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**The Double Life
of the Female
Vampire:
Carmilla between
Queer Resistance
and Cinematic
Spectacle**

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INTRODUCTION

The vampire is one of the most enduring figures in Western culture. Emerging from eighteenth-century folklore and popular superstition, the vampire gradually evolved from a monstrous revenant associated with disease, death and social panic into one of the most complex and adaptable figures of modern literature and popular culture. Throughout this transformation, the vampire became increasingly associated with questions of sexuality, desire, gender and transgression. Among the many literary representations of the vampire, Josph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) occupies a particularly significant position. As one of the earliest narratives to place a female vampire at the centre of the plot and to depict an explicitly homoerotic relationship between two women, the novella has become a foundational text for both vampire fiction and queer Gothic studies.

This thesis investigates the evolution of the vampire figure from its folkloric origins to contemporary reinterpretations, focusing in particular on the cultural, literary and political legacy of *Carmilla*. The central aim is to examine how the figure of the female vampire became associated with transgressive sexuality and how *Carmilla*'s representation has been successively reinterpreted through feminist, queer and adaptation studies perspectives. Particular attention is devoted to the tension that characterizes Le Fanu's novella: while *Carmilla* is initially constructed as a monstrous threat to Victorian social order, later critical and creative reinterpretations have increasingly reclaimed her as a figure of female autonomy, queer desire and resistance to patriarchal authority.

The analysis adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines literary criticism, feminist theory, queer theory and adaptation studies. The theoretical framework draws particularly on the works of Nina Auerbach, Jack Halberstam¹, Judith Butler, Barbara Creed, Ken Gelder and Linda Hutcheon, whose contributions provide the tools necessary to examine the relationship between gender, sexuality, monstrosity and cultural reinterpretation. Through these perspectives, the thesis explores the ways in

¹ In the year *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* was published (1995) he was still known by his pre-transition name, which is also the name that appears on the cover of the book. However, in this thesis he will only be mentioned as Jack Halberstam.

which representations of vampirism reflect broader social anxieties concerning female sexuality, homosexuality and the instability of identity.

The first chapter traces the historical and literary development of the vampire from the eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century. Beginning with the phenomenon commonly described as “vampire hysteria”, it examines the cultural origins of vampiric belief before analysing the gradual transformation of the vampire into a literary figure. Particular attention is devoted to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Bride of Corinth*, E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Vampirism* and John Polidori’s *The Vampyre*, texts that contributed to redefining the vampire as a psychologically complex and increasingly individualized character. The chapter concludes with an introduction to *Carmilla*, focusing on the novella’s representation of female desire, ambiguity and transgression.

The second chapter examines the critical reception and theoretical reinterpretations of *Carmilla*. It analyses the ways in which feminist and queer critics have transformed the novella from a narrative of monstrosity into a text capable of articulating forms of resistance to Victorian gender ideology. Through discussions of hysteria, gender performativity, queer desire and the concept of the monstrous feminine, the chapter argues that *Carmilla* can be understood not merely as a threat to patriarchal order but also as an alternative model of femininity and subjectivity. The chapter concludes by comparing *Carmilla* and *Dracula*, highlighting the different ways in which the two texts negotiate questions of gender, sexuality and patriarchal authority, and eventually proposing some of the articles and reviews of *The Ladder* to demonstrate how *Carmilla* was reinterpreted as a proper queer icon.

The third chapter investigated the literary and cinematic afterlives of *Carmilla* through the lens of adaptation theory. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon’s conception of adaptation as reinterpretation rather than replication, the chapter first examines Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* as revisionist rewriting that reclaims the vampire figure through Black queer subjectivity and alternative forms of kinship. It then turns to cinematic adaptations, focusing on the Hammer *Karnstein Trilogy* and the commercialization of the lesbian vampire within exploitation cinema. Through an analysis of the male gaze and visual spectacle, the chapter demonstrates how film adaptations frequently transformed *Carmilla*’s queer potential into an object of heterosexual consumption.

Finally, the chapter considers contemporary adaptations such as the KindaTV web series *Carmilla*, exploring how recent reinterpretations have sought to reclaim the character for queer audiences.

By tracing the transformation of Carmilla from Victorian monster to queer cultural icon, this thesis demonstrates how representations of the vampire are shaped by changing historical attitudes toward gender and sexuality. at the same time, it argues that the enduring relevance of *Carmilla* lies precisely in the ambiguity of Le Fanu's original text, whose unresolved tensions have enabled later generations of readers, critics and creators to reinterpret the female vampire according to new cultural and political contexts.

CHAPTER I

From Folklore to Fiction: The Cultural and Literary Development of the Vampire Figure up to the Late Nineteenth Century

1.1 The Origins of the Vampire and the Spread of “Vampire Hysteria”

The figure of the vampire first appeared in the folklore of Britain in the eighteenth century, causing a phenomenon known as “vampire hysteria” in the population, as such monsters were believed to exist in real life and constituted an actual threat for European societies. For this reason, the first sources in which vampires are described are newspapers and treaties that witness their existence, while they appear in literature only later, as a consequence of their popularity. The first vampire sightings allegedly happened in eastern Europe, more precisely in the areas which are still today commonly related to vampires, such as Austria, Hungary and Bohemia. The first descriptions of these creatures in folk mythology are extremely close to a repulsive and demonic monster, a reanimated corpse who feeds on the life-force of sleeping victims by sucking their blood and sowing chaos in the community (Senn and Perkowski, 1991).

This representation is far from the vampire of today’s collective imaginary: the modern conception of the vampire does not derive from the folkloric character, but rather from its evolution into a literary character, portrayed as a seductive, alluring human-like creature who preys on people. Therefore, in order to properly analyse the evolution of the vampire in literature, it is essential to trace its origins back to the beliefs, fears, and superstitions embedded in popular culture.

As Senn and Perkowski claim, “the vampire [...] stands for and represents our inability to explain, understand, and adjust to three phenomena that “demonically” elude scientific control: sex, death and the unconscious psyche” (Ibid., p. 216). The use of monsters for a possible explanation to unknown phenomena was not unusual at the time, and also vampires constituted a scapegoat and were blamed for unpredictable and inexplicable evil events like diseases.

Among the sources that circulated in the eighteenth century about the witnessing of vampire appearances, one of the most influential is Dom Augustin Calmet’s *Treatise on the Apparitions of Spirits and on Vampires and Revenants*, a scholarly investigation

that legitimized such sightings as a topic of intellectual debate. Calmet's interest in supernatural phenomena circulating in Europe – particularly in vampires in eastern Europe – led to the production of the treatise, in which he compiled official military reports, church investigations, local testimonies, newspaper accounts and medical examinations of exhumed bodies; all these reports were considered authoritative by the villagers, who actually believed that dead people had returned from the grave and that their attacks caused illness and death (Barber, 1987). Furthermore, this theory was supported by the fact that the corpses were unusually preserved, as described by Calmet.

When they [vampires] have been taken out of the ground they have appeared red, with their limbs supple and pliable, without worms or decay; but not without a great stink. [...] The only remedy for these apparitions is to cut off the heads and burn the bodies of those who come back to haunt people
(Calmet, 2015, pp. 55-6)

This, according to Calmet, constituted a proof that these corpses were revenants.² Another source that allegedly certified the existence of vampires is the 1725 report on Petar Blagojević in the *Wienerisches Diarium*³ by an Austrian imperial named Frombald. The author recounted that after the death of Blagojević, an inhabitant of the Serbian⁴ village of Kisiljevo – under Habsburg administration –, locals claimed that several people had died shortly afterward, following nighttime attacks by the deceased. After the attacks, villagers demanded that Blagojević's corpse was exhumed, and it appeared unusually intact, with fresh blood in the mouth and the hair and the nails seemed to have grown. Such evidence, like in the case of Calmet's treatise, were associated to cases of vampirism (Barber, 1987).

While these studies were popularly considered reliable sources that confirmed the existence of vampires in the eighteenth century, modern historical analysis tried to

² A revenant is a dead person returned to harm the living

³ Founded 1703, the *Wienerisches Diarium* was one of the earliest continuously published newspapers in Europe; it was printed in Vienna and served as an official news publication of the Habsburg monarchy

⁴ In Serbian, "vampyri" means "back from the dead"

understand the causes of the phenomenon known as “vampire hysteria”, that is, mass panics brought on by superstition, which often revolved around inexplicable events such as sudden deaths or illnesses. In an article on the Smithsonian magazine by Karina Wilson about the eighteenth-century panic (Wilson, 2020), the factors recognized as the causes for the spread of the vampire hysteria are the following: misinterpretation of decomposition, as corpses can appear swollen or blood-filled during early decay; lack of medical knowledge that made people think that the symptoms of diseases such as tuberculosis were actually caused by vampire attacks; and the cultural folklore of eastern European traditions, which already included beliefs in revenants.

The idea that vampires reflect the anxieties of a specific historical moment is the main thesis of Nina Auerbach’s *Our Vampires, Ourselves*: in the introduction to the book, she claims that “vampires shape themselves to personal and national moods” (Auerbach, 1995, p. 5). If in the eighteenth century the dominant fear centred on illness and death, in the centuries that followed – when the vampire became a literary figure and its characteristics evolved – it also adapted to the culture that produced it, reflecting deeper psychological anxieties specific to each society.

Auerbach’s work is structured chronologically and examines how the figure of the vampire is continually reshaped and adapted to express the anxieties of different historical periods, from the Victorian era to the years of Reagan’s presidency. In the same way, this chapter analyses the birth of the literary vampire from its first appearances in German Romanticism to the feminization of the vampire in Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, focusing on the most relevant shift in the conception of the creature: the birth of the aristocratic vampire, born in the 19th century and widely used in the Victorian age to respond to cultural anxieties such as sexuality and gender roles, the aristocratic decadence, moral corruption and social degeneration.

1.2 The Vampire in German Romanticism

German Romanticism plays a crucial role in the transformation of the vampire from a folkloric corpse into a psychologically complex literary character. As analysed above, pre-Romantic descriptions of vampires were limited to a material corpse that returned from the grave with specific characteristics, such as a physically undead body, the necessity of drinking blood, the spread of the disease and a lack of psychological or

inner life. The stories of such creatures reported by scientists and philosophers reached Western Europe through observations made by Austrians who had occupied Central European territories (Crawford, 2005). Despite Vienna being the main centre for reports about vampires, such stories also reached Emperor Karl VI⁵, who – driven by his interest in these creatures – encouraged the writing about this superstition. From the production and widespread circulation of these accounts, the figure of the vampire began to be associated with Hungary and the neighbouring regions, providing significant inspiration for the literary vampire that later appeared in the earliest German ballads. The first vampires that appeared in literature were indeed protagonists of Gothic poetry (Tanti, 2019).

1.2.1 The Bride of Corinth: The First Literary Vampire

Composed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1797 – exactly one century before the publication of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* – and originally titled *Die Braut von Corinth*, the poem is considered the introduction of the figure of the vampire to German, and more generally world, literature. Goethe took inspiration from Phlegon of Tralles, an ancient Greek writer who, in the II century A.D. collected a series of anecdotes involving the undead, ghosts, hermaphrodites and giants (Oki, 2021); Goethe reinterprets the story poetically with the aim of creating the first vampire text in literature, even if the cannibalistic vampire motif does not seem to be a literary subject that suits well the high classical period, as it is usually limited to trivial cultural works. Indeed, compared to Phlegon of Tralles’s story, in which the female protagonist returns from death to seek her lover and shows more passion than the human character – representing therefore the girl not as a brutal vampire, but merely as a ghost –, Goethe’s poem “emphasises the definitive problem in romantic relationships underscored by cannibalism” (Oki, 2021, p. 171).

*The Bride of Corinth*⁶ is set in Ancient Greece, during an historical change: the transition from paganism to Christianity in the Western world, as represented in the VII stanza with the ambivalence between pagan deities and the Christian cross.

⁵ Habsburg Emperor Karl VI became aware of the folkloric figure of the vampire after defeating the Ottoman army in 1716 in Hungary, and consequently came into contact with the conquered territories and their beliefs and traditions

⁶ All the references to the poem and its English translation are taken from the following edition: Goethe, J.W. von and Zeydel, E.H. (1957). *Poems of Goethe: A Sequel to ‘Goethe, the Lyrist’*. Directory of Open access Books (OAPEN Foundation). University of North Carolina Press

Hier ist Ceres', hier ist Bacchus'
Gabe,
Und du bringst den Amor,
liebes Kind!
Bist vor Schrecken blass!
Liebe, komm und lass,
Lass uns sehn, wie froh die
Gotter sind. [...]
Unsichtbar wird Einer nur im
Himmel,
Und ein Reiland wird am Kreuz
verehrt;

"Ceres' gift and Bacchus' here
are lying,
And you, child, bring Cupid on
to me!
You are pale with fear,
Dear girl, come, and here
Let us see how joyful gods can
be." [...]
Worshipped is One God,
Unseen, in Heaven,
And a Savior crucified in pain.
(Goethe, 1957, pp. 62-3)

This transition is portrayed in the poem with the clash between Christian repression and a hidden, ecstatic love between a girl whose mother converts to Christianity and forces her daughter to withdrawal from life, eventually leading to the girl's death from physical and spiritual depravation, and a young man who, unaware of these events, still arrives to Corinth convinced to marry the girl. Once alone in the guest room, he meets a female figure that the readers are led to associate with the daughter rising from the dead. The climax of the story is reached in the XVIII stanza, with an exchange of words and bodies that symbolically refer to an act of total consumption.

Liebe schliesset fester sie
zusammen,
Tranen mischen sich in ihre
Lust;
Gierig saugt sie seines Mundes
Flammen,
Eins ist nur im andern sich
bewusst.
Seine Liebeswut

Tears are mingled with their
ardent rapture,
While in love they're close and
closer pressed;
From his lips his passion she
would capture,
Each is by the other's thought
possessed.
Now his passion's flood

Warmt ihr starres Blut,
Doch es schlägt kein Herz in
ihrer Brust.

Warms her torpid blood,
Yet no heart is beating in her
breast. (Ibid., pp. 66-7)

The figure of the bride is described as a transgressive, nocturnal lover who defies religious morality, embodying the eighteenth-century vampire role. However, Goethe chooses to give the bride, despite being a vampire, a form of humanity defined as her “spirit”, divorcing her from the figure of a mere killer, in order to make the poem fit the high classical motif.

When the mother enters the room and finds the two lovers, her daughter speaks to her.

Dieser Jungling war mir erst
versprochen,
Als noch Venus' heit'rer Tempel
stand.
Mutter, habt Ihr doch das Wort
gebrochen,
Weil ein fremd, ein falsch
Gelt'nd Euch band!
Doch kein Gott erhort,
Wenn die Mutter schwört,
Zu versagen ihrer Tochter
Hand.
Aus dem Grabe werd ich
ausgetrieben,
Noch zu suchen das vermisste
Gut,
Noch den schon verlorenen
Mann zu lieben
Und zu saugen seines Herzen
Blut.

"To this youth my pledge had
first been spoken,
While the shrine of Venus
graced the land.
Then this pledge, o mother, you
have broken
Through an alien and false
demand.
Wrath no god forbears.
When a mother swears
That she'll keep from love a
daughter's hand.
"Driven from the grave, I am a
lover,
Seeking evermore the ruined
Good,
Still to love whom I have lost as
lover,
And to suck his heart's most
precious blood. (Ibid., pp. 68-9)

She has come back to life in the form of a vampire to take her lover with her by biting him and making him follow her to the grave. As Endres states, “What in life could not come together is to be united in death forever” (Endres, 2020, p. 205).

The narrative repeatedly invokes blood and burial imagery, which are central to the vampire myth, and the absolute love between a vampire and a human is a literary construction that has kept its popularity until today. For this reason, the poem is classified in the periodical category of “Sturm und Drang”.⁷

The final stanza seals the redemption for the bride herself and her groom, and the poem concludes with the line “Des Wellenschlags am Fels, ein neues Leben” (“To the ancient gods we’ll swiftly soar” (Goethe, 1797)), which indicates a return to pre-Christian powers. Vampires are therefore depicted as beings who have escaped Christian salvation and remain bound to older, darker deities, which detaches from the conception of vampires later adopted by the Western culture as evil beings, devoid of humanity. As previously analysed, the original idea on which the figure of the vampire was raised is the binary construction predator-prey, built upon the notion of cannibalism, which was already present in many fairy tales, such as Charles Perrault’s *Little Red Riding Hood*. Fiedler (1973, p. 14) noticed that in a time like our own, “cannibalism, especially in the form of vampirism, has become again a compulsive theme of popular literature, indeed a central feature of mass culture in general.” Nonetheless, the concept of cannibalism related to vampires has radically changed, from being a practice merely related to the body to gaining symbolic meaning. In particular, vampirism becomes a metaphor for sexuality in Goethe’s *The Bride of Corinth*, shifting from a repulsive revenant to an erotic one, since the human groom seems attracted by the dead bride even though he is aware of her vampiric features. Her return from the grave is driven by unfulfilled love and religious repression, underlining the vampire’s expression of interior conflict and erotic desire that indicate a sign of humanity. That is to say, the undead figure becomes a tragic subject rather than merely a monster; for this reason, *The Bride of Corinth* is considered by many scholars a precursor to modern literary vampires.

The bride in the poem exists in multiple in-between states: she appears between life and death, as she is never fully alive nor fully dead, between paganism represented by

⁷ A proto-Romantic literary movement spanning in the late 1760s and early 1780s.

old gods and the imposed Christianity, and even her sexuality is ambiguous, since she is forced into celibacy but driven by erotic longing. She becomes a symbol of female liminality whose body serves as the site of conflict produced by repression. A girl to whom marriage was denied, who was forced into religious life and cut off from sexuality returning as a vampire can be interpreted as a sign of a condition created by suppression. This constitutes an example of what Freud called the “uncanny”⁸: when repression – represented in the poem by the sexual desire forced into the unconscious by Christian repression – leads to a return (in this case, a vampiric one), desire re-emerges in a distorted form. Erotic longing returns not as ordinary love, but through nocturnal visitations, an intimacy marked by the drinking of blood, and a form of desire that is at once tender and lethal. The uncanny is precisely something which is not foreign, the return of the intimate made strange; Freud often links the uncanny to the body, especially when boundaries break down. The bride’s body is at the same time dead and animated, cold and desiring, pure and erotically active, and this produces a gendered uncanny. The horror does not come just from the figure of the vampire, but rather from the female desire that refuses containment, as female sexuality was supposed to be controlled, contained or erased, and instead it returns in an excessive, uncontrollable form.

The uncanny is also present in the tension derived from the encounter between the bride and the young man, in which the former appears to the latter as something simultaneously familiar and alien, creating a contrast between attraction and repulsion that intensifies the erotic desire. The vampire becomes an ambiguous figure that both draws and threatens one’s boundaries. This dynamic, established by Goethe in his poem, becomes fundamental to understand the evolution of the popular conception of the vampire, which reflects the cultural anxieties of the time, as examined by Auerbach. Auerbach reads Goethe’s vampire not simply as a supernatural predator, but as a figure produced by historical and cultural rapture, suspended between pagan sensuality and Christian asceticism. The bride’s return from the dead exposes the violence of repression itself: denied erotic fulfilment and autonomy in life, she re-emerges in death as a destabilizing presence that collapses boundaries between desire

⁸ In German, “Unheimlich”: Freud defines it as a “class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (Freud, 1919, pp. 1-2)

and death, victimhood and agency (Auerbach, 1995). In particular, in *The Bride of Corinth*, the bride transforms from a passive, controlled figure in life to an active, desiring, and transgressive presence in death. Her newfound agency is framed as monstrous, with her vampirism representing a subversive and perverse form of liberation.

The female figure's sexuality, suspended in a state of liminality due to repression, would go on to inspire numerous texts in the following century, such as *Carmilla*, where repressed same-sex desire resurfaces in a haunting form—an example that will be examined in detail later in this chapter.

1.2.2 Hoffmann between Psychological Interiorization and Supernatural Ambiguity

The shift from the traditional vampire that represents an external monster, and therefore a threat, to a figure that expresses inner disturbance is especially portrayed by E.T.A. Hoffmann in his *Vampirism*, a transitional text that contributed to turn the vampire from a folkloric creature into a psychological figure. Through Hoffmann, vampirism becomes desire, obsession, psychic contagion, and a metaphor for psychological parasitism.

The short story is contained in the fourth volume of Hoffmann's 1821 novel *The Serapion Brethren*, and it has been published as an excerpt under various names, such as *Tale of a Vampire*, *Cyprian's narrative*, *The Hyena*, *Vampyrismus* and *Vampirism*. The text was produced in the background of Gothic fiction, which was gaining popularity in the cultural context of Germany, inspired by Kant's discourses on sublime aesthetics. The first formulations of Gothic productions in European literature appeared during the shift from the optimistic Enlightenment defined by social development into a chaotic period of political division, mainly remembered for the French Revolution, for which the Gothic served as a metaphor (Paulson 1981). Carlson connects the vampire to the transition from the Enlightenment's elitist optimism to Romanticism's populist contrarianism, claiming that:

Vampire literature per se is a post-Enlightenment phenomenon, a result of Romanticism and of the interest in folklore [...]. Through German

Romanticism, the vampire made his way from folklore into the realm of literature. (Carlson 1977, p. 26)

While early English Gothic novels exploited fears of foreign and religious “others” yet ultimately reaffirming rationality by explaining away the supernatural, Hoffmann and the German Gothic tradition embraced the uncanny more fully, presenting supernatural phenomena as genuinely destabilizing and unresolved. Influenced by Kant’s ideas concerning the sublime, German authors of horror showed an interest in evoking a sustained and enduring sense of sublime horror filled with mystery, which differentiates them from their British counterpart (Stevens, 2000).

The tale is presented in a framing narrative, as it starts with a meeting of the Serapion Brothers – a literary society of intellectuals. They start to talk about vampire mythology, a topic considered repulsive and disturbing, after one of the members brings up Polidori’s recent novel *The Vampyre*. Cyprian is the member who tells his own true story about a vampire, guiding the reader through the second narrative frame, the actual story of the beautiful Aurelia, whose mother, a widowed baroness, is known to be a despicable woman. The narrator is Count Hyppolitus, a distant relative who has inherited his father’s estate and remains enchanted by Aurelia once he meets her, even though he has weird feelings towards her mother, also influenced by the opinion of his deceased father, who considered her repulsive. The Count later becomes increasingly obsessed with Aurelia and eventually they become engaged. The wedding becomes the scenery for a scandal when the baroness – Aurelia’s mother – is found dead in the cemetery the same morning, causing a hysterical attack in Aurelia. She then confesses all her past traumas to Hyppolitus, admitting her mother’s nature and depicting her as an abusive and promiscuous woman. Aurelia’s most significant recollection concerns the visits of a man she refers to as “the Stranger,” who ingratiates himself with her family by buying them expensive gifts and covering their expenses. In return, he attempts to assault her, confirming her growing suspicions about his sinister nature and compelling her to escape. Rather than receiving sympathy, she is subsequently scolded by her mother. When his true identity as a violent criminal wanted for theft and murder surfaces, the baroness brutally punishes Aurelia for having pushed their benefactor away. Even what appears to be the only positive development – the meeting and

subsequent engagement with Hyppolitus – is ultimately spoiled by the baroness, who places a curse on her daughter:

You are my misfortune, horrible creature that you are! But in the midst of your imagined happiness vengeance will overtake you, if I should be carried away by a sudden death. In those tetanic spasms, which your birth cost me, the subtle craft of the devil. — (Hoffmann 1892, p. 466)

From the moment Aurelia finishes to recall her past traumas, expressing her fear towards her dead mother, Hyppolitus observes that she becomes even more withdrawn and uneasy, as though burdened with concealing something terrible. She starts to take long, solitary walks and grows progressively more distressed:

In a very short time Aurelia began to alter very perceptibly. [...] her mental state – confused, variable, restless, as if she were constantly frightened at something – led to the conclusion that there was some fresh mystery perturbing her system. [...] She shut herself up in her rooms, sought the most solitary walks in the park. (Ibid.)

