption is described by Elizabeth Signorotti as a reinstatement of "male control in the exchange of women" (607). Signorotti agrees that "women vampires were generally perceived as loathsome and diseased" (610), which can be seen within texts like *Dracula* and others that follow. Le Fanu's novella shows a shift happening in social views of women by implementing powerful female characters. Signorotti asserts that "writers... often responded [to female empowerment] by creating powerful women characters, the vampire being the most powerful, negative images" (Signorotti 610). *Carmilla* challenges the patriarchal views that society had of women in the nineteenth century. While this is true, it can also be seen as a representation of powerful women being dangerous. Carmilla is a vampire preying on the weak and killing other women—This could act as a way to keep women out of power. However, I do not believe this was Le Fanu's intent. As previously stated in Chapter 1, this novella is not often looked at by scholars as one of Le Fanu's best works, which is puzzling given that "it depicts a society where men increasingly become relegated to powerless positions while women

assume aggressive roles” (Signorotti 611). It is not a stretch to argue that the protection and guidance Laura finds with Carmilla replaces the protection and guidance Laura received from her father—further disrupting the view of powerless women and placing Carmilla directly in a place of power. While Carmilla’s powerful and mysterious nature heavily resembles the Irish banshee, it must also be recognized as a disruption to male authority. Signorotti notes, “Carmilla’s refusal to bear her ancestral name is just one example of her refusal to be subsumed by male authority. She is less interested in sharing with Laura her lineage—a primary concern in male systems of exchange—than her sexuality” (614). Carmilla’s mysterious nature is also a “refusal” of male authority. She keeps her history a secret for her advantage. We can see that the connection between Carmilla and Laura is growing quite serious within the dialogue spoken between the two:

... she murmured with a sigh, as she drew her arm closer about my waist, and let her pretty head sink upon my shoulder. “How romantic you are, Carmilla,” I said. “Whenever you tell me your story, it will be made up chiefly of some one great romance.” She kissed me silently. “I am sure, Carmilla, you have been in love; that there is, at this moment, an affair of the heart going on.” “I have been in love with no one, and never shall,” she whispered, “unless it be with you,” How beautiful she looked in the moonlight! (Le Fanu 273).

The romanticism forming between the two women insinuates the transgressive relationship that is developing, as well as further emphasizing the novella’s refusal of male authority.

Much like Laura’s previous homoerotic experience when being bitten by Carmilla, a similar biting experience happens in Chapter 6, but this time Laura becomes more frightened than before. She describes feeling “a stinging pain as if two large needles darted, an inch or two

apart, deep into [her] breast” (Le Fanu 278). She sees a female figure at the foot of her bed, after having just been bitten by what appeared to be a large black cat. The idea of shapeshifting can connect with a nonconformant to the patriarchal society surrounding her. Carmilla’s ability to alter her shape allows her to escape a very “restrictive, one dimensional role available to women” (Signorotti 615). After this incident, Laura admits to not wanting to tell her father, much like the first incident. She says, “I thought he would laugh at my story, and I could not bear its being treated as a jest” (279). Laura’s emotions about telling her father show a clear indication of how mocking the patriarchal roles are to female emotions within the novella. The more involved Carmilla and Laura become, the clearer it becomes just how accessory the male figures are within the text. During a frenzy to find Carmilla, Laura notes, “We began to cool a little, and soon recovered our senses to dismiss the men” (Le Fanu 284). Laura begins to trust more in herself and Carmilla, making her need for male guidance smaller and smaller.

It is after this second attack that Laura begins to feel physically and emotionally disconnected from the world around her. She describes “the same lassitude, and a languor” (Le Fanu 281) weighing on her throughout the day. We see a decline not only in Laura’s physical state, but her mental state too. She admits that “a strange melancholy was stealing over me, a melancholy that I would not have interrupted. Dim thoughts of death began to open, and an idea that I was slowly sinking took gentle, and, somehow, not unwelcome possession of me” (Le Fanu 281). Readers begin to receive ample amounts of information regarding Laura’s now visible illness that she would not admit to anyone, including her father. While these changes are alarming upon first reading, there is a lingering sense that Laura finds the feelings desirable. Signorotti highlights “the ontological change in Laura between the beginning of the narrative and the end is never reversed, suggesting that her shifting desires are, for her, healthy and vital”