When a doctor diagnoses Aurelia's pregnancy and rambles aimlessly about the peculiar nature of pregnancy cravings, Hyppolitus starts being concerned about the strange behaviour of his wife: Aurelia has completely ceased eating, "she never took the smallest morsel of anything to eat, evincing the utmost repugnance at the sight of all food, particularly meat" (Ibid., p. 467). After having discovered from a servant that Aurelia spends her nights away from the chateau, returning just before the daybreak, one night, Hyppolitus resolves to follow her and ultimately arrives at a graveyard, where a violated grave is surrounded by a ghastly coven of cannibals.

There, in the bright moonlight, he saw a circle of frightful, spectral-looking creatures. Old women, half naked, were cowering down upon the ground, and in the midst of them lay the corpse of a man, which they were tearing at with wolfish appetite. Aurelia was amongst them. (Ibid., p. 469)

Shocked by the scene, he wanders for the rest of the night around the countryside, and when he returns to the chateau, Aurelia is peacefully asleep in bed. Hyppolitus, hoping that what he saw was only a gruesome dream, acts normal, until they sit down to breakfast, when Aurelia refuses the food set before her, provoking Hyppolitus's violent reaction and ultimately prompting her to lunge at him: "the Countess flew at him, uttering a sound between a snarl and a howl, and bit him on the breast with the fury of a hyena." (Ibid., p.470). The story ends with Hyppolitus becoming hopelessly insane. In the tale, ambiguity has a structural function: the narrative never confirms the distinction between real supernatural events and hallucination, and therefore the reader is trapped in interpretative uncertainty. Hoffmann's stories "refuse to provide a comforting rational explanation" (Kellermeyer, 2023, p. 5) and keep the reader in a liminal space between hallucination and reality. In *Vampirism*, the narrator is himself affected by distorted perception of reality, and his gradual descent into madness mirrors the supernatural experiences he describes, ultimately rendering him unreliable. According to Todorov's definition of the fantastic (1975), such stories can be accepted as involving supernatural agency, or they can be dismissed as just characters' superstitions, mental illness or hallucinations (Todorov, 1975). *Vampirism* belongs to the fantastic genre famously defined by Todorov specifically because it maintains for the most part an uncertainty between the real and the supernatural, allowing multiple explanations.

Decades before Todorov, also Freud had written about the ambiguity certain writers kept on whether the fictional world was real or imaginary, tracing a blurred line between the characters' mental illness, hallucination and dreaming; he called this ambiguity "uncertainty", claiming that "it is true that the writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know [...] whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation" (Freud, 1919, p. 7). Gothic stories are indeed particularly apt to express uncanny feelings, which are described by Freud as "nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind and has been estranged only by the process of repression" (Ibid., p. 13). Hoffmann, for example, situates his horror stories in bourgeois settings and he portrays intimate relationships; in *Vampirism*, the vampire is not "other", but emerges from the family, from intimacy and desire, anticipating Freud's idea that the

uncanny is rooted in the familiar becoming unfamiliar. He anticipates psychoanalysis by internalizing horror and exploring repression and return, creating a bridge between Gothic literature and psychological horror. Freud, a century later, discussed how emotions and urges – like sexual desires – become frightful and uncanny, and can result in mental disorder when they are repressed into anxiety. He was also convinced that there was a difference between the uncanny in real life and the uncanny experienced by reading – usually stories that “flow with the supernatural”: he takes Hoffmann as an example of fictional uncanny, as he made the feeling central in many of his stories, usually connecting it to a dimension that can be defined *familiar* or *domestic*. The mysteries encountered by the protagonists of his stories usually deal with family dramas and in general situations that end up becoming *Unheimlich*⁹, and therefore it is necessary to keep them hidden by repressing them. While Freud’s notion of the uncanny provides a crucial framework for understanding the ambiguity between reality and hallucination in Hoffmann’s tale, it remains primarily concerned with psychological uncertainty and the return of the repressed. However, such an approach does not fully account for the text’s insistence on corporeality and visceral horror. To address this dimension, Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject offers a necessary extension. In *Powers of Horror: An essay on Abjection*, Kristeva defines the abject as that which disturbs identity, system and order, emerging where the boundaries between self and other, life and death, collapse. Unlike the uncanny, which operates through cognitive hesitation, the abject provokes an immediate bodily reaction of repulsion. Hoffmann’s *Vampirism* moves precisely in this direction: it not only unsettles perception but also confronts the reader with scenes that materialize horror in explicitly physical terms. At the same time, this emphasis on the body does not stand in opposition to Freud’s model, but rather deepens it: the return of the repressed that defines the uncanny frequently manifests through bodily disturbance, fragmentation, and threatened dismemberment, it is precisely this convergence between psychic repression and corporeal anxiety that Freud himself identifies in his reading of Hoffmann’s works, most notably in his interpretation of *The Sandman*, where the fear of bodily violation – particularly the loss or manipulation of the eyes and limbs –

⁹ According to Schelling, “Unheimlich is all that should have remained secret, hidden, and instead surfaced” (cited in Freud, 1919, pp. 3-4)

becomes the vehicle through which unconscious trauma resurfaces. In the tale, the protagonist Nathaniel tells the memories of his childhood, linked to the death of his father and the legend of the Sandman, an imaginary figure used by his mother to make him go to bed early and who would punish disobedient children by throwing sand in their eyes. The child identifies this figure with lawyer Coppelius – described as repellent even physically – who occasionally visits his father, and the two practice mysterious operations, discovered by Nathaniel himself when, one night, he enters his father's studio:

It seemed to me that human faces were visible on all sides, but without eyes, and with ghastly, deep, black cavities instead. (Hoffmann, 1816, p. 90)

Nathaniel is then discovered by Coppelius, who even more uncannily proposes something different from stealing the child's eyes:

With a piercing laugh, Coppelius cried: 'All right, the boy may keep his eyes and snivel his way through his lesson; but let's examine the mechanism of his hands and feet.' And with these words he seized me so hard that my joints made a cracking noise, dislocated my hands and feet, and put them back in various sockets. [...] but everything went black and dim before my eyes, a sudden convulsion shot through my nerves and my frame, and I felt nothing more. (Ibid., pp. 90-91)

After this traumatic experience, Nathaniel stays unconscious for months and his father will die a year later during one of his experiments with Coppelius.

According to Freud, the Sandman takes the symbolic meaning of the authoritarian and horrific father, in contrast with Aurelia's mother in *Vampirism* who tries to force her daughter to marry an abominated stranger at the age of sixteen, demonstrating to have the same role as Nathaniel's father but with a different reaction from Aurelia, who follows her own intentions and denies her mother's persuasion. The two characters represent the same-sex dominant parent, and the mother-daughter relationship in

Vampirism can be interpreted as the Elektra complex during Aurelia's adolescence (Oki, 2022).

Moreover, Aurelia's vampirism can be considered uncanny itself, as it constitutes an actual return from the dead, which is simultaneously a literal and symbolical return. According to Freud, the uncanny emerges when something once familiar but repressed returns in an altered and disturbing form, often through mechanisms of repetition, doubling and the collapse of boundaries between life and death. In his discussion of the double¹⁰, Freud identifies the fragmentation of identity and the projection of unconscious desires onto another figure as central sources of psychic anxiety. These concepts are particularly relevant to Gothic literature, where supernatural figures frequently externalize inner conflicts and repressed impulses. In *Vampirism*, the vampire can therefore be read not merely as a supernatural being, but as an uncanny manifestation of divided subjectivity, embodying desires and fears that the rational self-attempts to suppress. This interpretation can be further reinforced through Auerbach's work, in which the author argues that vampires function as historically contingent figures of otherness that reflect the anxieties of the cultures that produce them. From this perspective, Hoffmann's vampire becomes both an external threat and a projection of psychological instability, linking Gothic fascination with vampirism to broader concerns about identity repression, and the permeability of the self (Auerbach, 1995).

Another Freudian aspect of Hoffmann's story is the aforementioned Elektra complex that blocks Aurelia's autonomous identity formation. Aurelia's vampirism can therefore be read not only as uncanny, but as abject. Her nocturnal participation in the cannibalistic ritual, centred around the consumption of a corpse, stages what Kristeva identifies as the ultimate form of abjection: the human body deprived of life, which no longer respects the borders separating subject and object. The graveyard scene thus transforms epistemological uncertainty into a material confrontation with that must be expelled from the symbolic order. Moreover, Aurelia's pregnancy further intensifies this abject dimension. As Kristeva argues, the maternal body constitutes a privileged site of abjection, as it destabilizes the boundaries of the subject by containing an

¹⁰ The theme of the double frequently appears in literature with the use of the *Doppelgänger*, a German word used to refer to a physical identical copy of a person, although its meaning has developed into representing a split of identity.

“Other” within the self. Aurelia’s rejection of ordinary nourishment, combined with her consumption of human flesh, grotesquely inverts the nurturing maternal function into a devouring impulse, reinforcing the collapse between life and death, self and other. Despite the logical comparison with the bride of Goethe’s *The Bride of Corinth*, Aurelia has more aggressive and subversive potential, emphasized in the narration through her “fantastic darkness” and cannibalistic desire, and presenting her as a violent, erotic force. The story also dramatizes the conflicted mother-daughter relationship, highlighting how the mother’s oppressive pressure led to Aurelia’s disobedience and consequently to the emergence of her vampiric urges. The figure of the mother also acquires a new significance within this framework. If, from a Freudian perspective, Aurelia’s relationship with her mother can be interpreted through the dynamics of repression and familial conflict, from a Kristevan standpoint the mother represents the primary source of abjection: that from which the subject must separate in order to constitute itself. In *Vampirism*, however, this separation fails, as Aurelia ultimately reproduces the very transgressive and monstrous qualities she seeks to escape. This collapse between self and maternal other exemplifies the return of the abject, aligning with Freud’s notion of repression while giving it a distinctly corporeal and destabilizing form. Hoffmann seems to articulate a profoundly conservative anxiety regarding the disruption of moral orthodoxy caused by the intrusion of a form of Otherness, to the extent that the story appears a cautionary tale in which Aurelia may be interpreted as embodying a subversive force that seeks to destabilize the social order represented by Hyppolitus and the nobility:

At the heart of [Hoffmann’s] vampire poetics lies the idea of transgression. [...] the vampire not only transgresses the fundamental dichotomy of life and death, but transgression and paradox from this figure’s very essence. (Sütterlin and Lambrow, 2018, pp. 116–17)

At the beginning of the story, Aurelia’s mother appears to be the insidious “Other”; only later does suspicion shift toward the young and beautiful bride, and the reader assists to a shift from a compliant dependent to a rebellious temptress, which constitutes the pivot of the horror component of the tale. The transformation from a

simple, child-like girl to a hysterical cannibal symbolizes a warning against the plotting machinations of women, and therefore as a threat to Hyppolitus's patriarchal authority, emphasizing the paranoid misogyny in *Vampirism*, in which "mad passion of hysteria on the part of women serves as the object of terror experienced by young men in connection with becoming attracted to them" (McGlathery, 1997, p. 107).

As both Aurelia and her mother transform from something desirable to something unnatural and inhuman, it is relevant to notice that this moment of transition occurs in the mysterious liminal zone of pregnancy. According to McGlathery (1997, p. 106), Hoffmann constructs a deliberately cynical "connection between erotic passion and insanity, as manifested in a young woman's hysteria": Hyppolitus finds himself shamed and overwhelmed when he discovers that his wife has metamorphosed into her mother. Together with pregnancy, also pregnancy cravings have a role in the events narrated. Aurelia assaults her husband "after he exposes her abnormal craving" (Kamla, 1985, p. 236), and moreover, she is seen inhaling mouthful human flesh from the corpse of a man:

[...] the oral aggression exhibited by [...] [Aurelia] extends beyond the infantile urge to suck [...] blood, and instead combines the urge to bite with that of tearing and devouring. It is really [...] ghoulish cannibalism. (Ibid.)

These associations with cannibalism may also symbolize a woman's repressed hunger for parity with her husband in terms of independency and personal sovereignty; Amelia's lack of appetite coincides with sexual rejection, and therefore she seems to have freed herself from Hyppolitus's control by finding the sisterhood of the cemetery, which teaches her a subversive autonomy. Pregnancy served to Aurelia as a tool to escape from others' authority and to experience a rite of passage unique to herself (Kellermeyer, 2023).

To conclude, Hoffmann's Aurelia embodies transgression and female autonomy, challenging patriarchal authority and moral norms. Her transformation – from compliant daughter to rebellious, cannibalistic bride – illustrates the fear of the Other and the disruptive potential of female desire within a conservative social order.

1.3 The Birth of the Aristocratic Vampire

In the nineteenth-century England, John Polidori is considered to have had a pivotal role in shaping the modern vampire, transforming it into an aristocratic, seductive and psychologically complex character, marking a shift toward modern identity and desire. Polidori's *The Vampyre* was, according to Christopher Frayling, "the first story successfully to fuse the disparate elements of vampirism into a coherent literary genre" (Frayling as cited in Tanti, 2019, p. 123). Even though Polidori, being a medical doctor, had studied the alleged cases of vampirism from the previous century, the protagonist of his story, Ruthven, is not based on medical reports, and it is actually in contrast with earlier vampire representations, which were typically grotesque and rural. As Ken Gelder notices in *Reading the Vampire*, the story is significant precisely because, unlike later Victorian vampire fiction, it lacks a strong bureaucratic network of doctors and paternal figures to diagnose and contain the vampire, sustaining uncertainty and anxiety (Gelder, 1994). Lord Ruthven is therefore considered the first Byronic vampire, that is, a creature eternally damned who brings death and destruction to those he finds on his way; he has a social status and moves in elite circles of London high society, embodying refinement, wealth and mystery. Such figure is clearly inspired by the Byronic hero, which traces its origins back to the literature of the eighteenth century and to the proliferation of the charismatic anti-heroes.¹¹ Polidori was able to transform the unattractive, zombie-like revenant belonging to folklore into a dangerously fascinating, sexually appealing aristocrat (Baldick as cited in Tanti, 2019). The mysterious figure no longer lives in remote foreign countries, representing an external invasion; it now exists among society, becoming a figure of social infiltration perfectly integrated into urban and modern environments, and which encourages the dissolute in their pursuit of vice.

The vampire had already entered the English Romantic culture through Lord Byron, who in 1813 had published *The Giaour*, in which a "false Infidel" is blasted by the curse of returning to family life as a vampire (Auerbach, 1995). However, the protagonist of Byron's poem is still closer to the vampire of *The Bride of Corinth*: it

¹¹ For example, Lovelace in Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Clarissa* or some of the main villains of Gothic romances.

can be defined a proto-vampiric figure, cursed, alienated and predatory, a Byronic hero who has become a predator of emotions and bodies.

There from thy daughter, sister, wife,
At midnight drain the stream of life;
Yet loathe the banquet which perforce
Must feed thy livid living corse: (Byron, 2008, pp. 759-762)

The vampire here once again turns back to life to seek revenge, and the poem treats themes of erotic guilt, transgression and eternal punishment.

Polidori's impact on the concept of vampire lies in his reinvention of the figure as a seducer, a nobleman and a traveller, which are all elements that make it a "real" person, in opposition with the corpse brought back to life in *The Bride of Corinth*. *The Vampyre* establishes a parallel between supernatural malevolence and the masochistic allure of moral corruption, greed, and social predation among elite members of society, thereby functioning as a metaphor for the decadence of the upper classes.

The figure of Lord Ruthven initiated a literary fascination with vampirism that has persisted into the modern era, and it is therefore unsurprising that the character was modelled on Lord Byron, the Romantic poet who was both companion and employer to John Polidori. The latter chose to base the protagonist of his story on Byron, who is considered both one of the founders and at the same time inspirations for the vampire characters, for several reasons: among these, the mysterious past of the poet, as well as his fame for his emotional detachment, moral ambiguity and charismatic dominance. Polidori transforms Byron's persona into a literal monster, and the metaphorical predation of the Byronic hero becomes actual vampirism: Ruthven's power lies in seduction, not violence, he fascinates rather than attacking directly, expressing vampirism as an eroticized domination in which desire intertwines with death and predation is coded as intimacy. Apart from being an inspiration to the character of Ruthven, *The Vampyre* was also born from Byron's own idea, which appears as a fragment sent to his publisher, John Murray, and which represents a protagonist named Augustus Darvell who travels Europe together with the narrator, and is characterized in the manner of the Byronic hero. The story of *The Vampyre*

originates in the legendary ghost competition that took place at Villa Diodati in 1816 and that is famously reported in Mary Shelley's 1831 Introduction to *Frankenstein*, and for this reason Byron was also initially identified as the author of Polidori's tale, in an attempt to boost the sales. However, Polidori did not simply copy Byron; he used Byron's fragment and *The Giaour* creatively and often ironically, turning Byron's solitary, depopulated Greek setting into an inhabited social world (Gelder, 1994). Gelder furtherly argues that:

[Byron's] travellers' destination – given here as Greece – is precisely the destination of Aubrey and Ruthven. But in Polidori's story, the travellers – Aubrey especially – find a very different kind of Greece. Byron's poem and his narrative fragment were solitary psychodramas, depopulated texts. [...] But the Byronic return to antiquity [...] is now ironically displaced by Polidori. (Ibid., p. 31)

In this reading, Greece in Polidori is not an abstract classical ideal but a place where folk belief and vampire superstition matter, so the story grounds vampirism in everyday social life.

The Vampyre; A Tale first appeared in the "New Monthly Magazine" on April 1st, 1819 as a new tale by Lord Byron, and the narrative, composed in the third person, centres on a young man named Aubrey who, while immersed in fashionable London society, becomes captivated by the enigmatic and misanthropic Lord Ruthven. Aubrey subsequently accompanies Ruthven on a journey through Europe. There, Ruthven dies, but not before extracting from Aubrey a solemn oath that he will conceal the circumstances of his death for a period of one year and one day. Upon returning to England, Aubrey is confronted with Ruthven's reappearance, now as a suitor to his beloved sister. This shocking encounter, coupled with Aubrey's inability to disclose the truth due to his binding oath, precipitates his psychological deterioration and eventual confinement. When he learns of his sister's imminent marriage to Ruthven, Aubrey attempts unsuccessfully to intervene, still constrained by his promise. Only after the stipulated period has elapsed is he released from his obligation; however, by

then it is too late. Aubrey dies of a ruptured blood vessel, and his sister falls victim to Ruthven, who is revealed as a vampire.

The story was published within the frame of “Byromania”, which is the craze for Byron among women following the scandals surrounding Byron’s separation from his wife. This increases the analogies between Byron and Ruthven, as they are both misanthropists, attracted to young females and accompanied by male companions – for this reason, the tale is often read as a representation of the relationship between Byron and Polidori. The reader is thus invited to see the protagonist of the story as a double for the poet, and more specifically to see Ruthven as a product of Byron’s imagination. Bainbridge sees the source of the vampire’s power in “his mastery of the rhetoric of Byronic poetics” (Bainbridge, 2006, p. 21), and Ruthven has exactly the reputation of a “winning tongue”, especially when he has to attract the interest of virtuous women, as described by Polidori himself:

Who could resist his power? His tongue had dangers and toils to recount – could speak of himself as of an individual having no sympathy with any being on the crowded earth, save with her to whom he addressed himself; [...] he knew so well how to use the serpent’s art, or such was the will of fate, that he gained her affections. (Polidori, 1819/2004)

As Bainbridge suggests, Byron’s poetry corresponds to “the serpent’s art”, and Ruthven corresponds to a demonic portrait of Byron.

All in all, it can be said that while Lord Byron may have playfully projected aspects of himself onto a vampiric figure to amuse the intimate circle gathered at Diodati, John Polidori transformed this impulse into a broader cultural phenomenon by fashioning a vampiric representation of Byron for an international readership, thereby establishing vampirism not only as a trope of sexual excess but also as an expression of so-called “Byromania”.

As claimed by Auerbach, every era embraces the vampire it needs, implying that the figure of the vampire reflects modern anxieties (Auerbach, 1995). In the case of Polidori, the vampire can be defined as a product of modernity, since it mirrors social fears of the time such as individualism, social mobility and hidden identities; the

aristocratic vampire is a symbol of elite corruption and a critique to modern social systems, shifting its popular vision from collective threat to intimate danger. As Auerbach argues, vampires are never stable figures but change to fit their times, functioning as mirrors of the cultural anxieties that produce them (Auerbach, 1995). In this sense, Polidori's Lord Ruthven does not merely inaugurate a new literary type, but reflects a specifically nineteenth-century concern with social performance, moral duplicity, and the permeability of class boundaries. The vampire's integration into aristocratic society signals a shift from external monstrosity to internalized corruption, aligning vampirism with the emerging fears of modern urban life, where identity itself becomes unstable and subject to concealment. It is no longer the traditional monster, born from superstition, who threatens communities, it has now turned into a cultural and social construct who targets individuals. Polidori even modifies the vampire physically, changing the traditional red vampire of Calvinist treatises into a colourless and pale creature, a skin colour close to aristocracy, described as follows:

by his colourless cheek, which never gained a warmer tint from the blush of conscious shame or from any powerful emotion, [Lord Ruthven] appeared to be above human feelings and sympathies, the fashionable names for frailties and sins. (Polidori, 1819/2004)

this emphasis on surface and appearance can be further illuminated through Jack Halberstam's analysis in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, where Gothic monstrosity is understood as something inscribed on the body, yet not always visibly legible. Halberstam argues that the monster often produces meaning at the level of skin, suggesting that identity in Gothic narratives is both constructed and concealed through outward appearance (Halberstam, 1995). Ruthven's pale, aristocratic exterior thus functions as a deceptive surface that masks his predatory nature, reinforcing the idea that monstrosity in the nineteenth century is no longer marked by grotesque excess, but by an unsettling normality. His body does not reveal his difference; rather, it conceals it, making him all the more dangerous.