(611). It is during this change that her father seems to take notice, asking a male doctor to examine Laura for some sort of illness. Afterward he says, “I wish our good friend, the General, had chosen any other time; that is, I wish you had been perfectly well to receive him” (Le Fanu 291), which Laura brushes off to ask again what it is that is wrong with her. It is clear Laura’s father’s main concern is how unfit her present state is for a suitor. This raises the question as to his true motive for wanting her back in good health. A clear motive would be to “reestablish the male bond and male exchange of women” (Signorotti 618), which is disrupted by the sexual relationship between Carmilla and Laura. The men in the novella can no longer properly exchange the women, in terms of marriage, because the women have rejected male authority. The idea of motherhood was referred to during this period as “a women’s highest duty” (Signorotti 618). Signorotti notes,

Their transgressive relationship disrupts the laws of procreation necessary to maintain social order. Le Fanu, however, refrains from making them culpable for their procreative transgression and from condemning his vampire representation of lesbian desire, leaving *Carmilla* more open ended than may at first appear (618).

This transgressive relationship not only disrupts the laws of procreation, as Signorotti points out, but it also creates a disconnect between the women and what was deemed socially acceptable.

While the novella may be more open-ended than imagined by readers, it must be noted that the men are the ones to kill Carmilla, in a very traditional way. These men do act in an accessory way to the overall plotline, but we see significant development within the latter half of the text. Chapter 10 begins with the most dialogue we have seen among the men so far. The General finally returns and discusses his previous whereabouts with Laura’s father. This is when

they both begin to make connections regarding the ruined Chapel of Karnstein—Carmilla’s given name and Laura’s ancestors. Laura’s father makes another reference to the joining of the two families, the General and Laura, saying, “I hope you are thinking of claiming the title and estates?” (Le Fanu 294). The General has other plans, though: “to unearth some of those fine people... to accomplish a pious sacrilege... which will relieve our town of certain monsters” (294). He begins their journey to the Chapel of Karnstein together by retelling his first encounter with Carmilla in the masquerade ball some time before the death of his niece Bertha; Carmilla went by another name when the General first met her. He notes, “Her mother called [her] by the odd name of Millarca” (297). The exchange the General had with Carmilla’s mother is concerning given his demand that she remove her mask so he can recall if they’ve met or not. While he urged her, repeatedly, to take her mask off, she responded with a simple “No,” stating that her mask is a clear advantage and that she will not give in to what he wants.

Carmilla’s mother deconstructs the General’s male agenda by denying his request to see her appearance. She is using who she is and who he knows her not to be as an advantage within this scene. She is displaying power over him, which was very uncommon for a woman during the nineteenth century. The General comes across as controlling and has a clear desire to see the woman’s face, but she is not giving in to his needs. Carmilla’s mother’s refusal to reveal her features and Carmilla’s use of an anagrammatical name showcase a form of power over their own identity. A woman's identity at this time would have been reliant upon fulfilling the male agenda by getting married, starting a family, or marrying off a daughter for estate purposes and political gains. Carmilla and her mother expose the General’s chivalrous nature as a form of weakness, as Signorotti notes, that is easily played upon by the two women. Signorotti adds, “Both women take advantage of the ‘separate sphere’ ideology common to Victorian discourse

in which women, seen as the repositories of innocence and order, require protection from the noble, stronger sex” (Signorotti 616). Their refusal to conform to this generic conceptual idea of a patriarchal society displays just how much power the women truly hold within the novella.

Le Fanu creates a parallel between how Bertha’s illness went and how Laura’s is currently going, which gives readers more information about how Carmilla chooses and lures her victims. Bertha had begun to experience the same decline in health that Laura is currently experiencing. The General explains that “my dear child began to lose her looks and health, and that in a manner so mysterious, and even horrible, that I became thoroughly frightened” (304). Bertha, too, was “visited by appalling dreams... then... by a spectre, sometimes resembling Millarca, sometimes in the shape of a beast... lastly came sensations. One, not unpleasant, but very peculiar, she said, resembled the flow of an icy stream against her breast” (305). The “not unpleasant” description here grabs my attention concerning the homoerotic feelings Bertha, and now Laura, experience while being bitten by Carmilla. I question whether this is the General discussing his feelings on the matter or restating Bertha’s feelings. He does not seem frightened by these homoerotic feelings she may be having for Carmilla, but by the scene itself. This speaks to the way the men feel about what is happening to the women of the novella. While the men (primarily Laura’s father) are, currently, unaware that Carmilla is the vampire preying on the women of the town, Le Fanu appears to be highlighting that it is not the homoerotic feelings she inspires but the “monster” herself that deserves attention.