In addition, the new, aristocratic vampire attends social events (balls, salons, social gatherings), creating a hunting ground which moves the social fear from an external,

physical invasion to an internal corruption; the danger becomes emotional, sexual and psychological. Auerbach further emphasizes that nineteenth-century vampires are intimate enemies, no longer distant folkloric threats but figures who inhabit the same social and domestic spaces as their victims (Auerbach, 1995). Ruthven exemplifies this transformation: his power lies precisely in his ability to pass as human, to circulate within elite society undetected, and to transform intimacy into a site of predation. In this way, vampirism becomes inseparable from modern forms of social interaction, where desire, trust, and danger converge.

Ruthven embodies Romantic subjectivity, which is the mirror of Romantic individualism, when the vampire enters homes, relationships and private spaces, and at the same time he establishes a connection with the Byronic identity that sees the self as exceptional and destructive, while also exposing the behaviour of Byronic, aristocratic “citizens of the world” who prey on others, especially through Lord Ruthven’s relation to Aubrey and to Aubrey’s sister:

Lord Ruthven moves freely around in ‘society’, unnoticed, while in the forests of Greece he is immediately recognised and feared. [...] Polidori’s story seems to suggest that ‘society’ itself is vampirish; its aristocratic representatives prey upon ‘the people’ wherever they go. (Gelder, 1994, p. 34)

Vampirism becomes a metaphor for desire without limits, a form of absolute control over others through the power dynamics of predator versus victim and seducer versus seduced, and the identity of the vampire becomes unstable, something between human and inhuman that is both a social insider and a hidden outsider. In this respect, Halberstam’s reading of Gothic monsters as figures of unstable and performative identity proves particularly relevant. Rather than embodying a fixed alterity, the vampire occupied a liminal position, shifting between categories such as human and inhuman, self and other, insider and outsider. Ruthven’s ability to navigate these boundaries underscores how monstrosity becomes a matter of performance and perception, anticipating later Gothic and horror traditions in which the most terrifying figures are those who cannot be easily recognized as such (Halberstam, 1995).

On the whole, *The Vampyre* establishes the aristocratic vampire archetype as a fusion of seduction, power and modern identity; through Byron's influence, the monster becomes a Byronic predator who, as Auerbach suggests, evolved within modernity, becoming a mirror of cultural anxieties and desires.

1.4 *Carmilla*: The Feminization of the Vampire

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* constitutes a significant addition to the Gothic genre that includes vampires; the story is an intersection of literary transformations, emerging anxieties about female sexuality and identity, and also nineteenth-century medical discourse on hysteria. *Carmilla* also signs a passage from a symbolic, psychological horror to a more somatic one, transitioning from earlier, pre-Stoker vampire tales, which focused on dreamlike influence, psychological seduction and uncanny doubles, into the embodied, surface-based monster who marks, penetrates and changes bodies. Not only does *Carmilla* introduce elements like bodily vulnerability and sleeping attacks, but Le Fanu also poses the focus on invasive physical intimacy. The story first appeared in the Victorian periodical *The Dark Blue*, and it was later included in *In a Glass Darkly*, a collection published in 1872 which contains five unrelated short stories connected only by the common thread of the fictional doctor Martin Hesselius, a psychologist specialized in investigating the occult, and who believes in the possible connection between the psychological and spiritual domains. At the time of the publication, vampires in England were a metaphor for the economic dependence of women, for the parasitic relationship between aristocracy and oppressed middle and lower classes and for unrepressed female sexuality. While Auerbach sustains that the demonized woman in nineteenth-century literature depicts a "hero who was strong enough to bear the hopes and fears of a century's worship" (Auerbach as cited in Signorotti, 1996, p. 209), most women in vampire tales were actually far too marginalized to be seen as heroic, and instead they were seen as diseased. Le Fanu could create *Carmilla* – considered to be the first protagonist female vampire – especially because of the growing concern about the power of female homosocial relationships in the nineteenth century, while all her predecessors were men, such as the already analysed Ruthven. The protagonist of the tale is distant from the typical representations of male vampires in previous narratives,

who used to prey on women often marginal to the story. Carmilla, on the other side, chooses to prey only on women with whom she is intimate: she becomes an intimate friend and lover to Laura, but she also fills the emotional void left by the absence of the mother and the distance of the father. According to Sedgwick, the exclusion of men from female friendships poses a threat primarily to the male kinship system rather than to female relational structures, as female homosocial bonds possess the potential to subvert or even dismantle patriarchal configurations of kinship, which is precisely what happens in *Carmilla* (Sedgwick as cited in Signorotti, 1996). The first encounter between the two – recalled at the beginning of the narration – happens when Laura is only six, and while alone in her bedroom she is visited at night by a mysterious young girl who lies beside her and then seems to bite her breast, after which the figure disappears. The scene is described as follows:

I can't have been more than six years old, when one night I awoke, and looking round the room from my bed [...] I thought myself alone. [...] I saw a solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed. It was that of a young lady who was kneeling, with her hands under the coverlet. [...] She caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed; [...] I was weakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast deep at the same moment, and I cried loudly. (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 246)

Carmilla initially assumes the role of a maternal figure, seeking to console Laura; however, this apparent nurturing presence is undermined when she penetrates her breast, revealing a profound subversion of maternal care. The motif of the “good mother” thus operates not only within the familiar connection between Laura and Carmilla¹², but also in relation to the Victorian ideal of the woman as the “angel in the house.” In this respect, Carmilla represents its inversion: she pretends to be a virtuous mother while inflicting harm upon her surrogate child in order to sustain herself. This opening scene portrays the dual role of Carmilla as both a mother and lover figure: the act of biting Laura's chest clearly underlines the monstrosity of Carmilla's desire, who also pretends to be a good friend to Laura. When the two meet for what the reader –

¹² Carmilla is an ancestor of Laura's mother side, as confirmed further in the narration.

and Laura herself – believes to be the first time, after an incident just outside Laura's castle, the latter is shocked as she recognizes the girl she met in her dream twelve years before. Carmilla claims that there is a supernatural connection between them and she inverts the role of predator and prey by playing the part of the victim and declaring that she had been frightened by a dream in which she recognizes Laura.

[Carmilla is speaking] If you were less pretty I think I should be very much afraid of you, but being as you are, and you and I both so young, I feel only that I have made your acquaintance twelve years ago, and have already a right to your intimacy; at all events it does seem as if we were destined, from our earliest childhood, to be friends. (Ibid., p. 260)

The narrative deepens the uncanny effect by making the two girls become, quite literally, familiar to one another – so much so that Laura even begins to wonder if they might be related. From this point on, the story unfolds through a series of variations on this motif of recognition without knowledge (Gelder, 1994).

Laura feels mixed emotions toward Carmilla, because her attraction is an inexplicable combination of fascination and disgust, but that inevitably results as a powerful attraction for Carmilla. This same-sex relationship is perceived as ambiguous by Laura also because it transgresses Victorian sexual morals. The novella therefore demonstrates a fear of otherness embodied by the fear of vampires, together with the fear for female sexuality and for homosexuality, which at the time was considered a sexual perversion. Female sexuality and homoeroticism are ambiguously represented by Le Fanu: Carmilla is a lesbian vampire whose homosexual feelings are openly expressed; Laura, on the other side, feels the same attraction but is also repulsed by it. Female sexuality and homoerotic relationships are not the only kind of otherness that the character of Carmilla represents; she embodies also the fear of miscegenation of mixing English with foreign blood. The novella can be read as regarding political, social and cultural issues of late nineteenth-century Ireland, as the author was active in all the concerns of Ireland, in a time in which a few independence movements for the independence of the state were rising. Robert Tracy in the Introduction to the

Oxford edition of *In a Glass Darkly* linked the Anglo-Irish cultural and political background to the themes of the novella:

This insistent Englishness, their social isolation, strongly suggest the lives of many Anglo-Irish landowners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The abandoned village suggests Ireland after the Great Famine of 1845-9. The people have been removed by what Laura's father calls the 'infection' of superstition, their fear of vampires – a recollection of the fever that accompanied the Famine. (Tracy, 1993, p. xx)

Laura's father insists on creating an England away from England, as he fears the loss of the British empire. The novella is set in Styria¹³ – a region of Austria famous for vampire sightings – but Laura and her father are proudly English: they speak English, read Shakespeare and drink tea, as the stereotyped British citizens. The story begins with Laura asserting her Englishness:

In Styria, we [...] inhabit a castle, or schloss. [...] My father is English, and I bear an English name, although I never saw England. (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 244)

Carmilla can thus be considered as a threat from the outside, a foreign being that destabilizes the balance of the British empire, in the same way in which Ireland was actually doing. The invasion of the *schloss* is also analysed by Halberstam's reading of Gothic spaces – domestic, secretive, claustrophobic –, arguing that Gothic anxieties are produced when the domestic sphere is invaded from within.

The monster [...] will find you in the intimacy of your own home; indeed, it will make your home its home (or you its home) and alter forever the comfort of domestic privacy. The monster peeps through the window, enters through the back door, and sits beside you in the parlor; the monster is always invited in but never asked to stay. (Halberstam, 1995, p. 15)

¹³ The Austrian province is situated on the Hungarian border.

Laura's father's house (supposedly protected) becomes the site of surveillance, secrecy and erotic threat; moreover, Carmilla is allowed into the house because she in blends in, according to class, beauty and manners.

1.4.1 Carmilla and the Ambiguity of Female Identity

Le Fanu's novella is permeated by liminal elements, starting from the figure of the female vampire herself – an embodiment of ambiguous identity who is neither fully monstrous nor fully human. Carmilla, at once predator and object of desire, unsettles the rigid binaries characteristic of the period, blurring distinctions between activity and passivity, victim and agent, as well as illness and desire. Homosexuality is also described in liminal terms, and it constitutes an increasing part of Carmilla's monstrosity and a threat not only to the stability of the English household, but also that of the related patriarchal – and therefore sexual – order. Yet, her monstrosity is not immediately visible, she is beautiful, graceful and delicate. Following Halberstam's great emphasis on skin as the surface where monstrosity is inscribed, Carmilla's skin conceals, rather than displays, horror, but the text is at the same time obsessed with bodily symptoms such as languor, pallor, faintness and bite marks, which are all sign on the skin. Carmilla's beauty then becomes a deceptive semiotic surface, in which monstrosity is coded not as hideousness but as illicit attractiveness. The novella participates in what Halberstam calls "Gothic surfaces", as the monster is recognizable not by grotesqueness but by ambiguous signs on the body: while Carmilla's smooth, unblemished skin masks her predatory nature, Laura's slowly marked skin reveals Carmilla's hidden identity.

Although Carmilla is not overtly depicted as monstrous, she is, more troublingly, cast as something devilish, while her vampiric nature remains concealed until the story's conclusion. As a result, the reader is not immediately encouraged to link her ambiguity to her identity as a vampire, but rather to her queerness and foreignness—qualities that introduce additional layers of liminality to the vampire figure. Her devilish feature is particularly emphasised in the funeral scene, in chapter IV, when the hearing of religious hymns¹⁴ physically hurts Carmilla, causing her to crumble and consequently scaring Laura. This portrayal of Carmilla as an infernal being is closely linked to her

¹⁴ Religious hymns, together with other religious elements like stone crosses, will become part of the vampire lore in later vampire fiction; however, at the time vampires were already associated with demonic creatures.

sexuality, as her relationship with Laura is marked by an intimacy shaped by fascination, fear, and medicalized suspicion. Laura experiences a fascinating yet disgusting attraction to Carmilla – one that intertwines desire with repulsion and disrupts the heteronormative barriers of the period:

Now the truth is, I felt rather unaccountably towards the beautiful stranger. I did feel, as she said, ‘drawn toward her’, but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed. She interested and won me; she was so beautiful and so indescribably engaging. (Le Fanu, 2008, pp. 260-1)

Laura – speaking in the above-mentioned passage – experiences an attraction that outweighs her sense of repulsion; this inclination subsequently develops into a form of romantic involvement that transgresses Victorian sexual norms and is framed as morally deviant within that cultural context. Carmilla’s vampirism is explicitly tied to same-sex desire, and she embodies Victorian fears of female autonomy, non-heteronormative sexuality and female penetrability, and therefore she becomes what Halberstam call a “technology of monstrosity”, a mechanism that makes visible the anxieties around otherness. The text places queer female desire in the category of the supernatural, the predatory and the dangerous, and for this reason Halberstam would say the novella produces Carmilla as a monster not because she is queer, but because Victorian culture needed a monster to express this anxiety (Halberstam, 1995).

Carmilla is ambiguous and mysterious also in her expressions of love for Laura, who is understandingly confused about Carmilla’s words and gestures:

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, ‘Dearest, your little heart is wounded; [...] [i]n the rapture of my enormous humiliation I live in your warm life, and you shall die – die, sweetly die – into mine. [...] so, for a while, seek to know no more of me and mine, but trust me with all your loving spirit.’ (Ibid., p. 263)

The love described by Laura is defined by a violent passion and expression of cruelty, as Carmilla can only survive by sucking her lover's blood, and consequently consuming her life and causing her death. Laura is unable not only to explain Carmilla's behaviour, but, more significantly, to explain her own feelings toward her; at the same time, she appears aware that Carmilla is shaped by a supernatural influence. Le Fanu at first pictures Carmilla's love as artificial, but at the end of the novella there are plenty of doubts about her supposed attachment to her preys; in particular, the relationship with Laura is pathologically described, both because the same-sex desire is coded as an illness and because the element of vampirism makes their relationship corrupted:

Her murmured words sounded like a lullaby in my ear, and soothed my resistance into a trance. [...] I experienced a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable, ever and anon, mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust. I had no distinct thoughts about her while such scenes lasted, but I was conscious of a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence. This I know is a paradox, but I can make no other attempt to explain the feeling. (Ibid., p. 264)

The lullaby murmured by Carmilla carries a dual connotation: on the one hand, it evokes the supernatural; on the other, it suggests an undertone of incest that anticipates the sexual intercourse between Carmilla and Laura, given that lullabies are conventionally associated with maternal care. Homosexual desire here unifies queer sexuality and mother-daughter relationship, enhancing Laura's fear and disgust and at the same time providing a sense of monstrosity in the character of Carmilla.

Laura even tries to give a logical explanation to the sexual attraction perceived from Carmilla by thinking that she must be a boy disguised as a woman: "[W]as there here a disguise and a romance? [...] What if a boyish lover had found his way into the house, and sought to prosecute his suit in masquerade[?]" (Ibid., p. 265). Laura seems willing to reinterpret the sexual desire through the lens of heteronormativity, in order for the transgression to become the normal. Toward the end of the novella, the connection between vampirism and sexual intercourse becomes obvious:

Certain vague and strange sensations visited me in my sleep. [...] [O]ne clear voice, of a female's, very deep [...] spoke as if at a distance, slowly, and producing always the same sensation of indescribable solemnity and fear. Sometimes there came a sensation as if a hand was drawn softly along my cheek and neck. Sometimes it was as if warm lips kissed me [...] My heart beat faster, my breathing rose and fell rapidly and full drawn; a sobbing [...] turned into a dreadful convulsion, in which my senses left me and I became unconscious. (Ibid., p. 282)

The reference to *le petit mort*¹⁵ is both referred to Laura's imminent death caused by vampirism and to the intercourse with Carmilla.

Laura seems to be destined to die, but she is eventually saved by a group of men, led by the General, who rescues her and restores the heterosexual, white, patriarchal order by killing the foreign, queer vampire. Carmilla is defeated by masculine force and religion against queerness and sexuality; from a Victorian point of view, Le Fanu could not have suitably ended the story in any other way than by suppressing the lesbian vampire and by describing Carmilla's love for Laura as unnatural and artificial:

Its horrible lust for living blood supplies the vigour of its waking existence. The vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons. [...] It will never desist until it has satiated its passion, and drained the very life of its coveted victim. (Ibid., 317)

Carmilla seems to be structured around "paternal figures" – doctors, generals, and other male authorities – who, according to Gelder, try to manage vampire anxiety by diagnosing, testifying and eventually destroying Carmilla:

¹⁵ Literally, "the little death", it refers to the post orgasmic state of unconsciousness that certain people receive after the intercourse.

These men consult with one another, ruminating together privately, away from Laura's hearing, before they come to their conclusion. No wonder Carmilla tells Laura, 'Doctors never did me any good'! The men in fact form a kind of bureaucracy which signifies Carmilla as a vampire precisely in order to manage the threat – and, eventually, to destroy it. (Gelder, 1994, p. 49)

However, despite the men's extensive knowledge, they are never able to explain the nature of Carmilla's love for Laura, and even though after her death the danger seems overcome, a vampiric dimension still remains, if not in Laura, who has survived, at least in Bertha and the other victims of Carmilla. Also Laura is haunted by Carmilla's death and has ambivalent thoughts concerning her, as she was both a monstrous vampire and a beloved companion. The end of the novella is itself ambiguous:

It was long before the terror of recent event subsided; and to this hour the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations – sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw in the ruined church; and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door. (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 319)

Le Fanu concludes the narrative by alluding to the possibility of an eternal reunion between Laura and Carmilla, while leaving Laura's lingering nostalgia for Carmilla open to interpretation. Gelder suggests that the same-sex desire that permeates the novella is intensified to the point that eventually it is not fully extinguished even after Carmilla's death, since Laura still experiences desire in memory and reverie (Gelder, 1994).

Le Fanu's creation of a woman vampire anticipates the shift toward the end of the century, which sees a predominance of female vampires in literature. The explanation for this shift situates in the growing awareness of women's power and influence at the time, to which the writers responded by creating powerful women characters (Senf as cited in Signorotti, 1996). The idea of female vampirism was also understood in a more figurative sense, as the literal contagion of the blood can be interpreted as a metaphor for the moral contagion and "contamination" of lesbianism: women's perceived link

with vampirism implied that by the late nineteenth century “close female bonding and lesbianism are conflated with notions of the unhealthy draining of female vitality” (Macfie as cited in Ibid., p. 610). *Carmilla* is a vampire tale that defies the established patriarchal systems of kinship, and most provokingly challenges the nineteenth-century notions of the “contamination of lesbianism”, as it is considered the first story to investigate disruptive lesbian desire. Among the stories collected in *In a Glass Darkly*, *Carmilla* is the most daring one, as Le Fanu depicts a society where men increasingly become relegated to powerless positions while women assume aggressive roles (Ibid.). Le Fanu’s main characters lose control over their women, and consequently they suffer the exclusion from the male kinship systems, unable to exchange women, who instead start to control their own exchange.

The novella’s proto-queer dimension eludes fixed interpretation while simultaneously opening space for queer readings and feminist reinterpretations, exposing the limits of patriarchal discourse.

CHAPTER II

From Monstrous Woman to Queer Icon: Carmilla and the Subversion of Victorian Gender Ideology

2.1 From Monstrous Body to Feminine Threat

The emergence of the female vampire in *Carmilla* marks a significant transformation in the literary history of vampirism. Unlike earlier male vampires, Carmilla embodies a form of female desire that challenges patriarchal structures of kinship, sexuality and authority. Yet Le Fanu's representation remains fundamentally ambivalent. On the one hand, Carmilla is constructed as a monster: she preys upon young women, spreads a fatal contagion and is ultimately hunted down and executed by male authorities. On the other hand, the novella repeatedly grants her narrative attraction, ideological coherence and emotional power. Rather than presenting female same-sex desire as simply deviant, Le Fanu creates a figure whose transgressive appeal continually exceeds the mechanism designed to contain her. The female vampire therefore emerges as both a threat to patriarchal order and a vehicle through which alternative forms of desire become imaginable.

The nineteenth-century transformation of the vampire from earlier male-centred figures into a new seductive and individualized creature can be understood as a disruption of established systems of kinship and desire. Nineteenth-century vampire narratives traditionally employed the vampire as a metaphor for broader cultural anxieties, and by placing a female vampire at the centre of the plot, Le Fanu "anticipates the shift toward the end of the century to predominantly female vampires" (Signorotti, 1996, p. 610). Signorotti interprets this shift through Lévi-Strauss's model of women as the "supreme gift" exchanged between men to cement social bonds:

In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* Lévi-Strauss argues that women are "valuables *par excellence* from both the biological and the social points of view [...] without which life is impossible". [...] Women, then, become the means of alliance, the "supreme gift" that binds men together and creates social order. (Ibid., p. 607)

Within this framework, women function primarily as objects of exchange rather than autonomous subjects. Carmilla disrupts this logic by refusing to circulate within patriarchal systems of kinship. Instead of serving as a passive object exchange between men, she actively pursues Laura and establishes an exclusive relationship that excludes male participation. The threat she poses therefore extends beyond vampirism itself: her desire challenges the structures through which patriarchal society organizes sexuality and social reproduction.

Sedgwick's concept of female homosociality further illuminates this disruption. Unlike male homosocial bonds, which depend upon the exclusion of homosexuality, female relationships exist along a continuum that can encompass friendship, intimacy and erotic attachment. Carmilla and Laura's relationship exemplifies this continuum: their bond cannot be neatly categorized as either friendship or sexuality; rather, it destabilizes the distinction itself. The significance of Carmilla's desire lies not simply in its lesbian implications but in its capacity to create a self-sufficient female alliance outside patriarchal exchange systems:

Sedgwick makes clear that women's relationships are not governed by homophobia; therefore, excluding men from female friendships or from access to women poses more of a threat to male kinship than to female. Thus, female homosocial bonds potentially carry tremendous power to subvert or demolish existing patriarchal kinship structures, which is precisely what happens in *Carmilla*. (Ibid.)

In *Carmilla*, the female body is reconfigured from a passive "sign" within systems of exchange into an active "psychic sponge" that drains male vitality, while simultaneously becoming associated with notions of lesbian "contamination." The demonization of the female body, together with the alignment of vampirism with female blood and lesbian desire, serves to illuminate mechanisms of patriarchal control over female sexuality. As subsequent analysis demonstrates, this dynamic stands in contrast to *Dracula*, where Bram Stoker reasserts an earlier model of exchange by repossessing female bodies for male pleasure.

The resulting genealogical shift can thus be understood in terms of the abandonment of exclusively male-centred vampiric metaphors, the emergence of a female vampire who embodies transgressive desire and disrupts the Lévi-Straussian economy of exchange, and the consequent patriarchal reaction that seeks to re-contain that desire. The emergence of the female vampire marks a significant transformation of the figure for several reasons. Foremost among these is her frequent depiction as a liminal entity, one that destabilizes and transgresses established boundaries – between life and death, subject and object, and traditional masculine and feminine roles. Carmilla’s undead status makes her “a spectre [that] visits living people in their slumbers; they *die*, and almost invariably, in the grave, develop into vampires” (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 304), establishing vampirism as a process of transmission that extends beyond the individual body. Significantly, even after the vampire has been identified and located, her existence remains restraint to the categories through which patriarchal authority seeks to understand and contain her. During the exhumation scene, the officials charged with destroying Carmilla discover a body that appears neither fully dead nor fully alive:

The features, though a hundred and fifty years had passed since her funeral, were tinted with the warmth of life. Her eyes were open; no cadaverous smell exhaled from the coffin. [...] The limbs were perfectly flexible, the flesh elastic; and the leaden coffin floated with blood, in which to a depth of seven inches, the body lay immersed. (Ibid., p. 315)

The description foregrounds Carmilla’s position between opposing states of being. Although she has been buried for over a century, her body retains the signs of vitality rather than decay, rendering the distinction between life and death unstable. As Signorotti argues, the novella’s conclusion remains fundamentally ambiguous because the transformations produced by Carmilla are never fully reversed; female desire and forms of self-determination continue to persist beyond her apparent destruction (Signorotti, 1996). The female vampire thus functions not only as a supernatural threat but also as a figure whose capacity for regeneration and transmission challenges patriarchal mechanisms of control and containment.

Another element that characterizes this new vampire is the detachment from heteronormative structures described by Lévi-Strauss, who defined women “object[s] of personal desire” and also “the subject of the desire of others” (Lévi-Strauss as cited in *Ibid.*, pp. 207-8). Carmilla simultaneously occupies both positions: she is the object of Laura’s fascination while also functioning as the active subject who pursues, seduces and ultimately claims her. In doing so, she disrupts the patriarchal exchange system in which women circulate primarily as objects between men. The relationship that develops between Carmilla and Laura is notable for its exclusivity and resistance to male intervention. Carmilla repeatedly frames their bond in terms that exclude all external authority, declaring to Laura: “You are mine, you shall be mine, and you and I are one for ever” (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 264). The language of possession here does not reproduce a conventional heterosexual courtship but instead establishes an autonomous female alliance that exists outside patriarchal structures of kinship and exchange. It is precisely this self-sufficient bond between women that ultimately provokes the intervention of the novella’s paternal figures, who perceive it as a threat requiring eradication. As Sedgwick argues, female homosocial bonds differ fundamentally from male homosocial relations because they are not sharply separated from homosexuality but rather exist along the same continuum:

[A]ll women in our society who promote the interests of other women [...] are “pursuing congruent and closely related activities. Thus the adjective ‘homosocial’ as applied to women’s bonds [...] need not be pointedly dichotomized as against ‘homosexual’; it can intelligibly dominate the entire continuum”. (Sedgwick, 1996., p. 609)

Carmilla’s relationship with Laura exemplifies this continuum by transforming female intimacy into a bond that challenges the patriarchal order and demonstrates how alliances between women can operate independently of male exchange systems.

This tension extends the novella’s treatment of sexuality. vampirism becomes associated not only with the transmission of blood but also with what critics have described as the “contamination” of lesbian desire. The female body is recast as a site of transgressive sexuality rather than a vehicle for heterosexual reproduction. Yet the

text never fully resolves whether this sexuality should be understood as monstrous or natural. Significantly, Carmilla herself challenges the assumptions of the paternal figures who condemn her. When Laura's father invokes divine authority, Carmilla responds by appealing instead to nature, insisting that "all things proceed from Nature" (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 270). Her argument indirectly contests the patriarchal and religious discourse that frames her desire as deviant.

As Signorotti observes, Carmilla's rejection of God reflects her broader refusal to submit to male authority. However, what is most significant is that the novella allows her to articulate this alternative worldview at all. Unlike many nineteenth-century monsters, Carmilla is not merely spoken about; she speaks for herself. Le Fanu grants her moments in which she challenges the ideological assumptions of the male characters who seek to destroy her, creating a counter-discourse that persists throughout the narrative:

Carmilla's inability to accept God as omnipotent extends from her general refusal to include males in her exclusively female kinship systems. Instead, she worships the embodiment of the feminine, Mother Nature, and implies the naturalness of her and Laura's female union. (Signorotti, 1996., 616)

The emergence of the female vampire therefore represents more than the introduction of a new Gothic monster. Carmilla occupies a paradoxical position within the novella: she is simultaneously a figure of contamination and a figure of liberation, a supernatural predator and an embodiment of female autonomy, a monster condemned by the narrative and a character whose desire remains emotionally compelling. It is precisely this unresolved tension that has enabled later readers and writers to reclaim *Carmilla* as a foundational queer text despite the novella's apparent moral condemnation of her.

2.1.1 Carmilla and the Emergence of the Female Threat

The transition to *Carmilla* constitutes a pivotal turning point, transforming the vampire from a Gothic creature into a queer feminine monster through a process of transgressive sexuality and liminality that unsettles patriarchal binaries. Le Fanu reshapes the traditional vampire by foregrounding Carmilla's feminine power and her

seductive sexuality; the novella's sapphic overtones are central to a Gothic strategy that presents vampirism as a vehicle for lesbian desire, thereby destabilizing patriarchal norms. Here, the Gothic is understood as described by Halberstam in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, where it is not merely a literary genre but a technology of monstrosity functioning as a mechanism that "produces" monsters, which in turn act as symbolic condensations of social anxieties. *Skin Shows* expands the study of Gothic horror by reframing monsters not as aberrations of the individual psyche, but as manifestations of broader cultural and social anxieties, enabling a reading of horror that accounts for race, class, sexuality, and gender, rather than a generalized sense of fear or repulsion. Monsters indeed frequently combine several forms of social difference, and in *Carmilla* the feminine monster becomes a proper "totalizing difference", rendering this layering explicit: Carmilla is a female monster in a genre dominated by male vampires, and her femininity is coded as dangerously seductive, her lesbian desire is central in the narration, expressed through physical closeness and emotional fixation, she is exoticized as she comes from a far land, and she moves easily among aristocratic families, infiltrating into domestic spaces. These elements underline how Le Fanu mixes several features of diversities – gender, sexuality, foreignness and class – that combined produce a "composite monster", one which is not monstrous because of a single deviation, but which represents the intersections that Halberstam argues Gothic texts encode (Halberstam, 1995). Within this framework, Le Fanu intertwines lesbianism with racial and cultural alterity, blurring the boundaries between the proper English heroine and the wild, undead Other. Carmilla's desire to transgress gendered boundaries transforms her vampiric appetite into an extroverted expression of the female Other that is both monstrous and desirable. Laura's simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from Carmilla, shaped by the vampire's liminality and abject nature, generates an ambiguity surrounding her figure: Carmilla is neither fully alive nor dead, neither human nor monster. The narrative unfolds through moments of "in-betweenness" and through images of physical thresholds (misty bridges, moonlight, doors), rendering her a fluid figure whose identity resists fixation and instead embodies a queer femininity that challenges the binary opposition between self and other. Ultimately, the fact that attraction prevails over the underlying horror constitutes a form of transgression

which, as theorized within feminist and queer frameworks, positions Carmilla's gaze and her active pursuit of Laura as a usurpation of the male voyeuristic gaze. These elements collectively trace the transition from the folkloric male vampire to a female vampire whose gender and sexuality are marked by ambiguity and fluidity. Although Carmilla remains both a predator and a monster – most visibly in her manifestation as a large black cat – her monstrosity is no longer reducible to physical violence alone. Instead, it becomes intertwined with broader Victorian anxieties surrounding female sexuality, same-sex desire and otherness. It is precisely through this interplay of monstrosity, ambiguity, liminality and destabilization that the narrative encodes Carmilla's vampiric nature, which, for much of the text, is never explicitly named. Throughout the majority of the narration, Carmilla is never deemed a vampire, however, the reader could easily suspect her true nature, as she is described as something dangerous, evil, something other, and Le Fanu gives various hints to suspect her vampirism. Firstly, Carmilla and Laura recognize each other from their common childhood dream, and when Laura sees Carmilla she is stunned by her familiarity, which makes her an uncanny – and therefore suspicious – character. In addition, the moon is at its brightest just before Carmilla appears:

Mademoiselle De Lafontaine [...] now declared that when the moon shone with a light so intense it was well known that it indicated a special spiritual activity. The effect of the full moon in such a state of brilliancy was manifold. It acted on dreams, it acted on lunacy, it acted on nervous people. (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 251)

The nineteenth-century conception of psychology as a discipline studying not only the mind, but also the bridges between human beings and spirits, led to the belief of a connection between psychology and metaphysics, a conflict that persists throughout the whole narration. Laura and her father, however, live in a rational world, they banish the supernatural as a superstition, reflecting the belief system of the nineteenth-century anglophone reader:

‘She is the poor girl who fancied she saw a ghost a fortnight ago, and has been dying ever since, till yesterday, when she expired [...] I hope there is no plague or fever incoming; all this looks very like it’ (Ibid., p. 266)

The believed cause of death of the “poor girl” is a fever known as *oupire*¹⁶, which is the rational explanation given to an inexplicable phenomenon. Carmilla seeks to divert attention from the possible supernatural explanations supporting the rational version of the facts.

Another element that could suggest Carmilla’s vampiric nature is her obscure origins, described when, after the incident, a “hideous black woman” is seen inside the carriage, and the suppositions of the woman being Carmilla’s mother emerge:

Then she described a hideous black woman, with a sort of coloured turban on her head, who was gazing all the time from the carriage window, nodding and grinning derisively towards the ladies, with gleaming eyes and large white eye-balls, and her teeth set as if in fury. (Ibid., p. 257)

The grotesque and racialized description of the unknown woman contributes to an atmosphere of unease and otherness. Her dark appearance, exaggerated facial features, furious expression, and exoticized turban evoke contemporary Victorian associations with foreignness, superstition and occult knowledge often attached to figures such as Romani women, fortune tellers or witches. Within the Gothic imagination, these characteristics mark her as uncanny and potentially demonic, not because the text explicitly identifies her with the devil, but because her physical appearance and behaviour place her outside the boundaries of respectable Victorian femininity and social order. Her ambiguous identity and unexplained connection to Carmilla therefore reinforce the sense that Carmilla originates from a supernatural and morally transgressive world.

All these hints suggest a shift in horror, from a physical predation to an erotic and emotional infiltration. Carmilla is a new figure in literature: femininity is no longer

¹⁶ Archaic variant of the word “vampire” derived from Slavic terms which indicate vampiric entities. Le Fanu uses the word as a synonym for “vampire”, emphasising the folkloric roots of Carmilla.

associated with passivity, the female vampire instead disrupts this conception and represents women as active desiring subjects. As Auerbach (1995, p. 41) suggests, “Carmilla feeds only on women with a hunger inseparable from erotic sympathy”, as a response to Victorian anxieties about the role of women and female sexuality. The conclusion of the novella can be read as an attempt to reassert a male-centred order: the execution scene functions to eradicate the queer monster while simultaneously foregrounding the possibility of reinscribing her within a patriarchal framework. The transgression embodied by Carmilla illustrates how the exceeding of established limits ultimately serves to reaffirm them; in this case, the destabilization of patriarchal boundaries culminates in her execution, which symbolically restores the Victorian social order. Yet, the vampire persists as a residual, indeterminate liminal presence that continues to unsettle gendered hierarchies. This interpretation of the text’s conclusion, which interweaves gender, sexuality, and monstrosity, underscores transgression as its central thematic concern.

2.1.2 *Carmilla and the Subversion of Victorian Domestic Ideology*

Carmilla’s same-sex desire and her expression of female sexuality, as noted above, constitute a transgression that renders her a subversive figure within Victorian culture. However, this transgression need not be interpreted solely as a threat destined to be defeated; it may also be read as an alternative to the Victorian patriarchal system, allowing Le Fanu’s text to be understood as an implicit critique of the ideal of the “Angel in the House”. From this perspective, the vampire emerges as a parasitic figure who infiltrates prohibited forms of intimacy and destabilizes Victorian norms, while remaining impossible to destroy.

Where Victorian femininity was codified in terms of passivity, purity, and domesticity, Carmilla is defined precisely through the inversion of these attributes; rather than merely violating the system, she exposes it as constructed and inherently unstable. The “Angel in the House”¹⁷ was a Victorian cultural ideal which celebrated women as moral guardians of the domestic sphere. According to prevailing social norms, women were expected to embody purity and self-sacrifice, devoting themselves entirely to the care of husband, children, and home. This conception can be traced back to the *donna*

¹⁷ The expression derives from the narrative poem *The Angel in the House* by Coventry Patmore, in which the ideal wife is described as devoted and morally pure. The text rapidly became a model for female behaviour, reflecting the patriarchal values of the Victorian Age.

angelicata of the Italian *Dolce Stil Novo*, exemplified by figures such as Francesco Petrarca's Laura and Dante Alighieri's Beatrice, whose idealized representations of femininity informed later artistic traditions, including those of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This Victorian ideal can be further understood, following Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, not as a natural expression of femininity, but as a regulatory performance, sustained through repetition and social enforcement (Butler, 1990).

Carmilla contrasts with the Victorian "Angel in the House" by embodying female sexual agency, mobility, and refusal of domestic containment; her exclusive bond with Laura assaults patriarchal law and resists marriage rather than supporting it. She does not submit to male authority, refuses to disclose her lineage and instead claims Laura as her own. While the Victorian angelic woman was supposed to be passive, self-sacrificing, desexualised and marriage-oriented, Carmilla is situated in an opposite position, as she embodies an active, pursuing subject, sexually autonomous and non-reproductive because of her lesbian desire. For these reasons, Carmilla could be identified as a classic feminine monster, a figure that has been present in Western culture since ancient times as the opposite of the angel woman¹⁸. However, Le Fanu makes a step further, allowing his character to reclaim desire and agency and avoiding framing her merely as a "monstrous inversion". Carmilla's refusal of passivity and her active pursuit of desire can be read from a Butlerian perspective as a failure – or refusal – of a prescribed performance, exposing the instability of the norms that define acceptable femininity (Butler, 1990): Carmilla is not simply the negative of the angel, she is an alternative model of femininity.

Moreover, the rejection of the Victorian marriage implies that it is replaced by an intimate female bond not organized around male exchange, reproduction or domestic subjection. While heteronormative Victorian marriage is presented as a structure in which women are exchanged by men, defined through heterosexual reproduction and positioned as dutiful, passive partners within patriarchy, Carmilla disrupts this structure, and her lesbian desire functions exactly as an alternative relational system. Her relationship with Laura is exclusive rather than socially sanctioned, female-centred, desiring instead of reproductive, and anti-domestic, since it does not lead to

¹⁸ Some examples of feminine monsters in literature are Circe or Meduza in Greek mythology and Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

marriage, motherhood or incorporation into the household order (Signorotti, 1996). This reading overcomes the Victorian kinship that treated women as “valuables” exchanged between men, as analysed by Lévi-Strauss, arguing that the bond between Carmilla and Laura not only creates a closed female circuit, but it also bypasses patriarchy, refusing reproduction and resisting commodification. Rather than constituting a deviation from a natural heterosexual order, Carmilla’s desire can be read, in Butler’s framework, as exposing heterosexuality itself as a regulatory norm instead of an ontological given (Butler, 1990).

Lastly, vampirism can be reframed no longer as just a predatory relationship, but more as a parasitic infiltration, both in a literal sense, as it survives by entering the victim’s body, taking blood and feeding on that person’s life to sustain its own existence, and metaphorically, as the vampire becomes a figure for forms of exploitative dependence, parasitic class relations, unrepressed female sexuality and sexual relationships deemed subversive or perverse (Signorotti, 1996, p. 609). In addition, nineteenth-century discourse associated female vampirism with the “contamination” of lesbianism and with the image of women draining the energy and emotional resources of her companions. Carmilla’s intrusion extends beyond her role as a vampire: she penetrates the domestic sphere, forms an intimate bond with Laura, and thereby functions from within the very system she disrupts rather than from an external position. In doing so, she stands in opposition to the ordered and regulated structures of patriarchy, presenting herself as a fluid, adaptive, and invasive presence. Consequently, her subversion does not take the form of external destruction but of an internal erosion that gradually undermines the system from within. The idea of the vampire as a parasite who infiltrates through intimacy works especially because of the sites in which Carmilla operates (the bedroom, the body, dreams), and while Victorian patriarchy regulates reproduction, marriage and the division of the public sphere from the private one, Carmilla creates unauthorized intimacy collapsing boundaries such as friendship and desire. In this sense, Carmilla does not merely transgress Victorian gender norms but exposes, in Butlerian terms, their performative and therefore unstable nature, opening the possibility of alternative configurations of desire and identity (Butler, 1990). The intimacy she displays is dangerous within Victorian logic, but can be also read as liberating.

From this perspective on vampiric infiltration, the novella's conclusion may be read not as the definitive destruction of Carmilla but rather as the enactment of an excessive ritual whose efficacy remains incomplete. Carmilla endures in memory, and the continuity of the female lineage is preserved through Laura's survival. In this light, the vampire emerges as structurally irrepressible.

To conclude, Carmilla embodies at the same time a symptom of Victorian anxiety, a critique of its gender system and an alternative model of female desire and relation; the vampire here exposes the instability of heterosexuality, domesticity and female passivity while simultaneously imagining non-patriarchal forms of intimacy.

2.2 Feminist Critic Reception: From the “Deadly Woman” to the Emancipated Figure

The critical reception of *Carmilla* reflects a broader shift from nineteenth-century medical and patriarchal constructions of female desire as pathological toward contemporary feminist and queer readings that reinterpret monstrosity and hysteria as sites of resistance to normative gender and sexual structures.

2.2.1 Freud's Analysis of Hysteria: Carmilla as a Pathological Threat

Nineteenth-century hysteria functioned both as a medical diagnosis and as a broader cultural narrative about femininity, in which female desire was framed as excessive, deviant, or unintelligible. Within this framework, female vampirism emerges as a literary expression of medical discourse on hysteria. In *Carmilla*, vampiric symptoms are portrayed in terms associated with hysteria, including nervousness, breathlessness, coughing, and aphonia. As Kathleen Costello-Sullivan observes, citing Tamar Heller:

[T]he thematics of appetite in ‘Carmilla’ – which [can be linked] to medical discourses about the related female maladies of hysteria, anorexia, and chlorosis – encode this fear of the devouring, sexually voracious woman lurking beneath the docile surface of the devoured woman, her apparent victim. (Costello-Sullivan, 2013, p. xx)

The female vampire thus becomes associated not only with disease and contamination, but also with anxieties surrounding female appetite, sexuality and bodily autonomy.

Le Fanu's novella itself repeatedly frames vampirism through the language of disease, diagnoses and contagion, thereby reinforcing the connection between female vampirism and contemporary medical discourse. Rather than presenting vampirism exclusively as a supernatural phenomenon, the narrative frequently adopts a quasi-clinical vocabulary that encourages readers to interpret it as a condition affecting the body and mind. Carmilla herself employs medical terminology when she describes vampirism as "this disease that invades the country" and insists upon its natural character: "Nature. All things proceed from Nature – don't they?" (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 270). Her statement is significant because it reframes vampirism not as demonic aberration but as a phenomenon embedded within the natural order, echoing contemporary attempts to explain forms of bodily and sexual difference through scientific and medical frameworks.

The same tendency appears in the General's account of Bertha's death, where vampirism is explicitly described as an epidemic condition. Recounting the events surrounding the niece's illness, he explains that the disease, which was then very prevalent in that part of Styria – "which the peasants called *oupire*" (Ibid., p.282) – was more than a simple disease:

'My beloved child [...] was now growing rapidly worse. The physician who attended her had failed to produce the slightest impression upon her disease. [...] The doctor from Gratz [...] told me that he could not be mistaken; no natural disease exhibited the same symptoms. [...] He said that the patient was suffering from the visits of a vampire!' (Ibid., pp. 308-10)

The folkloric vampire is thus translated into a language of prevalence, transmission and diagnosis. Significantly, the term *oupire* does not function merely as a supernatural label but as a local name for a disease that spreads through the community, suggesting an epidemiological understanding of vampirism. Through this strategy, Le Fanu places the vampire at the intersection of folklore and medical knowledge, transforming a supernatural threat into an object of observation and classification.

The structure of Laura's narrative further reinforces this medicalized framework. Her condition is described through a progressive catalogue of symptoms that resemble a

nineteenth-century case history: weakness, loss of appetite, disturbed sleep, nervous exhaustion and increasing physical debility. Laura recalls that she had no longer any appetite and experienced a languor that increased hourly, claiming that “every morning I felt the same lassitude, and a languor weighed upon me all day” (Ibid., p. 281), while doctors and male authorities repeatedly attempt to identify the source of her illness. The framing device involving Doctor Hesselius strengthens this clinical dimension, presenting Laura’s account as a document worthy of scientific scrutiny. Although the novella ultimately attributes these symptoms to vampiric predation, their detailed recording mirrors contemporary medical case studies concerned with nervous disorders and female illness.

At the same time, Le Fanu complicates any straightforward medical explanation. When Carmilla’s tomb is finally opened, the vampire’s body displays none of the expected signs of decay, as previously mentioned in the chapter. The scene simultaneously invites and frustrates scientific investigation: the vampire’s body is examined with almost forensic precision, yet the evidence ultimately exceeds the explanatory limits of medical knowledge. Vampirism is therefore positioned within a liminal space between pathology and the supernatural, where the language of diagnosis attempts to contain a phenomenon that continually escapes classification. By embedding vampirism within discourses of disease, symptomatology and bodily examination, Le Fanu anticipates later medical and psychoanalytic attempts to interpret female desire through diagnostic frameworks. The novella’s representation of vampirism as both a pathological condition and an irreducibly mysterious phenomenon provides an important context for understanding the relationship between *Carmilla* and the nineteenth-century discourse of hysteria that would later be systematized by Freud.

In this regard, when read alongside Sigmund Freud’s analysis of Dora, as presented in *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905 [1901]), the novella can be seen to participate in a broader nineteenth-century construction of hysteria as a specifically female condition. Both hysteria and vampirism thus depict femininity as unstable, permeable, and contagious, positioning the female body as a surface upon which male-authored medical and literary knowledge is inscribed. Freud frames his analysis of Dora’s case through mechanisms of repression, misrecognition, and interpretative

authority over the female voice, producing a tension between what Dora says and what he interprets – a tension that contemporary psychoanalytic and feminist critics have read as an instance of interpretative appropriation rather than clinical insight –, and attributing hysteria specifically to women. Heller highlights how physicians of the era associated female sexual deviation with pathological hysteria: “Carmilla is a masquerade [...] linked in medical discourses with the hysteric, whom doctors distrust, because her illness may be a cover for [...] her sexual immorality” (Heller as cited in Oki, 2022, p. 17).

As Freud analysed Dora’s case, a parallel with Doctor Hesselius as a medical correspondent who diagnosed Laura can be drawn, even though, in the case of *Carmilla*, the story is narrated by Laura, who writes her own account instead of receiving a medical report. Freud’s examination of Dora also foregrounds the role of dreams, suggesting that a recurring childhood dream may operate as the expression of a “wish” that re-emerges whenever an unconscious conflict is activated:

The dream sets up a connection between those two factors – the event during childhood and the event of the present day – and it endeavours to re-shape the present on the model of the remote past. For the wish which created the dream always springs from the period of childhood; and it is continually trying to summon childhood back into reality and to correct the present day by the measure of childhood. (Freud, 2013, p. 71)

The repetition of such dreams points to a fragmented self not fully assimilated into consciousness. Dreams likewise play a significant role in *Carmilla*: as previously noted, Laura first encounters Carmilla in a childhood dream, and “[t]he dream itself [...] creates a link between the childhood experience and the present experience” (Ibid., p. 60). Laura’s first dream, therefore, can be read, through a Freudian lens, as operating in a similar way as Dora’s: the dream embodies Laura’s repressed wish for a mother-figure and for a same-sex affection, and the function of the dream connects her childhood signed by the longing for the mother and her present-day homosexual attraction:

The first occurrence in my existence, which produced a terrible impression upon my mind, [...] was one of the very earliest incidents of my life which I can recollect. [...] I can't have been more than six years old, when one night I awoke. [...] I saw a solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed. It was that of a young lady who was kneeling, with her hands under the coverlet. [...] She caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling. (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 246)

Furthermore, by projecting this wish onto a vampire, the narrative literalizes the medical tendency to pathologize female intimacy, and the erotic bond becomes a source of hysterical symptoms. However, contemporary feminist readings reinterpret this dynamic not as pathology but as a space of resistance to heteronormative regulation, where the “symptom” becomes a coded expression of desire rather than its distortion.