Le Fanu’s creation of a queer, monstrous character is central to the understanding of this text, but he does not treat it as remarkable. The General even notes, “That day Millarca came home with us. I was only too happy, after all, to have secured so charming a companion for my dear girl” (Le Fanu 304). Laura becomes troubled after hearing such similarities to her own

experience; some might even read jealousy here in her tone. She says, “You may suppose, also, how I felt as I heard him detail habits and mysterious peculiarities which were, in fact, those of our beautiful guest, Carmilla” (305). She does not further elaborate on these feelings, but the inclusion of this short look at Laura’s emotional connection to the story she’s hearing from the General is Le Fanu’s way of highlighting just how attached Laura has become to Carmilla. It shows how involved the two women are with one another. Laura seems not to feel attacked or victimized by Carmilla, but possessive of her.

Laura does not elaborate on these feelings any further, but the General does reveal his plans for the abandoned village. He plans to wreak vengeance on Carmilla and to “decapitate the monster” (306). Laura’s father is shocked by the General’s plans but continues to listen as he says, “Aye, with a hatchet, with a spade, or with anything that can cleave through her murderous throat” (306). This reference to the decapitation of a vampire comes from the lore Le Fanu was very familiar with. More of this lore is uncovered when Laura’s father begins to speak to the woodman of the village, who notes that the village was “troubled by revenants... several were tracked to their graves, there detected by the usual tests, and extinguished in the usual way, by decapitation, by the stake, and by burning” (307). This description is the first glimpse of what vampire lore Le Fanu felt suitable for his novella apart from Carmilla never rising early and getting weakened by the sun. He is depicting Carmilla’s historical background, which is important to her development as a crucial character within the text. I previously discussed Le Fanu’s influence for the text coming in part from an account read in Calmet’s dissertation. Remnants of this familiar Hungarian account are echoed in the woodman’s story quoted in Chapter 1. This connection between Carmilla and a real vampire account increases the realistic nature of Carmilla’s character. It emphasizes the immortality that vampires are given, but it also

demonizes her even further, making clear connections between the things she does and the things she is about to undergo at the hands of these men.

Carmilla and her kind become more demonized as the male perspective on the incidents is further developed. Kayla Lindsey discusses the chaotic persona vampires tended to project, noting, “The vampire allows a vision of a chaotic experience within a believable context...” (20). We see this chaos in the General’s inability to accept the reality of Carmilla’s vampiric nature. The General expresses denial upon reading the letter from the doctor who had examined Bertha, remarking,

Nothing, you will say, could be more absurd than the learned man’s letter. It was monstrous enough to have consigned him to a madhouse. He said that the patient was suffering from the visits of a vampire! The punctures which she described as having occurred near the throat, were, he insisted, the insertion of those two long, thin, and sharp teeth which, it is well known, are peculiar to vampires; and there could be no doubt, he added, as to the well-defined presence of the small livid mark which all concurred in describing as that induced by the demon’s lips (Le Fanu 310).

Lindsey continues, “[T]he vampire means a loss of control” (20), which can be seen in the men’s struggle to prevent future vampire attacks, stopping Carmilla during the beginning portion of the novella and saving Bertha or Laura. They have lost their patriarchal hold on what is happening within their society, resulting in this chaotic experience. The General even notes just how skeptical he was about the entire thought of the existence of such supernatural beings. He says, “Being myself wholly sceptical to the existence of any such portent as the vampire, the supernatural theory of the good doctor furnished, in my opinion, another instance of learning and

intelligence oddly associated with some one hallucination” (Le Fanu 310). This recurring theme of hysterical behavior continues to be associated with the monstrous nature of the existence of vampires. Lindsey further develops this argument with, “The vampire, especially most of the female vampires, crosses a multitude of boundaries that the Victorians held most central to their social structure... [her] transformative [body] demonstrates the faultiness of a culturally prescribed female nature” (20). This crossing of “a multitude of boundaries” is clear within Carmilla’s transgressive relationships with these women, primarily Laura since we see the most of it within the novella.