Through an authorial shift, the text demonstrates the dual existence of a conscious narration, embodied by Laura's writing, and an unconscious vampiric desire, embodied by Carmilla, a structure that mirrors Freud's “talking cure”, through which dreams and reminiscences are used to reconstruct fragmented hysteria: Freud recognizes hysteria symptoms in Dora and interprets them as expressions of unfulfilled desires. For this reason, Dora can be associated with Laura, as they are both adolescents navigating the transition to adult identity. In addition, Freud collocates the same-sex attraction in the period of puberty, and at the same time he situates it within the neurotic spectrum:

[I]n boys and girls who have reached puberty clear signs of attraction towards their own sex are normally observed. [...] we shall also expect to find a stronger disposition to homosexuality in the nature of a neurotic. (Freud as cited in Ibid., p. 23)

According to this formulation, which reflects late nineteenth-century assumptions about scientific discourse on sexuality rather than an inherent link between same-sex desire and pathology, the patient's hysterical symptoms correspond to the expression

of her affection for a temporary absent lover, which is what happens to Laura in *Carmilla*. Such a claim reflects the assumptions of nineteenth-century sexual science; by contrast, Sedgwick argues that same-sex desire constituted a fundamental structure of relationality rather than a pathological deviation, thereby challenging the Freudian alignment between homosexuality and neurosis (Sedgwick as cited in Signorotti).

As Oki underlines at the end of the essay,

The female narrator, the protagonist Laura, does not die at the end. Rather, it can be interpreted that she is on the way to physical and mental recovery. In fact, the experienced story is written from the perspective of the female narrator to reconstruct her trauma that is repressed in the unconscious. (Ibid., p. 24)

Female vampirism operates within hysteria discourse as both a symptom, that is, the pathological, somatic manifestations, and a critique, built through the female narrator's ability to reestablish identity through storytelling. Where Dora aborts therapy and remains a fragmented *nothing*, Laura reconstructs her identity by authoring the narrative of her doppelgänger, thereby achieving an emancipated subject-position absent in Freud's case, where the female voice remains mediated and ultimately contained within the analyst's interpretative framework. In this sense, Laura's narrative agency aligns more closely with contemporary feminist and queer reinterpretations of hysteria and desire, which, following Butler and Sedgwick, relocate meaning from pathology to performance and relationality.

The contrast between Dora and Laura highlights how Freud's case illuminates the mechanism of adolescent female identity crisis in *Carmilla* while also revealing Laura's agency beyond Dora's therapeutic failure. Thus, while a Freudian reading illuminates how hysteria structured the intelligibility of female desire in the nineteenth century, contemporary approaches shift the focus from repression to representation, emphasizing narrative agency over diagnostic containment.

2.2.2 The "Monstrous Woman" as a Symbol of Sexual and Social Freedom

Although *Carmilla* has frequently been read through discourses that associate female same-sex desire with pathology and deviance, later feminist and queer criticism instead reconsider the vampire as a figure capable of destabilizing normative categories of

gender, sexuality and identity. *Carmilla* thus became a pivotal text for later queer interpretations for several reasons, including its construction of lesbian desire, its portrayal of the vampire as a queer figure suspended outside conventional notions of time and identity, and its creation of a space for alternative, non-normative forms of intimacy.

In this context, *Gender Trouble* provides a valuable theoretical framework through which to read *Carmilla*, particularly in relation to gender performativity, queer desire, and the instability of identity. In the preface to their work, Butler admits they sometimes interpret the concept of gender as simply a self-invention or that the psychological significance of a gendered performance can be immediately inferred from its outward expression. Gender is in fact not something innate, but rather something performed through repeated acts that create the illusion of stable identity, and despite “[t]he presumption of a binary gender system [that] implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender and sex” (Butler, 1999, p. 10), gender and sex are actually to be considered as no distinct at all. Butler exposes the contradiction of conceiving gender as mirroring sex or being restricted by it by claiming that:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (Ibid.)

Butler assumes that it is problematic to understand gender simply as the cultural interpretation of biological sex, as sex itself is already shaped by gendered assumptions. Rather than being merely a cultural meaning imposed upon a pre-existing biological reality, gender should be understood as the system through which the categories of sex are themselves produced and defined.

As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive”, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts. (Ibid., p. 11)

Dismantling the idea of a stable gender core, Butler therefore defines gender as something in constant evolution, something which is never fixed and works through repetition. In this sense, *Carmilla* embodies an identity which never quite settles, appearing under different names and histories throughout the whole narration, eventually revealed toward the final chapters:

In the particular instance of which I have given you a relation, Mircalla seemed to be limited to a name which, if not her real one, should at least reproduce, without the omission or addition of a single letter, those, as we say, anagrammatically, which compose it. *Carmilla* did this; so did *Millarca*. (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 317)

Furthermore, *Carmilla* represents a kind of femininity that feels exaggerated and theatrical: her languid gestures, the intense emotional expressions and shifting identities can be read as a kind of “performance” of femininity that exposes how constructed and stylized it is, one that perfectly fits Butler’s claim that “gender reality is created through sustained social performances” (Butler, 1999, p. 179). This is particularly evident in *Carmilla*’s theatrical emotional intimacy with Laura:

“I have been in love with no one, and never shall,” she whispered, “unless it should be with you.”

How beautiful she looked in the moonlight!

Shy and strange was the look with which she quickly hid her face in my neck and hair. [...] Her soft cheek was glowing against mine. “Darling, darling,” she murmured, “I live in you; and you would die for me, I love you so.” (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 273-4)

Another element that strictly relates *Carmilla* to *Gender Trouble* is the disruption of heteronormativity through the homoerotic relationship between *Carmilla* and Laura, which is central in the narrative. Butler detaches from the idea that heterosexuality is the default structure organizing gender, moving a critique toward structuralism, which

believed in “the naturalization of both heterosexuality and masculine sexual agency” (Butler, 1999, p. 55). They start by highlighting the problematic that compulsory heterosexuality and binary structures constitute:

The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practice of heterosexual desire. (Ibid., p.30)

Additionally, they contend that gender identity is socially constituted through compulsory heterosexuality, producing what they define as a “unity” of gender. The disruption of this system therefore requires an act of subversion. In *Carmilla*, nineteenth-century heteronormative norms are destabilized through Carmilla’s desire, which does not conform to the conventional male–female dynamic but instead queers it. From a Butlerian lens, this reveals how fragile heteronormativity is: it has to be constantly reinforced, in the novella specifically through male authority figures who seek to destroy Carmilla. The intimate and explicitly charged desire expressed by Carmilla generates a sense of confusion in Laura, who finds herself torn between attraction and unease, even though in the end she herself claims that “the sense of attraction immensely prevailed”, adding that “[s]he interested and won me; she was so beautiful and so incredibly engaging” (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 261) Carmilla’s body itself becomes a site of both fascination and horror that displays a desire portrayed as seductive but also pathological and dangerous. The effects of homosexual attraction are clearly described as an illness through Laura’s bodily decline:

For some nights I slept profoundly; but still every morning I felt the same lassitude, and a languor weighed upon me all day. I felt myself a changed girl. A strange melancholy that I would not have interrupted. Dim thoughts of death began to open, and an idea that I was slowly sinking took gentle [...] possession of me. (Ibid., p. 281)

The symptoms continue especially through Laura's exhaustion, until the illness becomes medically observable, when the doctor examines Laura and discovers "a small blue spot, about the size of the tip of [Laura's] little finger" (Ibid., p. 289). Le Fanu also makes evidence that Laura's illness is strictly connected to Carmilla's presence, as after spending time with her, she describes her symptoms as follows: "I had grown pale, my eyes were dilated and darkened underneath, and the languor which I had long felt began to display itself in my countenance" (Ibid., p. 282), whereas toward the end of the story Laura herself claims that "[t]he disappearance of Carmilla was followed by the discontinuance of my nightly sufferings" (Ibi., p. 315).

Butler is particularly interested in the ways in which social norms regulate bodies and identities and desires are considered intelligible and legitimate, while marginalizing or pathologizing those that deviate from heterosexual expectations. In this sense, the representation of Carmilla's desire as both seductive and contagious reflects the cultural anxiety surrounding forms of sexuality that exceed normative gender structures. Laura's bodily deterioration therefore becomes not only a gothic symptom of vampirism, but also a metaphor for the perceived threat that queer desire poses to the social order.

The violent effort by the General and the group of authoritative men to eliminate Carmilla can be read as society's attempt to regulate and erase non-normative sexuality. From a Butlerian perspective, this reaction exemplifies the mechanisms through which heteronormative society preserves its stability by punishing identities and desires that challenge binary gender relations. Carmilla's destruction ultimately functions as an attempt to restore normative order and reassert the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable forms of sexuality:

The grave of the Countess Mircalla was opened; and the General and my father recognised each his perfidious and beautiful guest, in the face now disclosed to view. [...] The body, therefore, in accordance with the ancient practice, was raised, and a sharp stake driven through the heart of the vampire. [...] Then the head was struck off, and a torrent of blood flowed from the severed neck. The body and the head were next placed on a pile of wood, and reduced to ashes. (Ibid.)

The vampire's death therefore symbolizes the suppression of queer subversion by patriarchal authority, even as the novella continues to preserve the unsettling presence of Carmilla within Laura's memory. Butler further argues that identities which fail to conform to dominant social norms are frequently rendered unintelligible, excluded from what society recognizes as legitimate or "human" forms of existence. Within this framework, subjects who challenge the coherence of binary gender and compulsory heterosexuality are often represented as deviant, unnatural or threatening. Carmilla can be read precisely through this lens, as her fluid identity and homoerotic desire place her outside the boundaries of nineteenth-century social intelligibility. Her refusal to participate in normative heterosexual structures make her a figure that resists categorization, and it is precisely this instability that transforms her into a monstrous presence within the narrative. The vampire therefore becomes a symbolic embodiment of anxieties surrounding identities that cannot be assimilated into dominant cultural frameworks. Through a Butlerian lens, it can be argued that Carmilla's monstrosity should not be interpreted as an expression of inherent evil, but rather as a projection of cultural fears concerning forms of gender and sexuality that destabilize normative expectations.

Finally, Carmilla's repeated "returns" – through history, under different identities – mirror Butler's idea of iterability, that is, identity is constructed through repetition, and it is never fully original. In the preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler claims that "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual" (Butler, 1999, p. xv), implying that gender identity is continuously produced through the repeated performance of socially regulated behaviours, gestures and norms. These repeated acts create the illusion of a stable identity over time, reinforcing the appearance that gender is essential or biologically grounded.:

[T]he action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meaning already socially established. (Ibid., p. 178)

Carmilla is herself not a singular stable self but a series of reappearances and reenactments, making her a kind of Gothic embodiment of Butler's theory, according to which identity is a copy without an original. As previously discussed, Carmilla appears throughout the narrative under different names and identities, which are suggested through various clues within the text and become clearer toward the end of the story, as in the following example:

“She called herself Carmilla?” asked the General, still agitated.

“Carmilla, yes,” I answered.

“Aye,” he said; “that is Millarca. That is the same person who long ago was called Mircalla, Countess Karnstein. (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 312)

The revelation that Carmilla, Mircalla and Millarca are in fact the same individual occurs in the final chapter, during the vampire's execution. Nevertheless, traces of her persist within Laura's memory, transforming the figure of Carmilla into a kind of immortal presence that continually reinvents itself.

Reading *Carmilla* through *Gender Trouble* turns the novella into more than a Gothic horror story: it becomes a dramatization of how gender and sexuality are constructed, policed and destabilized. Carmilla herself can be seen as a figure who exposes the performative, fragile nature of gender norms, even as the narrative ultimately tries to contain and destroy her.

Another feminist theoretical text that can be helpful to provide a contemporary reading of *Carmilla* is Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine*, in which the author presents a feminist, psychoanalytic exploration of how women, especially their bodies and sexuality, are constructed as monsters in horror films and culture, using the term “monstrous-feminine” to emphasize that gender itself is central to how monstrosity is built. Creed suggests that horror repeatedly casts feminine bodily functions and reproductive power as abject, frightening and threatening to patriarchal symbolic order.

Carmilla therefore can be read as a quintessential embodiment of what Creed defines as the “monstrous-feminine”, since her monstrosity derives specifically from her gender and sexuality rather than from simple violence or supernatural evil. She is

frightening not simply because she is a vampire, but because she embodies forms of femininity that threaten the patriarchal order, such as sexual autonomy, erotic intimacy between women and resistance to male authority. Creed's central thesis appears in the introduction to *The Monstrous-Feminine*, in which she claims that "[a]ll human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (Creed, 1993, p. 1), underlining the universality of such conception of monstrosity concerning the female gender, and adding that "[m]ost societies also have myths about the female vampire, a creature who sucks the blood of helpless, often willing victims and transforms them into her own kind" (Ibid.). Creed then argues that the monstrous-feminine emerges when femininity is associated with sexual excess, bodily permeability and disruption of social and symbolic boundaries, and Carmilla fulfils all three aspects. She repeatedly expresses desire in explicitly sexual language, embracing Laura, gazing at her intensely, and declaring feelings that exceed conventional female friendship. Drawing on psychoanalysis, particularly on Freud and Kristeva, Creed then contends that horror frequently encodes anxieties surrounding female sexual autonomy, reproduction and bodily difference:

Freud argued that woman terrifies because she appears to be castrated, man's fear of castration has, in my view, led him to construct another monstrous phantasy – that of woman as castrator. Here woman's monstrousness is linked more directly to questions of sexual desire than to the area of reproduction. (Ibid., p. 7)

Creed draws not only on Freud's theory of castration anxiety, but also on Kristeva's theory of abjection – defined by Kristeva herself as something that "does not respect borders, positions, rules, [something which] disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva as cited in Ibid., p. 8) – to argue that patriarchal culture associates the female body with instability, excess and threat.

In *Carmilla*, the vampire's threat lies not merely in her predatory nature but in her erotic attraction to Laura. Carmilla repeatedly expresses desire in explicitly sensual language: "[Carmilla's] hot lips travelled along my cheek in kisses; and she would

whisper, almost in sobs, ‘You are mine, you *shall* be mine, you and I are one for ever’” (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 264); also Laura frequently describes Carmilla through tactile and sensual imagery: “[s]ometimes 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” (Ibid.). Her sexuality operates outside heterosexual and patriarchal structures, making her dangerous in the context in which the novella was written, and her power emerges through intimacy, seduction and emotional attachment, aligning with Creed’s argument that the monstrous feminine often represents fears surrounding female desire that cannot be controlled by men. Carmilla is unmarried, sexually autonomous and resistant to male authority figures; her presence therefore destabilizes the domestic sphere, transforming the supposedly safe space of the castle into a site of erotic anxiety and corruption.

Creed defines the vampire as a “creature of evil because she/he lives on blood drawn from a wound that marks the surface of the skin. Like all abject figures, the vampire is both terrifying and seductive” (Creed, 1993, p. 60), but then she differentiates the male vampire from the female vampire, identifying the latter as one of the clearest cinematic and literary examples of the monstrous-feminine, as, unlike male vampires, she is not simply a predator, but she is also sexually seductive, combining eroticism with death and turning desire into a source of horror:

The female vampire’s world signifies darkness, the undead, moon, the tomb/womb, blood, oral sadism, bodily wounds and violation of the law. The world of the living, frequently represented by a patriarchal figure [...] versed in vampire lore, signifies light, life, the sun, destruction of the tomb, blood taboos, the stake/phallus, the unviolated body, the enforcement of the law. (Ibid., p. 61)

Carmilla exemplifies the fusion of sexuality, penetration and consumption that, according to Creed, characterizes the “monstrous-feminine vampire”: her attacks are intimate, slow and erotic, not violent or animalistic; she targets young women, forming emotional and sensual bonds before feeding, and Laura experiences her presence with a mixture of pleasure and fear. Creed suggests that this disconnects female sexuality

from heterosexual marriage and reproduction, and frames women as desiring subjects rather than passive objects, and for this reason “[t]he most persistent threat to the institution of heterosexuality [...] comes from the female vampire who preys on other women” (Ibid.). The exchange of blood symbolically replaces heterosexual reproduction, as instead of producing life through patriarchal family structures, Carmilla reproduces herself through female-to-female transmission, creating an alternative lineage outside male participation. Drawing on Kristeva’s concept of abjection, Creed analyses the female vampire in relation to lesbianism, arguing that “the lesbian is associated with a number of forms of abjection” (Ibid., p. 65), thereby connecting vampirism and femininity through the symbolism of blood. Creed repeatedly emphasizes that bodily fluids become horrifying because they blur the boundaries of the clean and proper body, together with other elements that she considers forms of abjection central to the construction of the monster, such as sexual immorality; corporal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest (Ibid., p.10). Creed then comes to the following conclusion:

The ultimate in abjection is the corpse. The body protects itself from bodily wastes [...] by ejecting these things from the body, [...] at the same time extricating itself from them and from the place where they fall, so that it might continue to live. (Ibid.)

Blood is central to this abjection; Carmilla’s feeding ritual transforms blood into a site of contamination, intimacy and corporeal dissolution, and Laura’s gradual weakening reflects the psychic destabilization caused by Carmilla’s presence. The eroticized exchange of blood also evokes menstrual symbolism and fears surrounding female corporeality. Creed argues that patriarchal horror frequently associates the female body with leakage, excess and impurity:

According to Kristeva, woman’s blood has been represented within patriarchal discourses as more abject than man’s for at least three reasons. First, woman’s menstrual blood threatens ‘the identity of each sex in the face of sexual

difference'. Second, woman's blood points to the fertile nature of the female body and bears witness to woman's alliance with the natural world. Third, woman's blood, which symbolizes birth and life, reminds man of his capacity, even willingness, to shed blood, to murder. (Ibid., p. 73)

Carmilla's blood-drinking literalizes men's anxieties: "[t]he female vampire is abject because she disrupts identity and order; driven by her lust for blood, she does not respect the dictates of the law which set down the rules of proper sexual conduct" (Ibid., p. 61).

Another element described as profoundly abject is the mother's womb, a "mysterious black hole [...] which threatens to give birth to equally horrific offspring as well as threatening to incorporate everything in its path" (Ibid., p. 49), which situates the mother as a figure of terrifying generative power, called by Creed the "archaic mother". Although Carmilla is not literally maternal, she still participates in this symbolic framework because she possesses a form of reproductive power independent of men. Moreover, through blood exchange, she drains vitality while simultaneously reproducing vampire existence, and her relation to Laura resembles a parasitic bond that challenges Laura's autonomy and identity: Laura's attraction to Carmilla constantly involves passivity, surrender and dissolution of self, all dynamics Creed associates with the "archaic mother". The threat is not motherhood itself, but female power over life and vitality, a core feature of the monstrous-feminine. In this sense, the most relevant aspect in *Carmilla* is that the female vampire reproduces herself without male participation: this is deeply threatening within patriarchal logic because it suggests an alternative economy of life, desire, and continuity outside heterosexual reproduction, making the autonomous female generative power the true problem for a male-centred system.

Creed indeed claims that the monstrous-feminine often encodes male anxiety about female sexuality that does not require men. Her theory of the monstrous feminine provides a strong framework for reading same-sex desire as culturally constructed horror, and it explains how patriarchal narratives often demonize forms of female sexuality that evade male control. Carmilla's affection for Laura repeatedly exceeds the boundaries of acceptable Victorian female intimacy. As previously examined,

Carmilla's affection is framed as both loving and lethal, while Laura's pleasure and attraction are treated as dangerous symptoms. The declarations of love and emotional possessiveness create a homoerotic subtext that Victorian readers would likely have recognized as transgressive, aligning with Creed's claim that horror frequently punishes female sexual excess as it disrupts patriarchal order. She discusses female monstrosity as follows:

woman transforms into a monster when she is sexually and emotionally unfulfilled. She seeks revenge on society, particularly the heterosexual nuclear family, because of her lack, her symbolic castration. (Ibid., p. 67)

Creed argues that patriarchal horror texts punish forms of femininity that are autonomous, self-pleasuring and non-reproductive. In Le Fanu's text, Carmilla offers Laura an alternative form of intimacy that excludes patriarchal authority entirely, and that therefore needs to be punished.

The destruction of Carmilla ultimately functions as what Creed describes as the reassertion of patriarchal order; horror narratives frequently conclude with the elimination of the monstrous feminine in order to restore symbolic stability. Carmilla's death is therefore ideologically significant. After male authorities have diagnosed vampirism in Carmilla through their medicalized and rationalized knowledge, her body is penetrated, dismembered and destroyed. The violent staking, decapitation and burning of Carmilla's body can be interpreted as an attempt to eradicate not only vampirism but also the threat of female sexual autonomy. This eradication reasserts male control over female bodies, eliminates queer desire and restores heterosexual, patriarchal normalcy. Creed argues that the monstrous feminine must often be symbolically contained because she exposes the fragility of patriarchal structures. Carmilla's punishment becomes a ritual purification of deviant femininity: she must die not because she kills, but because she desires wrongly. Male authorities orchestrate this destruction: Laura's father, General Spielsdorf, priests and vampire hunters unite to eliminate Carmilla, and Laura survives only after the vampire is destroyed, suggesting that acceptable femininity can exist only once transgressive female desire has been suppressed.

To conclude, Carmilla is monstrous because she represents what femininity might become if freed from patriarchal limits: sexually active, emotionally intense, oriented toward other women and resistant to regulation. Her monstrosity is therefore ideological, not biological.

2.3 Female Desire and Patriarchal Control in *Carmilla* and *Dracula*

Dracula by Bram Stoker was published twenty-five years after *Carmilla*, in 1897, and he was almost certainly familiar with Le Fanu's work when composing the novel. Nevertheless, several significant differences between the two texts should be emphasized in order to understand how each negotiates female sexuality, patriarchal authority and social anxiety.

Firstly, *Carmilla* employs a single first-person narrator, Laura, whereas *Dracula* is narrated through multiple textual forms – letters, diaries, telegrams, and newspaper clippings. The former is framed as a case history edited for Doctor Hesselius, while the latter presents itself as a compiled documentary archive. These narrative structures reflect different ideological projects; Laura's personal account remains subjective, intimate and unresolved; even after Carmilla's destruction, she continues to "hears the light step of Carmilla" (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 319) in her reveries, *Dracula*, by contrast, constructs what Gelder describes as a "textually dense narrative, written from a number of perspectives or 'points of view', which brings together a multiplicity of discursive fields" (Gelder, 1993, p. 65). The novel ultimately closes with Jonathan Harker's retrospective note written seven years later, symbolically restoring narrative and social order.

The most relevant comparison, however, concerns the two vampire protagonists themselves: Count Dracula and Carmilla. Carmilla is a female vampire – beautiful, languid, seductive and emotionally obsessive – who preys on young women. Gelder describes her as follows:

Carmilla is 'languid', 'apathetic', sleeping well into afternoon – yet highly sexed, obsessive. Her behaviour is 'queer' enough to make Laura wonder at one point if she is a boy in disguise – Laura decides, however, that her 'languor' is precisely what distinguishes her as female, not male. (Ibid., p.60)

Count Dracula, on the other hand, is represented as male, ancient, intellectually superior and politically threatening: a centuries-old warrior-nobleman associated with invasion, corruption and foreignness rather than intimate seduction. While Carmilla's threat emerges from emotional and erotic proximity, Dracula embodies imperial and social anxieties connected to degeneration and infiltration.

Le Fanu situates his narrative within a remote Austrian province where women are permitted a degree of sexual and emotional autonomy largely absent from Victorian social structures. Men are repeatedly displaced to the margins of the narrative: they are powerless, incapable of understanding the mysterious "female malady", and unable to exchange women as objects within patriarchal kinship systems. Laura and Carmilla's relationship therefore "defies the traditional structures of kinship by which men regulate the exchange of women to promote male bounding" (Signorotti, 1996, p. 607), and the novella allows Carmilla not only to speak but also to challenge the male interpretation of her as "unnatural" (Gelder, 1993).

Stoker's novel, by contrast, systematically seeks to repossess and regulate the female body: the Crew of Light (Van Helsing, Harker, Seward, Holmwood and Morris) ultimately restores patriarchal order. Lucy Westenra, whose sexuality becomes increasingly expressive and transgressive, is violently destroyed, whereas Mina Harker, characterized by duty, rationality and self-sacrifice, is preserved. The opposition between Lucy and Mina thus reflects the novel's moral division between dangerous female desire and acceptable femininity. As Signorotti argues:

Surprisingly, it took twenty-five years for a strong reaction to [Le Fanu's] demolition of male authority. It took a writer experiencing sexual anxiety in his personal life, similar to the anxiety of the disenfranchised men in "Carmilla". In *Dracula*, Stoker finally repossessed the female body that eluded him in his personal life and every man in "Carmilla". (Signorotti, 1996, p. 628)

Carmilla is overtly concerned with lesbian desire, and the relationship between Carmilla and Laura is intimate, mutual and erotically charged, often described by critics as "one of the first literary depictions of vampire homosexuality" (Oki, 2022, p.

23). Even after Carmilla's death, Laura's attachment persists: the queer desire at the centre of the novella is never fully "cured" (Gelder, 1993). *Dracula*, meanwhile, expresses deep anxiety regarding female sexuality, but redirects that anxiety through predominantly heterosexual frameworks. The three vampire women in Dracula's castle and the transformed Lucy are excessively sexualized figures whose destruction becomes necessary for the restoration of social order. Although the novel engages with numerous Victorian taboo – including non-procreative sexuality, abnormal sexuality, bisexuality, incestuous undertones, and deviant desire – these elements are projected onto the monstrous antagonist and must therefore be eradicated.

Le Fanu ultimately produced an intimate, queer and open-ended narrative about desire escaping patriarchal containment and continuing to haunt the social order even after the vampire's destruction. Stoker's novel is expansive, defensive and ultimately conservative a story about invasion, discipline and restoration, in which masculine authority reasserts control over female bodies, foreign threats and the narrative itself. According to Signorotti, Le Fanu's most evident innovation lays in allowing women to "express their sexuality" beyond male control, a literary dismantling of patriarchal authority that would provoke a reaction only twenty-five years later through Stoker's *Dracula* (Signorotti, 1996).

2.3.1 Le Fanu's Carmilla: Dismantling Patriarchal Control

Le Fanu's most radical move was to render men powerless while allowing women to control their own circulation:

[Carmilla] depicts a society where men increasingly become relegated to powerless positions while women assume aggressive roles. Le Fanu pushes his male character, who lose all control over their women, toward the edge of his narrative. (Ibid., p. 611)

The clearest example is Laura's ineffectual widowed father, who is also physically remote, since his room is located at the castle's perimeter and "at the narratives edge" (Ibid., p. 617). His spatial marginalization mirrors his symbolic impotence. When Carmilla disappears and Laura panics, she cannot even call for him, and she gradually recognizes his inability to protect or guide her. The resolution of the crisis

consequently depends less upon paternal authority than Laura's own experience and perception. General Spielsdorf is similarly deceived, as Carmilla's mother manipulates his chivalric instincts, which the narrative exposes as a weakness: "such manly protectiveness is in fact a form of emasculation" (Ibid., p. 616)). The men of the novella repeatedly fail both intellectually and practically, remaining incapable of "either understanding or treating Styria's baffling (female) 'malady'" (Ibid., p. 611). Their authority is therefore shown to be fragile, reactive and ultimately ineffective. Moreover, the women in *Carmilla* reject the role assigned to them within traditional kinship systems. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's theory of exchange, Signorotti argues that women conventionally function as "valuables" exchanged between men in order to reinforce male social bonds. Carmilla and Laura create a self-sufficient system of female kinship that bypasses male mediation entirely. According to Signorotti:

[Le Fanu's] abstention from enforcing the laws governing kinship systems – his allowing women to escape their traditional roles as valuables to be exchanged between men – is a radical move for any Victorian writer. (Ibid., p. 628)

One of the most revealing symbols of female independence in the novella is the portrait of Mircalla Karnstein without a frame, which Signorotti interprets as suggesting "Carmilla's unrestrained, rampant sexuality and her infectious refusal to remain bound by male forms" (Ibid., p. 614). the absence of a frame symbolizes not only Carmilla's resistance to patriarchal containment but also the disruptive materiality of her presence. As Signorotti further observes, "Carmilla's unframed effigy accentuates her physicality – as a contained image would not – and the threat she poses to male order" (Ibid., 615). The portrait therefore becomes a visual metaphor for feminine excess escaping masculine systems of categorization and control.

The male alliance in the story is itself unstable. The "paternal figures" (Laura's father, General Spielsdorf and the doctors) eventually unite in order to destroy Carmilla, but their coalition remains "profoundly unstable and precarious – which is why it must be continually (and in this case, ruthlessly) reinforced" (Gelder, 1993, p. 61). The traditional "erotic triangle" is refigured into a structure composed of two women and

one or more men, a formation that “threatens these fathers’ ascendancy over their otherwise dutiful daughters” (Ibid., p. 60). In this sense, female desire destabilizes patriarchal authority not only sexually but structurally. Crucially, Le Fanu does not allow male authority to have the final word. Laura is never entirely horrified by Carmilla, even after the revelation of her vampiric nature. Following Carmilla’s destruction, Laura still falls into reveries, “fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla in the drawing-room door” (Ibid., p. 61). The narrative thus refuses a complete restoration of patriarchal order, suggesting that female same-sex desire survives beyond the violent reassertion of male authority. As Signorotti concludes:

Although “Carmilla”’s denouement is ambiguous, Le Fanu refrains from heavy-handed moralizing, leaving open the possibility that Laura’s and Carmilla’s vampiric relationship is sexually liberating and for them highly desirable. (Signorotti, 1996, p. 611)

2.3.2 Stoker’s *Dracula*: Reasserting Patriarchal Order

Where Le Fanu unleashes female desire, Stoker works to contain and regulate it: Signorotti argues that “*Dracula* seeks to repossess the female body for the purposes of male pleasure and exchange, and to correct the reckless unleashing of female desire in Le Fanu’s “Carmilla”” (Ibid., p. 607).

Stoker divides femininity into a binary opposition. On the one hand stands Lucy Westenra, who becomes overtly sexual after her vampiric transformation: “voluptuous”, aggressive and physically excessive. She must therefore be destroyed, and her destruction is both violent and ritualized: Arthur Holmwood drives a stake through her heart as Van Helsing reads from a missal, an act that Christopher Craft interprets as a form of “corrective penetration” designed to “exorcises the threat of a mobile and hungering feminine sexuality” (Craft, 1984, p. 122). Lucy’s body becomes “the infinitely penetrable body of a somnolent woman” (Ibid., p. 117), a passive site through which the male characters – Dracula and the Crew of Light – conduct their struggle for dominance and symbolic possession. On the other hand, Mina represents acceptable femininity as the alternative: intelligent and capable, yet ultimately obedient to patriarchal structures. Van Helsing calls her “one of God’s women

fashioned by His own hand” meant “to show us men and other women” the path to salvation (Ibid., 118). Craft argues that this “reifies Mina into a stable sign or symbol [...] performing a fixed and comfortable function within a masculine sign system” (Ibid.). Mina is therefore preserved precisely because she remains interpretable and controllable within patriarchal discourse.

Craft’s most influential argument is that *Dracula* operates through what he terms “heterosexual mediation”, whereby desire between men is displaced through the female body. Dracula’s taunt to the Crew of Light makes this mechanism explicit:

My revenge is just begun! I spread it over the centuries, and time is on my side. Your girls that you all love are mine already; and *through them you and others shall yet be mine...*” (Stoker as cited in Ibid., p. 111)

The serial blood transfusions administered to Lucy, during which the men symbolically penetrate her body in succession, function as “displaced marital (and martial) penetrations” (Ibid., p. 121). Through Lucy, male desire and rivalry become indirectly articulated. As Craft famously states, “men touching women touch each other” (Ibid., p. 128). Female bodies thus become mediating objects through which masculine homosocial relations are negotiated and reinforced.

The formal structure of the novel further reinforces this patriarchal project. Whereas *Carmilla* is narrated directly through Laura’s voice, *Dracula* ultimately encloses Mina’s perspective within Jonathan Harker’s framing authority:

Unlike Laura, who relays her story directly to her female reader, Mina is not allowed direct access to her readers but must go through male channel to be heard. Harker’s final note further silences Mina, reestablishing what Craft terms the “pattern of homosexual mediation”. (Signorotti, 1996, p. 627)

The story’s conclusion may therefore be read as a successful restoration of patriarchal order. Mina survives, but only by becoming the vehicle for male continuity through motherhood, giving birth to a son whose “bundle of names links all our little band of men together” (Ibid.). As Signorotti observes:

The birth of Mina's child, the "little band's" son, subsumes her forever under male control. This, for Stoker, was the happy ending that Le Fanu failed to provide. (Ibid., p. 628)

To conclude, as Gelder notes, the Crew of Light are "patriarchal with Lucy and 'paternal' with Mina" (Gelder, 1993, p. 80): they exercise violent disciplinary force against the sexually transgressive woman while adopting a more protective and negotiated authority toward the compliant one. Stoker therefore does not simply reproduce traditional patriarchal tyranny; rather, he modernizes it into a paternalistic structure capable of incorporating women's labour – Mina's typing, organizing and hypnotic tracking – while still preserving masculine control. Le Fanu's achievement, by contrast, was to imagine a world in which that control fundamentally fails. In *Carmilla*, fathers are "unable to exchange women" (Signorotti, 1996, p. 611), whereas in *Dracula* patriarchal order ultimately succeeds. The two novels therefore function as a dialogic pair: Stoker recognized what Le Fanu had symbolically unleashed and wrote *Dracula* as an attempt to contain it once again.

2.4 Carmilla and Lesbian Cultural Reclamation: *The Ladder* and the Construction of a Queer Icon

Although *Carmilla* emerged within a Victorian cultural context marked by anxieties surrounding female sexuality and same-sex intimacy, lesbian readers later appropriated the text as part of a queer literary genealogy. While feminist and queer theory reinterpret *Carmilla* as a text that destabilizes gender and sexuality, lesbian readers and activists of the twentieth century also played a crucial role in reclaiming the novella as part of a broader queer literary tradition. One of the most significant spaces for this cultural reclamation was *The Ladder*, the magazine founded in 1956 by the Daughters of Bilitis¹⁹, which became the first widely distributed lesbian magazine in the United States, and which aimed to create lesbian visibility, community and literary culture. The magazine frequently published essays, reviews and bibliographies recovering

¹⁹ The first lesbian organization founded in the United States, born in 1955 in San Francisco and created in a time characterized by strong social repression, it provided a safe space for lesbian women and a starting point for the contemporary movement for LGBTQ+ rights.

lesbian-coded texts from the past, participating in constructing a lesbian literary canon, and *Carmilla* became part of that canon because readers recognized in it forms of female intimacy and desire absent from mainstream literature.

Through literary criticism and book reviews, *The Ladder* attempted to reconstruct a genealogy of lesbian representation that mainstream literary history had erased. Within this context, *Carmilla* acquired new significance as one of the earliest texts to depict erotic intimacy between women, despite its original framing within Gothic horror and degeneration discourse. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the magazine published reviews, bibliographies and literary commentary that encouraged readers to rediscover texts containing female same-sex desire, even when such themes were coded ambiguous or framed negatively within their original historical context. Works such as Le Fanu's *Carmilla* here acquires renewed significance. Although the novella presents its vampire protagonist as both predatory and monstrous, it also grants considerable narrative space to the emotional and erotic bond between Carmilla and Laura, producing tensions that complicate any unequivocal moral condemnation. Rather than focusing exclusively on the text's Gothic framework of vampirism, death and social transgression, lesbian readers increasingly emphasized its representation of female same-sex desire and intimacy. The reclamation of *Carmilla* within lesbian literary culture demonstrates how meanings attached to monstrosity and deviance can be historically transformed. Elements that Victorian readers may have associated with transgression, danger or social anxiety became, for later queer audiences, sources of identification, desire and cultural continuity.

One of the earliest examples of *Carmilla*'s queer reclamation present in *The Ladder* appears in a 1957 list in which the novella was recommended:

CARMILLA by Sheridan Le Fanu (1872). From "Green Tea and Other Ghost Stories, Arkham House, 1945.

The Lesbian as vampire! A very subtle and spine tingling mystery, written by a master in that field. It is remarkable for the time it was written, and is not a book to be read alone on a dark night. (*The Ladder*, 1957, p. 19)

Rather than rejecting the text because of its association between lesbianism and monstrosity, the magazine reclaimed it as part of a broader lesbian literary tradition. The entry suggests an early attempt to recognize female same-sex desire within Gothic fiction and to reinterpret a once-pathologized figure as culturally significant for lesbian readers.

Another, more explicitly critical engagement with *Carmilla* appears in Gene Damon's column in *The Ladder* in 1971, written in response to the release of *The Vampire Lovers*, a cinematic adaptation of Le Fanu's novella which will be further analysed in the following chapter. Damon dismisses the film as "a male movie, for a male audience", criticizing the exploitation of lesbian vampirism for heterosexual male spectatorship, while simultaneously acknowledging that Le Fanu's *Carmilla* is possibly the oldest example of lesbian vampirism.

Movie makers have been flirting again with vampires, and one of their horrors (for the viewer) is THE VAMPIRE LOVERS, written by Tudor Gates and directed by Roy Ward Baker. It is a male movie, for a male audience, and is almost too silly to comment on [...]. [T]ying vampires and Lesbians together is an old literary game, with possibly J. Sheridan LeFanus CARMILLA the oldest example. Also, it's not new in movies since it's been at least five or more years since the rotten film BLOOD AND ROSES dealt with this theme. (Damon, 1971, pp. 47-8).

The statement is particularly significant because it recognizes *Carmilla* not merely as a Gothic curiosity, but as the foundational text of a lesbian vampire tradition already culturally identifiable by the early 1970s. At the same time, Damon's criticism reveals an emerging lesbian concern with the male commodification of female homoeroticism. The figure of Carmilla illustrates how lesbian readers could appropriate texts originally shaped by homophobic anxieties and reinterpret them as sources of affirmation. The qualities that nineteenth-century discourse coded as dangerous (female sexual autonomy, same-sex desire, resistance to patriarchal authority) became precisely the elements that later queer audiences recognized as empowering.

The reception of *Carmilla* within lesbian publications such as *The Ladder* demonstrates how literary meaning is historically renegotiated. Although Le Fanu's novella emerged from a cultural context that associated female same-sex desire with danger and deviance, later lesbian readers transformed Carmilla into a figure of queer continuity, resistance and identification. The vampire who once embodied patriarchal fears of female sexuality eventually became a symbol of lesbian visibility and survival.

CHAPTER III

Carmilla beyond the Victorian Text: Literary and Cinematic Reconfigurations

While the previous chapter examined the literary queer subversion embodied by *Carmilla*, the present chapter will focus on the character's subsequent adaptations, particularly her representation in literature and cinema. Through the analysis of *The Gilda Stories* and B-series films as primary case studies, this chapter will explore the extent to which these reinterpretations either preserve or undermine Carmilla's subversive potential.

Adaptation in this section is considered as reinterpretation rather than merely a copy of a source text, or, as defined by Linda Hutcheon in her *A Theory of Adaptation*, "repetition, but repetition without replication" (2013, p. 7). It is a new work that stands in an acknowledged relationship to a prior one. Hutcheon discusses that treating fidelity as the measure of success assumes that the adapter's goal was simply to reproduce the original, which it almost never is; she then notes that "there are many and varied motifs behind adaptation and few involve faithfulness" (Ibid., p. xiii).

This chapter seeks to demonstrate that the figure of the female vampire is frequently reshaped to accommodate male-oriented visual culture, thereby contrasting with the queer and emancipatory interpretations discussed in the previous chapter. More specifically, it will examine how literary adaptations often reclaim Carmilla's queer potential, whereas cinematic adaptations tend to commodify it for the male gaze. In this context, *The Gilda Stories* by Jewelle Gomez, published in 1991 and centred on a Black queer vampire protagonist, will be considered as an example of a literary interpretation inspired by *Carmilla*, despite not constituting a direct adaptation of Le Fanu's novella. On the other side, 1970s pornographic vampire films will function as examples of the hyper-sexualization characteristic of B-series cinema, in which explicit erotic content was primarily directed toward a specific audience composed of male viewers.

3.1 The Queer Legacy of Carmilla

Carmilla occupies a complex and contested position within the genealogy of lesbian Gothic literature. Written by a Victorian male author and framed through the conventions of a medical case history, the novella ultimately culminates in the destruction of its vampire protagonist by patriarchal authorities. Nevertheless, the text consistently undermines its own homophobic apparatus in ways that have enabled later queer readers and writers to reclaim it as a foundational queer text. Through its narrative structure, representation of desire, and unresolved conclusion, *Carmilla* moves beyond the trope of the “lesbian as monster” and gestures toward an early form of queer subjectivity.

Carmilla occupies a complex and ambivalent position within the genealogy of lesbian Gothic literature. Although framed through a Victorian medical discourse and ultimately resolved through the violent destruction of its vampire protagonist by patriarchal authorities, the novella persistently destabilizes the ideological framework it appears to uphold. Through Laura’s first-person narration, the sustained erotic and emotional intensity between Laura and Carmilla, and the persistence of desire beyond Carmilla’s death, the text repeatedly resists stable moral categorization and undermines its own pathologizing logic. While Carmilla is constructed as a threatening, “undercoded” figure of aristocratic lesbian deviance (Gelder, 2994, p. 60), she is also granted a discursive voice that challenges patriarchal and theological explanations of her condition, allowing alternative understandings of female desire to emerge. The novella’s unresolved ending, in which Laura continues to experience Carmilla’s presence after her death, further complicates any restoration of heteronormative order and suggests the endurance of queer affect beyond narrative closure. As a result, *Carmilla* does not function as a coherent proto-queer or proto-feminist text, but rather as an ideologically unstable work whose contradictions have enabled its later reclamation as a foundational lesbian Gothic narrative. This ambivalence has made it a key precursor for subsequent queer reinterpretations, from *The Gilda Stories* to contemporary adaptations, which explicitly rework its latent possibilities into affirmative models of queer subjectivity and relationality.

Despite its deeply Victorian anxieties surrounding sexuality, *Carmilla* has subsequently been reclaimed as a lesbian classic. *The Ladder* famously referred to it

as “a sub-basement lesbian” text and described Carmilla as “no more and no less than a very clever young woman determined to run off with the girl of her choice” (Keesey, 1993, p. 14). The novella also profoundly shaped the tradition of lesbian vampire cinema, influencing works ranging from *Dracula’s Daughter* (1936) and *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) to the KindaTV web series adaptation, which reimagines the narrative within a contemporary context where “desire between women in the series is so normalized that ‘Laura Hollis [is] gay without having to ‘come out’” (Crape, 2023, p. 7).

This does not imply that *Carmilla* should be understood as straightforwardly proto-feminist or explicitly queer-affirming. The novella undeniably mobilizes “undercoded but no doubt recognisable representations of the aristocratic lesbian” (Gelder, 1994, p. 60) as obsessive, threatening and dangerous, and Carmilla herself is violently executed by patriarchal authorities. Yet the same narrative that pathologizes her also allows her to speak, grants Laura an enduring desire for her, and ultimately refuses to completely revoke that desire. It is precisely this unresolved tension that establishes *Carmilla* as a precursor to later queer Gothic texts rather than a fully realized queer narrative in itself. The novella provided subsequent writers and readers – from Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* to contemporary adaptations such as KindaTV’s *Carmilla* – with a textual foundation that could be simultaneously critiqued and reclaimed, transforming the figure of the monstrous lesbian into one of queer subjectivity and empowerment.

3.1.1 *The Gilda Stories as a Queer Rewriting of Carmilla*

The Gilda Stories (1991) by Jewelle Gomez cannot be considered a direct adaptation of *Carmilla*, but rather a deliberate corrective and reinvention of the entire vampire tradition from which *Carmilla* emerged. Gomez explicitly set out to “excavate and reshape” vampire mythology in order to:

strip away the dogma that has shaped the vampire figure within the rather narrow Western, Caucasian expectation, and to create a heroic figure within a broader, more ancient cultural frame of reference. (Jenkins, 2013, p. 313)

A comparison between Gomez’s novel and Le Fanu’s novella reveals how radically Gomez transforms the terms that Le Fanu established.

One of the most significant differences between *Carmilla* and *The Gilda Stories* lies in their radically different conceptualizations of vampirism and, consequently, of queer identity itself. In *Carmilla* – framed within Le Fanu’s collection as a medical case history mediated by male authority – Laura’s narrative remains partially contained within a patriarchal structure that pathologizes female same-sex desire. Carmilla, a white aristocratic lesbian vampire characterized by beauty, languor and obsessive attachment, is represented as both seductive and dangerous. Her vampirism is constructed as a contagious curse associated with predation, bodily violation and death; she feeds by draining the blood of her victims, thereby reinforcing the association between lesbian desire and monstrosity typical of much nineteenth-century Gothic literature.