Carmilla, Laura, and the other women within the text push against the social structures set in place. They derail the normal, male-dominated behavior and begin inserting “chaos.” Carmilla’s ability to shift and alter her shape speaks to this “faultiness” Lindsey mentions within a society that has a “culturally prescribed female nature.” The General experiences the effects of Carmilla when he tries to take the advice given to him in the doctor’s letter. He says,

I concealed myself in the dark dressing-room... I stood at the door peeping through the small crevice, my sword laid on the table beside me, as my directions prescribed... I saw a large black object, very ill-defined, crawl... over the foot of the bed, and swiftly spread itself up to the poor girl’s throat, where it swelled, in a moment, into a great, palpitating mass... I had stood petrified. I now sprang forward, with my sword in my hand. The black creature suddenly contracted toward the foot of the bed... I saw Millarca... I struck at her instantly with my sword; but I saw her standing near the door, unscathed... I... struck again. She was gone; and my sword flew to shivers against the door (Le Fanu 311).

The General's inability to take down Carmilla displays her place of power not only within the household, but within society. It is worth noting the phallic image the sword represents during this scene. Her ability to manipulate her presence and form exerts a form of power over herself.

Carmilla's demise and Laura's death conclude the novella, but, recalling Signorotti's observation about just how open-ended the text can truly be, the vampiric nature is what lives on. Signorotti argues, "Carmilla's resolution follows the traditional means of vampire extermination, but the neat resolution fails to contain the larger forces of which Carmilla is only a single manifestation" (Signorotti 618). Carmilla is staked while in her true form within her grave inside the Chapel of Karnstein. Even in those final moments, Laura notes Carmilla's beauty and "warmth of life" (Le Fanu 315). The men pierce the stake through Carmilla's heart as she lets out a shriek, strike off her head, and place both her body and decapitated head into a pile of wood to burn. The scene of Carmilla's death is very similar to the descriptions given by Paul Barber in his historical records of vampire lore. Afterward, Carmilla's ashes are thrown into the river. Laura adds that she uses the report of the Imperial Commission to summarize such a horrid scene.

The immortality Laura holds is clear, as we know she must rise from the grave as a vampire, making her a direct descendant of Carmilla, as should Bertha. Le Fanu makes clear to the reader, "It is the nature of the vampires to increase and multiply, but according to an ascertained and ghostly law... that spectre visits living people in their slumbers; they die, and almost invariably, in the grave, develop into a vampire" (Le Fanu 318). Laura's father takes her to Italy the spring following Carmilla's death. She confesses the recurring thoughts she still has about Carmilla, reinforcing just how strong their relationship was. She says, "To this hour the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations—sometimes the playful,

languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend... and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing door” (Le Fanu 319). Carmilla’s existence only ends on the surface, as she continues to live on through her lineage she has spread throughout the women of Styria. Laura, too, lives on, as it is assumed she is reborn upon her death in her vampiric state. The immortality Carmilla gives to these women and the open-ended nature of the ending suggests the women are completely free from male constraints and are free to live on as they see fit.

4 CONCLUSION

Many will argue the insignificance or irrelevant nature behind Le Fanu's Gothic text, but that is why this critical argument is needed. Looking at the life of Sheridan Le Fanu would not at first glance appear to be beneficial in critically analyzing why he created a queer, female vampire, but in Le Fanu's case it is a crucial aspect behind the development of *Carmilla*. The relationship that Sheridan Le Fanu had with women like his mother, Emma Lucretia Dobbins, his sister, Alicia Sheridan Le Fanu, and his wife, Susanna Bennett, influenced the strong female characters within *Carmilla*. Scholars have noted just how influential the women in his life were to his fiction, but the women and his traumas are scarcely included in the critical arguments surrounding his texts, primarily *Carmilla*. The traumatic effect of women's deaths in Le Fanu's life, historical vampire history, and the banshee as a folklore influence are all echoed throughout this novella. After further analysis into the text and the critical argument surrounding it, it is crucial that Le Fanu's *Carmilla* be recognized as a primary influence in the development of vampire fiction and the Gothic. This text disconnects the patriarchal hold and highlights female empowerment. It disrupts the vampiric, male image that *Dracula* places onto vampire fiction, the Gothic, and texts that follow. Le Fanu used his personal trauma and experiences to recreate the image of vampirism. The text should hold a firm place within the literary canon, and an acknowledgement of the feminist aspects of the text should be integrated into the critical discussion surrounding it.

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