By contrast, *The Gilda Stories* fundamentally reconfigures the vampire figure through a Black queer perspective. Structured as an episodic novel that follows its protagonist across more than two centuries of American history and narrated primarily through Gilda’s own point of view, the novel presents vampirism not as a curse but as a chosen transformation capable of generating freedom, survival and community. Gilda, introduced as an enslaved Black girl escaping violence in 1850s Louisiana, experiences vampirism as a form of rebirth rather than contamination. Gilda’s first experience of vampiric transformation is explicitly framed as an affirmation of survival rather than trauma, as shown when she reflects that:

Looking down at the blood soaking her shirt and trousers she felt no disgust. It was the blood signaling the death of a beast and her continued life. (Gomez, 2016, p. 5)

This logic of survival over contamination is further radicalized in the narration of her first transformation, which from an external perspective might be misread as violence or death:

To an outsider the sight might have been one of horror: their faces red and shining, their eyes unfocused and black, the sound of their bodies slick with wetness, tight with life. Yet it was birth. The mother finally able to bring her

child into the world, to look at her. It was not death that claimed Gilda. It was Bird. (Ibid., p. 167)

The passage reframes vampiric becoming not as annihilation but as relational transmission, in which Bird functions as protector and initiator rather than destroyer. Most importantly, Gomez transforms the act of feeding itself from a violent and exploitative practice into a reciprocal exchange.

This ethical reciprocity sharply contrasts with Carmilla's predatory model of vampirism. The novel further complicates the relationship between death, power and vampiric existence by reframing it as part of a shared continuum of life:

Don't be frightened by the idea of death; it is part of life in all things. It will only become worrisome when you decide that its time has come. Power is the frightening thing, not death. And the blood, it is a shared thing. (Ibid., p. 45)

The "original" Gilda further adds that "[t]here is joy to the exchange we make. We draw life into ourselves, yet we give life as well. We give what's needed – energy, dreams, ideas. It's a fair exchange in a world full of cheaters" (Ibid., p. 47) while talking to the Girl, who will later be named Gilda herself.

Whereas Carmilla feeds through consumption and depletion, Gomez's vampires establish intimate psychic connections with humans, leaving behind cognitive and emotional gifts "in return for the rejuvenating blood they take" (Dodd, 2023, p. 30), a process that Persephone Dodd interprets as "a corrective to white heteropatriarchal exploitation of women of colour" (Ibid.). As Jenkins further observes, Gomez demonstrates that "it is possible to satisfy one's 'hunger' without being a monster, without producing terror, exploitation, or bodies in pain" (Jenkins, 2013, p. 321). In this sense, *The Gilda Stories* decisively separates queerness from monstrosity. While *Carmilla* remains partially embedded within a Victorian discourse that associates lesbianism with contamination and death, Gomez relocates monstrosity within systems of racial, patriarchal and sexual violence. The novel's true predators are not vampires, but the human figures – particularly white men associated with slavery, sexual coercion and exploitation – who reproduce oppressive social structures (Dodd, 2023).

Another fundamental distinction between *Carmilla* and *The Gilda Stories* concerns their representation of sexuality, kinship and female autonomy. In the former, female same-sex desire remains coded as transgressive and dangerous, reinforcing the association between queerness and monstrosity that permeates much nineteenth-century Gothic literature. Although the novella temporarily destabilizes patriarchal authority by rendering male figures ineffective throughout much of the narrative, masculine control is ultimately violently reasserted through Carmilla's execution. Moreover, the text continues to privilege a model of family grounded in blood lineage, inheritance and patriarchal order. Queer desire may persist at the level of Laura's memory and subjectivity, but it cannot openly survive within the social structure restored at the conclusion of the novella.

On the other side, *The Gilda Stories* presents sexuality as affirmative, normalized and inseparable from emotional intimacy and communal belonging. Queer desire is not associated with corruption or contamination, but rather with care, reciprocity and survival. Equally significant is the novel's reconfiguration of family, which is no longer defined biologically but constructed through ideological and emotional bonds. Gomez imagines kinship as multiracial, intergenerational and consciously chosen, thereby rejecting the patriarchal family structures that Gothic fiction traditionally seeks to preserve. Male authority is notably marginal within Gilda's world: Black male characters appear primarily as brothers, sons or companions rather than as patriarchal heads of households.

Within this framework, female autonomy functions both as the premise and the outcome of Gilda's vampiric existence. Throughout the novel, Gilda actively constructs her own family network, forming connections with figures such as Bird, the Native American vampire who first protected her; the "original" Gilda, the white vampire who initiates her transformation; Sorel, her European mentor; and Julius, the Black man whom she later transforms into a vampire, symbolically becoming his spiritual mother. These relationships are based not on biological reproduction but on mutual recognition, ethical responsibility and shared values.

This ethic of movement and continuity is also reflected in the novel's spatial imagination, where kinship is extended across geography and time. In one moment, Gilda's world is rendered as expansively mobile and future-oriented:

On a ridge to the south in the quickening sky she saw two figures in silhouette against a silver moonbow. Julius and Effie were parallel with them, moving eastward toward Machu Picchu. (Gomez, 2016, p. 307)

The image reinforces the novel's refusal of fixed origins, instead emphasizing circulation, journeying and the creation of transhistorical communities.

As Jenkins explains:

Gomez is able to create a family that “not only bypasses heterosexuality and often negates the male presence as a necessary and powerful ‘head’ of the family, but also takes agency of the ‘act’ of naming itself – naming and claiming identity as a family without procreation is a necessary component of either.” (Hall as cited in Ibid., p. 318)

The novel explicitly articulates this philosophy of chosen kinship through Anthony's teachings to Gilda: “to choose someone for your family is a great responsibility. It must be done not simply out of your own need or desire but rather because of a mutual need” (Gomez, 2016, p. 76). Anthony further reinforced the ethical dimension of this alternative family structure by warning that “we must search ourselves and the other to know if it is really essential. To do otherwise is a grave error, the result of which can only be tragedy” (Ibid.). Family, therefore, is represented not as a naturalized biological institution but as a deliberate ethical commitment grounded in reciprocity and consent. In this sense, Gomez directly overturns the patriarchal and hereditary model of kinship ultimately reaffirmed in both *Carmilla* and *Dracula*. This philosophy of reciprocity is later embodied on Gilda's experience of feeding and transformation. One of her feeding scenes is described as follows:

Gilda put her lips to the trickle of blood and turned it into a tide washing through her, making her heart pump faster. Her insistent suckling created a new pulse and filled her with new life. In return, she offered dreams. [...] The woman absorbed Gilda's desire for family, for union with others like herself,

for new experience. Through these she perceived a capacity for endless life and an open door of possibility. (Gomez, 2016, p. 145)

Gilda's embodied experience of vampiric feeding further emphasizes its transformative and expansive nature. the relationships she forms are based not on biological reproduction but on mutual recognition, ethical responsibility and shared values.

At the end of his novella, Le Fanu suppresses female autonomy through patriarchal violence. Carmilla is executed by paternal authorities, and the possibility of an alternative queer domesticity is destroyed before it can fully materialize. Yet Laura's enduring attachment to Carmilla complicated this apparent restoration of order, suggesting that desire itself survives despite the violent reimposition of patriarchal control. Gomez's novel develops precisely this unresolved potential within *Carmilla*, transforming queer desire and chosen kinship from Gothic threat into the foundation of an emancipatory community.

A further major divergence between *Carmilla* and *The Gilda Stories* emerges in their treatment of race and otherness. In Le Fanu's novella, the vampire's threat is partially constructed through her foreignness, which reflects broader Victorian anxieties surrounding continental invasion and aristocratic decadence. Although Carmilla is unquestionably white and belongs to the Styrian nobility, her ambiguous foreign identity nevertheless marks her as culturally threatening within the English and Anglo-Irish Gothic imagination. Race itself remains largely invisible in the novella, as whiteness functions as the unmarked norm shared by almost all of its characters. Consequently, otherness in *Carmilla* is articulated primarily through nationality, aristocratic excess and deviant sexuality rather than through explicit racial difference. *The Gilda Stories*, instead, places race at the very centre of its narrative and political framework. Spanning from slavery in the nineteenth century to a dystopian future in 2050, the novel reconstructs Black American history through the perspective of a Black lesbian vampire protagonist. As Jenkins notes, Gilda is the protagonist of the first novel about a Black vampire published in the United States (Jenkins, 2013). Gomez therefore reclaims a literary tradition historically dominated by white European figures and reimagines vampirism through Black queer subjectivity.

Significantly, Gilda's transformation into a vampire is inseparable from the historical violence of slavery and racism. Her vampiric existence begins not through supernatural seduction alone, but through her escape from enslavement, and her first act of violence is committed against a white overseer attempting to rape her (Ibid.). Vampirism thus becomes associated not with corruption or contamination, but with survival, resistance and liberation from racialized oppression. As Christopher Lewis argues:

Gomez positions white-determined humanity as a terrifying force in *The Gilda Stories* and in doing so questions the utility of aspiring to gender and sexual normality, a social compulsion that emerged in the United States as a means of defining whiteness as superior to blackness. (Lewis, 2014, p. 350)

In this sense, Gomez reverses the traditional Gothic opposition between human normality and monstrous otherness. Whereas *Carmilla* presents the vampire as the threatening outsider disrupting social order, *The Gilda Stories* locates monstrosity within the structures of white supremacy, sexual violence and racial exploitation embedded in human society itself.

The novel further challenges the Eurocentric foundations of vampire mythology by recovering its African cultural dimensions. Gomez incorporates elements derived from West African traditions – including the *obayifo*, *asiman* and *Adze* of Ewe mythology – thereby situating vampirism within what Jenkins describes as a “broader, more ancient cultural frame of reference” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 313). By reconnecting the vampire figure to African diasporic histories and mythologies, Gomez destabilizes the assumption that vampirism is exclusively rooted in European Gothic traditions. The result is not merely a revision of *Carmilla*, but a broader decolonization of vampire mythology itself.

This reconfiguration of vampirism through race, queerness and alternative systems of belonging also profoundly shapes the two texts' endings and their ideological implications. While Le Fanu ultimately restores patriarchal and social order through the violent destruction of the vampire – leaving queer desire to persist only as a haunting psychological trace within Laura's memory – Gomez rejects the necessity of such repression. Instead of punishing the queer vampire figure, *The Gilda Stories*

allows Gilda to survive and continue imagining forms of collective future. The novel concludes with Gilda “no longer fleeing for her life” (Gomez, 2016, p. 307), suggesting that she has finally attained a condition of relative freedom, stability and self-determination.

Gomez herself described the political stakes of her rewriting. Publishers told her that her “main character was unsellable because she was a woman of colour, a lesbian, and a vampire” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 313). Activists worried that “connecting the idea of vampires with vulnerable communities was too negative” (Johnson, 2016, para. 4). Gomez pressed ahead, describing her book as “a lesbian-feminine interpretation of vampires” (Ibid.) that would tell Black lesbian stories through a figure of power instead of victimhood. Where *Carmilla* gave queer readers a tragic mirror – a vampire whose desire is punished and whose death is required – *The Gilda Stories* gives them a triumphant one. Carmilla is killed; Laura is left haunted. Gilda survives, grows, loves, builds family and ultimately arrives at a point where she finally gains complete freedom. The one tale ends with a stake through the heart; the other ends with freedom. *Carmilla* provided the raw material: the first female vampire protagonist, the erotic charge of same-sex desire, the suggestion that queer attraction might persist beyond punishment. However, it remained trapped in its Victorian frame – the lesbian vampire as monster, destroyed by the patriarchy. *The Gilda Stories* takes that latent potential and reverses every term. It makes vampirism a gift instead of a curse, exchange instead of predation, chosen family instead of biological lineage, and a Black lesbian hero instead of a white aristocratic predator. As Gomez wrote, she wanted to “create a mythology to express who I am as a black lesbian feminist” (Keeseey, 1993, p. 15). *The Gilda Stories* is what the mythology looks like, not a sequel to *Carmilla*, but its utopian answer.

3.1.2 Adaptation as Reinterpretation: From *Carmilla* to *Gilda*

In defining adaptation as a reinterpretation rather than a repetition, Hutcheon identifies several problems with the dominant approach used by adaptation studies, which is “fidelity criticism”. This method judges an adaptation by how closely it matches its ‘source’ or ‘original’; such approach, according to Hutcheon, is problematic for various reasons. Firstly, it implies a moral hierarchy, as the language used to describe unfaithful adaptations reveals the charge: vocabularies such as “tampering”,

“interference”, “violation”, “betrayal”, “deformation”, “perversion”, “infidelity” and “desecration” (Ibid., p. 2) smuggle in a moral judgement, as though the adapter has committed a transgression against a sacred original. Then, it privileges the adapted text as ‘originary’, since calling one text as a ‘source’ or ‘original’ implicitly grants it priority and superiority. Hutcheon prefers the term ‘adapted text’ to avoid this hierarchy. The adapted text is not uniquely authoritative, but simply prior in time: “to be second is not to be secondary or inferior; likewise, to be first is not to be originary or authoritative” (Hutcheon, 2013, p. xii). Furthermore, the method of “fidelity criticism” ignores the medium shift; adaptations that move from one medium to another – for example novels becoming films, poems becoming opera, or videogames turning into movies – cannot be ‘faithful’ in any simple sense because each medium has different affordances. For instance, films tell stories through images and sound; novels tell them through words and interiority. A ‘faithful’ novel-to-film adaptation in the literal sense would require voiceover narrating every thought and description, which would make a terrible film. Adaptation inevitably involves transcoding, and that means change is not a flaw but a necessity. Finally, this method denies adaptations their own status as works, as it treats adaptations as derivative shadows rather than autonomous creations. Hutcheon insists that adaptations have their own ‘aura’, their own “presence in time and space” (Ibid., p.6), they are a “derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary” (Ibid., p. 9).

The hostility to adaptations, Hutcheon argues, is a relatively recent cultural attitude, a product of post-Romantic “valuing of the original creation and of the originating creative genius” (Ibid., pp. 3-4). Before that, cultures routinely borrowed, adapted and retold stories without stigma: Shakespeare adapted his culture’s stories from page to stage. The idea that adaptation is inferior is tied to specific cultural biases, what Robert Stam calls ‘iconophobia’ (suspicion of the visual) and ‘logophilia’ (love of the word as sacred) (Ibid., p. 4).

Hutcheon offers several alternatives to fidelity to frame the analysis of adaptation: she emphasizes that adaptation is always also an interpretative act, and every adaptation reads its adapted text even as it recreates it. The most interesting adaptations are often those that consciously contest, critique or recontextualize the earlier work, like the *Carmilla* adaptations discussed above, which do not fail because they depart from Le

Fanu, but succeed because the transform his homophobic Victorian frame into something affirmative. “Fidelity criticism” asks how close a work is to the original, but the better question would be: what does one adaptation do with its adapted text? As Hutcheon writes, adaptations are “palimpsestuous works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts” (Ibid., p. 6). The pleasure and meaning of an adaptation come from the oscillation between the known and the new, from recognition *and* change: to judge an adaptation solely by fidelity is to miss the entire game.

Hutcheon then discusses revisionist adaptations, asserting that when an adaptation deliberately challenges the ideological assumptions of the earlier work, especially by shifting perspective, re-centring marginalized figures or re-writing the political valence of the story, it becomes a revisionist adaptation. Hutcheon uses the term ‘transculturation’ or ‘indigenization’ for what happens when a story “migrates from its context of creation to the adaptation’s context of reception. [...] [T]he meaning and impact of the story can change radically” (Ibid., p. xvi); *The Gilda Stories* is a revisionist adaptation of *Carmilla* across several dimensions.

Carmilla was published in a Victorian framework that codes lesbian desire as predatory, pathological and evil, and the story is considered by Crape an example of “authoritative rejection of queer desire” that reflects “historically medicalized understandings of lesbian feeling” (Crape, 2023, p. 11). *The Gilda Stories* ideologically reverses every term of that equation, as Gomez set out to “strip away the dogma that has shaped the vampire figure [...] to create a heroic figure within a broader, more ancient cultural frame of reference” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 313). Where *Carmilla* defines vampirism as monstrosity, Gomez defines it as a “gift”; where Le Fanu’s vampire drains life, Gomez’s vampires engage in reciprocal exchange; where *Carmilla* is executed, Gilda survives and thrives. This is not a failure to fidelity, it is deliberate, theoretically informed reworking of the adapted text’s homophobic core.

Transculturation is another fundamental concept in order to analyse *The Gilda Stories* as a revisionist adaptation of *Carmilla*. Le Fanu’s novella is set in a remote Austrian province and treats vampire as an aristocratic foreign threat, while Gomez transplants the lesbian vampire story into Black American history: the protagonist’s vampirism is not a curse but a path to freedom from a system more predatory than any vampire. Gomez “politicizes a nexus of issues” – race, gender, sexuality, power, family and

desire – by making Gilda a Black lesbian vampire who interrogates the assumption that “speculative fiction is a genre written for, by and about white people” (Ibid.). The novel also recovers African vampire traditions that predate and exist outside the European Gothic frame. This is transculturation in Hutcheon’s precise sense: the same story-form migrates into a radically different cultural context and acquires an entirely new political meaning.

Gomez also applies an operation of re-centring the story’s narration, as *Carmilla* was narrated by Laura – a young woman who survives but is left haunted, and Carmilla herself speaks only through her seduction and her brief assertion that her desire is natural (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 270). In Hutcheon’s terms, *The Gilda Stories* constitutes a “change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view” (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 8). Gomez gives the vampire herself the narrative authority, and the male medical frame is gone entirely. As discussed by Lewis:

Gomez’s reassessment of vampirism sharply deviates from representations of vampires and the living dead in other vampire literature, wherein the illicit bodily/sexual desires and shape-shifting abilities of the vampire are designed to inspire fear in other and thereby define the vampire as evil. (Lewis, 2014, p. 449)

Hutcheon notes that adapters work with a range of motivations: “the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying” (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 7). Gomez was explicitly conscious of operating within a tradition she needed to transform, she described her project as one of “recasting the mythology”: “I feel I can remake mythology as well as anyone ... I was certain I could create a mythology to express who I am as a black lesbian feminist” (Keesey, 1993, p. 15). She knew the *Carmilla* adaptation intimately and recognized its harms; she called it a “sub-basement lesbian classic” (Ibid., p. 16). However, she refused to let that tradition be the only one. This is precisely what a revisionist does, she inherits a story-form, recognizes its ideological limitations and reworks it from the inside-out. As Crape argues:

The numerous adaptations of Le Fanu's text must grapple not only with how to depict the various authorities in their retellings, but also with the transformation of textual authority implied by the process of adaptation. (Crape, 2023, p. 1)

The Gilda Stories goes further than any direct adaptation of *Carmilla* by changing not just the plot but the entire political logic of the vampire myth.

If Gomez's novel demonstrates how adaptation can function as a form of queer reclamation, cinematic adaptations often reveal a different dynamic. The visual medium, particularly within exploitation and B-series cinema, frequently transforms Carmilla's subversive potential into erotic spectacle. The same figure that Gomez reimagines as a site of Black queer empowerment is, in many film adaptations, repackaged for heterosexual male consumption. Examining these cinematic reconfigurations therefore provides an opportunity to assess how different media negotiate the tensions between queer representation, commercial imperatives and the enduring legacy of *Carmilla*.

3.2 The Lesbian Vampire on Screen: Exploitation, Eroticism and the Male Gaze

The shift from literature to film has profoundly transformed both how Carmilla is represented and what she means socially. The key frameworks for understanding this are Laura Mulvey's theory of cinematic gaze, the commercial dynamics of horror cinema and the queer reception of these films over time.

In Le Fanu's novella, Carmilla is mediated entirely through Laura's first-person voice; the reader experiences Carmilla's beauty, her seduction and Laura's conflicted desire through words on a page, through Laura's interiority, not through visual display. The text is a case study of female sexuality in which the supernatural operates as a narrative device through which female and same-sex desire can be explored indirectly, concealed beneath the conventions of the fantastic genre. The eroticism is "understated", implied rather than shown (Canavan, 2016).

Film changes this entirely: the cinematic image makes Carmilla's body the central spectacle. As Mulvey argues:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. [...] In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19)

Where the novella allowed Laura's psychological ambivalence to dominate, film externalizes the lesbian vampire as a visual object – beautiful, dangerous, displayed for consumption. Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* argued that classical Hollywood was built around male gaze²⁰. Crucially, the Hays Production Code²¹ already institutionalized this gendered visual regime: as Mulvey herself noted, the Code eliminated sexually explicit innuendo, but cinema was always “fuelled by sex, embodied in the star system” (Mulvey, 2024, para. 11) – it simply routed eroticism through the indirect language of voyeurism and fetishism. The Code's prohibition on “sex perversion” (including any hint of homosexuality) meant queer desire was rendered almost entirely invisible.

When the Hays Code collapsed in 1968 and was replaced by the MPA rating system²², the dam broke. The sexual revolution, second-wave feminism and the gay liberation movement – catalysed by the 1969 Stonewall riots²³ – all pushed for more explicit representation, but the structural logic of the male gaze did not disappear, it was intensified. The same patriarchal regime that had operated under constraint could now show nudity and sex directly but still through the same framing: women as erotic spectacle, men as bearers of the look.

Literature gave Carmilla interiority and ambiguity, a voice inside Laura's consciousness. Classical cinema gave her a body, making the lesbian vampire visible

²⁰ The camera, the narrative and the spectator were all aligned with a heterosexual male subject position, while women were reduced to passive spectacle.

²¹ The Hays Code started in the 1920s, defining filmmaking in America and supported by a number of members of the Christian associations, worried about corruption and sin promoted by Hollywood productions. The Code was enforced, in 1933, into a form of indirect censorship, to the point that if the content of the script was not approved by the committee, it had to be modified.

²² The MPA (Motion Picture Association) rating system was created in 1968, after the elimination of the Production Code, which only influences the film distribution indicating the appropriate age to watch a movie, affecting the audience instead of the film itself.

²³ A series of riots against a police raid in defence of LGBT rights that took place in Manhattan (New York) in 1969.

as spectacle but largely re-containing her within the male gaze and the punishment narrative. Contemporary queer cinema and web media have begun to reclaim her, transforming the figure from a monster to be destroyed into a protagonist whose desire is not only visible but affirmed. Each medium change has shifted not just what *Carmilla* *looks like* but what she *means* – from Victorian allegory for forbidden desire, to exploitative visual feast, to a figure of queer reclamation and love.

3.2.1 Cinematic Eroticism and the Male Gaze

The decline of censorship systems did not dismantle the male gaze; it removed the last barrier that had kept its sexual content implicit. The sexual revolution provided cultural permission and market demand for explicit material; the lesbian vampire film was the genre where these forces converged with particular intensity because it could simultaneously exploit the thrill of female homosexuality for a mainstream audience, absorb the post-Stonewall pressure for queer visibility, contain the threat within Gothic horror's moral framework and trade on the literary respectability of Le Fanu's classic. Before 1968, when the Code was still active, cinematic representations of *Carmilla* were limited by the restrictions concerning the portrayal of lesbian desire. Queerness appeared through coding and implication, and female desire became visible only through suggestion.

Dracula's Daughter was produced in 1936 and is considered one of the earliest cinematic descendants of *Carmilla*. The film establishes a template in which lesbianism is simultaneously present and disavowed: unlike Le Fanu's novella, in which Laura narrates her own desire, *Dracula's Daughter* relocates lesbian attraction into visual hints interpreted by the spectator. Directed by Lambert Hillyer, the film is Universal's follow up to *Dracula* and the first screen representation of a lesbian vampire. The Production Code Administration's head, Joseph Breen, intervened several times in order to avoid any suggestion of perverse sexual desire, leading to a series of bans to the film. The representation of women is evident in Marya's character, a tragic sympathetic figure who actively wishes to be "cured" of her condition. The lesbian subtext is conveyed entirely through lingering looks, loaded dialogues and the sadomasochistic undertones of the painting scene; there is no nudity. The lesbian vampire is a predator, but she is also a victim of her own nature, and for this reason the Hays Code demanded her death (Erwin, 2015). There is no internal male surrogate

watching the women for the audience, despite being a film written and directed by men: the look is voyeuristic in the sense that Mulvey describes (the spectator watching in the dark), but the director could not exploit the female body as a spectacle because of the Production Code. *Dracula's Daughter* treats Marya's desire as psychological torment rather than erotic display. The movie was well reviewed at release and now considered an early queer classic, and Gloria Holden's performance as the tormented Countess is widely praised for its dignity and hypnotic quality. Its reputation rests on what it achieved *despite* censorship: Entertainment Weekly described the movie as "so hot it's impossible to imagine how it even got past the '30s censors" (Simels, 1992, para. 2).

Blood and Roses (1960) is a French-Italian adaptation directly inspired by *Carmilla*. The director, Roger Vadim, aestheticizes lesbian desire, transforming Gothic transgression into visual poetry while simultaneously depoliticizing it. The Carmilla-like protagonist is portrayed as tragic and sensual through a series of dream sequences, with particular focus on beauty and visual allure. The movie is widely considered the first genuine cinematic treatment of the lesbian vampire theme as such, as Vadim updates the story to contemporary Italy and introduces a crucial ambiguity: is Carmilla possessed by her vampire ancestor or is she simply driven mad by jealousy over her cousin Leopoldo's engagement to Georgia? The lesbian content is "sub" – a brief kiss in a greenhouse after Georgia pricks her finger on a rose, a moment of finger-sucking, longing looks. Nudity is also restricted to a single flash where Carmilla tears off her blood-stained top; in the scene, Vadim's camera is sensuous and lingering, it gazes at women's bodies, but it does so in the style of an art film. The male gaze is present, but aestheticized, the film is slow, more interested in atmosphere than exploitation, and the erotic tension is between the two women rather than filtered through a male protagonist's look.

The *Karnstein Trilogy* was directed by three different directors, yet all three films were famously produced by the Hammer Film Production. *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) was produced after censorship restrictions weakened; it appears more progressive as it openly depicts lesbian sexuality despite ultimately reframing queer desire as erotic spectacle for male consumption. *Lust for a Vampire* (1971) is a proper commercialization of the figure of Carmilla, in which the subversive potential of the

lesbian vampire's desire is increasingly displaced by a marketable form of sexual spectacle. The last film of the trilogy, *Twins of Evil* (1971), appears morally conservative because of the Puritan brotherhood's condemnation of female sexuality, but the camera simultaneously eroticizes the women it claims to punish. The Hammer Film Production systematically reconstructs Le Fanu's lesbian vampire as an object of erotic spectacle, progressively subordinating her queer potential to the commercial imperatives of exploitation cinema. The *Karnstein Trilogy* is considered the first mainstream British horror series of film to depict lesbian desire explicitly, and gained commercial success even if it "was considered daring, and there were some problems with the British censorship" (Canavan, 2016, p. 23). The first film of the Hammer's trilogy was made in the immediate aftermath of the Hays Code's replacement by the MPA rating systems, but the British Board of Film Censor, under John Trevelyan, still pushed back, as he warned Hammer that he "was not prepared yet to accept lesbian sex to this point" (Ryley, 2025, para. 11); Hammer's successful defence was that the lesbian content was justified by the literary source material. The result was that:

The understated eroticism of Le Fanu's original becomes full-on nudity and more in the film version. Indeed, it is this that ensured its commercial success and cultural status. (Canavan, 2016, p. 23)

The Vampire Lovers is the most enduring film adaptation of Le Fanu's novella, as it exemplifies what happens to Laura on screen. The film indeed added something the novella lacked: a male surrogate spectator into the diegesis who appears in the opening and closing sequences, providing voice-over narration. As Andrea Weiss observes, "the range of possible alternative interpretations that spectators can read from the film" was dramatically restricted, and male control of female desire and the female body is reasserted (Weiss, 1992, p. 96).

Between 1970 and 1974 alone, some twenty different vampire movies with lesbian themes were produced by international studios (Keesey, 1993). The Hammer's *Karnstein Trilogy* made Carmilla into a formula; a beautiful, sexually aggressive vampire who seduces young women and is eventually destroyed; as John Craig Holte

discusses, the overall pattern is the one where “female vampires, although depicted as sexually attractive and intelligent, are destroyed at the end” (Holte, 1999, p. 166):

Both the films based on “Carmilla” [*Daughters of Darkness* and *Countess Dracula*] and those using Elizabeth Bathory²⁴ as a source feature intelligent, sexually active female vampires whose destruction at the end of the films restores traditional values after viewers have had the opportunity to enjoy narratives full of forbidden pleasures. (Ibid., p. 167)

Cinema allowed the lesbian consent to become explicit, but under the controlling framework of the male gaze and the requirement that transgressive sexuality has to be punished.

The lesbian vampire film of the 1970s exemplifies Mulvey’s male gaze in its post-censorship, post-sexual revolution form, in several specific ways, including the perspective shift present in *The Vampire Lovers* and discussed above. From the first-person narration attributed to Laura in the book, the film changes the perspective, following Carmilla and introducing a mysterious man in black who watches the vampire drain victims, quite literally embodying the male gaze through which the male audience can place himself in the scenes. Another fundamental element is the bisexual love triangle, which Andrea Weiss identifies as a recurring trope in these films: a human couple formed by a man and a woman is threatened by a vampire who seduces the woman. The man represents the church, family and social order, and therefore goodness, while the lesbian represents evil and eroticism. The erotic content is framed as a threat to be overcome, but the camera dwells on it – the film exists for male titillation and moral condemnation (Weiss, 1999).

These films embody men’s anxieties about the sexual revolution and the second wave of feminism, while at the same time providing an “excuse” to look at women making out. The result is a paradox: the 1970s lesbian vampire cycle offered perhaps the most visible representation of lesbianism in the history of cinema up to that point, but almost

²⁴ A historical figure who is depicted in the film as a vampire who has survived over three hundred years until contemporaneity.

entirely filtered through a heterosexual male film structure. This is the male-gaze and its post-censorship form, exactly as Mulvey would describe it a few years later: the female body is displayed as a spectacle coded for *to-be-looked-at-ness* and nudity “freezes the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19), which is exactly what happens in the *Karnstein* films.

The Vampire Lovers is widely regarded as the best movie among the trilogy, “a low-key drama, with more naked flesh than blood on view” (Canavan, 2016, p. 23). It was not well received critically but was commercially successful and gave Ingrid Pitt cult status as the “Queen of Vampires”. The sequel were less successful: *Lust for a Vampire* is generally considered weaker, and *Twins of Evil* had the least lesbian content. Critics note that the acting in Hammer films was inconstant and the films are difficult to take seriously today, as Canavan underline that he “found it difficult to take [the movie] seriously” (Ibid.).

The lesbian vampire became the limit case of Mulvey’s argument: a figure whose erotic charge depended on the male gaze, whose visibility was real but circumscribed and whose proliferation in the 1970s marked not liberation from patriarchal looking relation but their adaptation to a post-censorship landscape. Censorship fell, but the gaze remained male. The sexual revolution liberated on-screen sex, but it liberated it into a pre-existing patriarchal visual structure. The lesbian vampire films of the 1970s could show what the 1930s could only hint at, but the showing was done for a heterosexual male spectator, with the lesbian vampire’s desire reframed as erotic spectacle available to the male viewer through the surrogate watcher placed inside the film.

3.2.2 From Exploitation to Reclamation: The Legacy of Cinematic Carmilla

The social relevance of Carmilla on film changed again as queer audiences began to reappropriate these images. Sarah Fonseca notes that while these earlier films were “problematic”, queer viewers who had no other lesbian representation “took what they could get”, and many have since begun to enjoy them “as an act of reclamation” (Fonseca as cited in Kim, 2019, para. 6). Watching through a camp lens creates “the space for an identification with the vampire’s secret, forbidden” desires (Ibid.). The most recent wave of Carmilla adaptations marks a decisive break. The KindaTV web series is particularly explicit in its revision. Crape notes that:

This adaptation of Carmilla recognizes the harm in its source text and responds to authoritative rejection of queer desire by presenting an adaptation in a form which makes visible the multiplicity of voices that inform the story and reinforcing through the character dynamics the value of varying perspectives. (Ibid., p. 11)

Because the 1970s exploitation film industry had no investment in positive representation, it paradoxically produced, as a result, the most visible lesbian content of the twentieth century. All the following adaptations put images of women kissing, undressing, and expressing desire for each other on screens worldwide at a time when mainstream Hollywood would not touch the subject. This created the strange situation where, for decades, there were “more queer vampire movies than there were queer any-other-genre-of-movie, by quite a wide margin” (Century, 2015, para. 3). The cost of such visibility was that in order to attract mass (male) audiences, the lesbian had to be a monster; she had to be presented as a danger to social order, her desire framed as a predatory threat. The commercial model demanded titillation, then punishment. The lesbian vampire became the archetypal model for the figure of the predatory lesbian, a character constructed as a threat to heterosexual femininity who targets innocent straight women and whose elimination is ultimately represented as necessary. This trope migrated far beyond horror into comedy, drama and everyday social perception. The commercialized vampire film taught audiences a visual language in which lesbian desire reads as inherently threatening, inherently about seduction and betrayal. The film *Lesbian Vampire Killers* (2009) is a direct descendant – a comedy that uncritically replicates the Hammer formula: two men must destroy a horde of oversexualized lesbian vampires who threaten white men’s sexual ability and white women’s safety. The Hays Code required that any character whose “deviance” was implied must face punishment or death. The exploitation films that revived Carmilla in the 1970s inherited this structure and baked it into the genre’s DNA even after the Code was gone. The lesbian vampire *always* dies at the end – beheaded in *The Vampire Lovers*, impaled in *Blood and Roses* and staked in *Lust for a Vampire*. This became a narrative expectation: lesbian desire on screen was permissible only if it culminated in

the death of the desiring woman. The trope of the queer character eventually killed at disproportionately high rates that continues to provoke outrage in contemporary television and film has its direct roots in this commercialization formula, a formula the *Carmilla* adaptations helped standardize.

The same films that objectified lesbian desire also produced the conditions for a queer counter-reading. Because the exploitation aesthetic was often cheap, the acting variable, and the plots absurd, the films lent themselves to camp reception. Queer audiences learned to watch *through* the male gaze, extracting pleasure and identification from material that was never designed for them. Andrea Weiss claims that:

Camp creates the space for an identification with the vampire's secret, forbidden sexuality which doesn't also demand participation in one's own victimization as a requisite for cinematic pleasure. (Weiss, 1993, p. 108)

This is a direct cultural consequence of commercialization: the films were made for men, but queer audiences took them anyway and made them their own. The camp reading of the lesbian vampire became a formative part of queer cinephilia and a model for how marginalized audiences can reclaim hostile texts.

The most significant consequence may be the wave of “by queer for queer” vampire works that have emerged in explicit reaction to the exploitation model. The *Carmilla* web series (2014-2016) is the clearest example: it adapts Le Fanu's novella for a modern queer audience, presents Laura as a vlogger, and consciously reverses the dynamics of the 1970s films. The vampire is not a predatory monster but a love interest, and the narrative is built for the pleasure of queer young women, not heterosexual men (Kim, 2019). These works could not exist without the commercialization that made *Carmilla* a known name. They are reactions against, but also descendants of, the Hammer template.

The commercialized framing of *Carmilla* created durable expectations. When mainstream media depicts lesbian desire today, it often still defaults to the visual language established by the exploitation films: soft-focus, aestheticized, designed to be beautiful for a presumed heterosexual spectator. The “two women kissing for male

attention” trope in everything from music videos to prestige television owes a direct debt to the commercial calculus of Hammer and its European peers:

Female desire and lesbian desire are still very much stigmatized or, at least, misinterpreted, largely because they’re seen from the perspective of men for the most part. (Smith as cited in Berman, 2016, para. 14)

The commercialization of queer desire through the *Carmilla* adaptations produced a paradox that remains unresolved. It made Carmilla known – far more widely known than Le Fanu’s novella ever was on its own. It put lesbian imagery on screens worldwide at a time when no other genre would. But it did so by encoding queer desire as monstrous, predatory and punishable; by framing it for male pleasure rather than lesbian identification; and by establishing visual and narrative tropes that continue to shape how lesbianism is represented in popular culture today. The reclamation work of the past decade is a direct response to this legacy: an attempt to free Carmilla from the commercialized frame that made her famous.

3.3 The Politics of Adaptation: Rewriting Carmilla Across Media

The three major adaptations of Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (considering the novella itself, the Hammer Film Production *Karnstein Trilogy* and the KindaTV web series) do not simply retell the same story in different media. Each enacts a fundamentally different relationship between narrative authority, visual pleasure, queer desire and the audience it imagines. Tracing the shifts between them reveals how medium, commercial context and historical moment reshape the politics of representing lesbian desire.

Le Fanu’s novella is a frame narrative; Laura’s first-person account is introduced and authenticated by an anonymous editor who vouches for Doctor Hesselius, a German metaphysician whose scholarly expertise guarantees the truth of the supernatural events. The editor assures the reader that Hesselius’s accompanying essay reflects his “usual learning and acumen, and with remarkable directness and condensation” (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 243). The story is thus presented as a *case study* – a document for scientific scrutiny – and the reader is positioned as a fellow investigator, receiving authorized knowledge through a chain of credentialed men. This structure does

ideological work. By framing queer desire within medical and legal discourse, the novella pathologizes it in the very act of giving it voice. Laura's language betrays this: she describes Carmilla's advances using the word "paroxysm", a term that simultaneously means an emotional climax and a recurring episode of disease (Crape, 2023). Carmilla herself confesses "I suffered from this very illness" (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 270), equating her vampiric nature with her same-sex desire. At the story's climax, the Baron and the General (representatives of medical and patriarchal authority) destroy Carmilla, and Laura is restored to her father's house, her story now safely contained within Hesselius's casebook. The literary form itself enacts the containment of queer desire by hegemonic authority.

The Hammer films of the 1970s do not inherit this structure of textual authority, they replace it with the authority of the camera. Where the novella frames its story as a document to be interpreted, the films frame their content as a spectacle to be consumed. The "case study" vanishes; what remains is the visual display of the female body, organized not by medical discourse but by commercial logic. The *Karnstein Trilogy* opens with *The Vampire Lovers* presenting "more naked flesh than blood" and "the understated eroticism of Le Fanu's original becomes full-on nudity and more" (Canavan, 2016, p. 23). The intermediary of scholarly authority is replaced by the intermediary of the camera, which mediated the relationship between spectator and spectacle. But this camera is not neutral; as Mulvey argues, it "projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (Mulvey, 1989, p.19). The cinematic apparatus itself becomes the new authority, and its authority is the male gaze.

The KindaTV web series breaks decisively with both models. The frame narrative is replaced by the vlog format: Laura is a journalism student at Silas University, and what the spectators watch is her class project. The opening title card includes her Twitter handle, an invitation to contact her and participate (Crape, 2023). Where Le Fanu's frame closes the story off (it is a completed case, submitted to an expert), the web series keeps the story open – Laura's knowledge is partial, the investigation is ongoing, and the audience is invited to contribute. Crape notes that the "central villain is closely aligned with the idea of authority" (Ibid., p. 6): Carmilla's mother, the Dean, embodies hegemonic, singular, patriarchal power, and her defeat requires a coalition of multiple perspectives – Laura's storytelling, LaFontaine's science, Carmilla's strategic cunning,

the fan community's collective knowledge. Where the novella consolidates authority in a single male expert and the films consolidate it in the male gaze, the web series actively fragments it.

The most consequential difference between the literary and cinematic adaptations is the transformation of who sees and who is seen. In Le Fanu's novella, Laura *sees* and *speaks*. The story is told from her first-person perspective. The readers have access to her interiority – her fear, her repulsion, her undeniable attraction. When Carmilla kisses her, Laura reports: “I experienced a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable, ever and anon, mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust” (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 264). Laura is the subject of perception; she is not the object of a gaze within the diegesis, rather, she registers the ambiguity of her own desire. The reader sees Carmilla through Laura's conflicted consciousness.

The Hammer films reverse this entirely. *The Vampire Lovers* changes the perspective of the story by introducing a mysterious black man who follows Carmilla and observes her while she drains the blood of her victims, embodying the male gaze through which the male audience watches the scenes. The female protagonist's subjective experience is displaced by a male surrogate watcher inside the film. The audience does not see through Laura's eyes, they see through the eyes of a man who watches women undress, kiss and die. The intimate, confessional tone of the literary text is replaced by the voyeuristic distance of the cinematic apparatus. This is precisely Mulvey's split: “[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19). The Andrea Weiss “bisexual love triangle” deepens this structural point. In the Hammer films, the man represents order, family, the church; the lesbian vampire represents evil and erotic spectacle. The narrative requires the man to overcome the vampire, but the camera dwells on her body in ways that contradict the moral condemnation. The films want the spectator to be aroused by what he is also supposed to fear and reject; this contradiction is the male gaze working at full capacity: female sexuality is displayed as spectacle and then punished, allowing the male spectator to enjoy the display without guilt. The punishment absolves the pleasure.

The KindaTV web series restores Laura's subjective control, but through a medium that makes that control visible. Laura does not merely narrate, she *edits*. She chooses

what to include, what to cut and how to frame her story. In a critical sequence, Laura and Carmilla begin kissing enthusiastically, and the image cuts to a rainbow “technical difficulties” screen²⁵ with the message “Oops, we did it again!”, and editorial choice that Crape identifies as deliberately refusing “fetishization of lesbian desire” (Crape, 2023, p. 9). Laura, as editor, withholds the kiss from the voyeuristic gaze of the audience; she grants herself and Carmilla privacy. This is a direct subversion of the cinematic mode, which demands visibility, and an answer to Mulvey’s charge that mainstream film codes the erotic into the language of patriarchal order. By controlling *when* to show and *when* to hide, the web series reclaims the right to representation without objectification.

The literary text and the cinematic text operate on fundamentally different economies of eroticism. Le Fanu’s novella works through implication. Canavan observes that:

[A]nyone turning to the book for the first time after watching a film version may be disappointed at the lack of explicit sex scenes, lesbian or otherwise, as, in keeping with the rest of the story, Le Fanu implies more than he tells. (Canavan, 2016, p. 23)

The erotic charge of the novella lies in what is *not* shown, in the gaps between Carmilla’s declarations of love and Laura’s ambiguous responses, in the fever dreams and the “strange tumultuous excitement” (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 264). The reader must imagine the body, and imagination permits identification across lines of gender and desire. A queer reader in 1872 could find herself in Laura’s ambivalence precisely because the text did not fix the meaning of that ambivalence into visual certainty.

The cinematic adaptation *must* show: film is a visual medium, and the 1970s exploitation market demanded that visibility be explicit. The Hammer films translated Le Fanu’s ambiguity into a visual language of nude bodies, parted lips, and eroticized violence. However, this translation came with a cost; when the camera shows Carmilla’s body being massaged, or undressed, or bitten, it fixes that body as an object. There is no ambiguity, no interiority, only the surface offered to the gaze. The literary

²⁵ The message or image displayed when a television broadcast is interrupted because of equipment failure, signal loss, censorship or transmission problems. In film and television directors sometimes deliberately incorporate a fake technical difficulties screen as a stylistic or narrative device.

Laura can say the pleasurable tumultuous excitement she felt was “ever and anon, mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust” (Ibid.) and leave the reader suspended between both; the cinematic spectator is given no such suspension. He is positioned to feel one thing: desire for the spectacle, followed by relief when the spectacle is destroyed. The erotic is externalized, and in being externalized, it is also commodified. The KindaTV web series finds a third path: a visual medium that refuses the logic of visual exploitation. By placing Laura behind the camera as much as in front of it, the series allows her to be seen *and* to control how she is seen. The eroticism of the series operates through the vlog form’s intimacy – the direct address to camera, the unpolished framing, the sense that Laura is speaking to us personally. When the series does become explicitly romantic, it uses techniques (such as the cutaway²⁶ or the “technical difficulties” screen) that acknowledge the audience’s desire to see while simultaneously refusing to satisfy it on the audience’s terms. As Duzevin-Caubet argues:

Editorial control makes this a humorous, endearing moment which Laura chooses to share with her viewers rather than a fetishization of lesbian desire. (Duzevin-Caubet as cited in Crape, 2023, p. 9)

Furthermore, each adaptation operates within a distinct cultural logic of queer desire. Le Fanu wrote *Carmilla* at the precise historical moment when European medicine was codifying homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder. The novella’s medicalized language is not incidental to its plot, it is the lens through which the story makes sense to its contemporary audience. Laura’s father calls in doctors; the Baron arrives with expert knowledge of vampires; the frame narrator is a scholar of the supernatural. Every authority figure reaffirms that Carmilla’s desire is a disease that must be cured by death. As Crape notes, the text “capitulates to authoritative statements of queer desire as perverse by portraying Carmilla’s lesbianism as a dimension of her evil” (Ibid., p. 6). The literary form pathologizes in the act of representing.

²⁶ A film editing technique in which the camera briefly cuts away from the main action to show else that is related to the scene before returning to the primary action. The audience therefore temporarily stops watching the central event and is shown another person, object, reaction or detail that provides additional information.

The Hammer film operate in a post-pathologization, pre-liberation space: the medical discourse of the novella is largely absent, no one calls a doctor to diagnose Carmilla's condition, but the commercial logic of exploitation market creates a different kind of framing. Lesbian desire is not sickness to be cured; it is a spectacle to be sold. Andrea Weiss argues that:

The archetypal lesbian vampire rose to prominence at the exact point in time when the concept of lesbian identity was first coming into widespread public discourse [...] that particular image of the lesbian vampire represented a displacement of anxiety over the potential for the lesbian feminist movement. (Weiss, 1992, p. 92)

The films respond to the threat of feminist and lesbian visibility by containing it within the male gaze: there are lesbians, but they are monsters, they exist for male enjoyment and they die at the end. The Hammer films show more than Le Fanu could, but they show it in a frame that negates the subjectivity of the women being shown.

The KindaTV series operates in a post-liberation, post-identity-politics space. Crape observes that "Laura Hollis is gay without having to 'come out'" (Crape, 2023, p. 7). Queerness is simply the default for most characters. The supernatural is also normalized: the series treats alchemy clubs and vampire hunters and interdimensional goddesses as routine features of university life. This normalization is not incidental; it is the series' central political gesture. By making queerness ordinary rather than spectacular, the series refuses both the pathologization framework of the literary text and the spectacularizing framework of the exploitation films. The Dean's claim that "stone cannot love flesh" (that a vampire cannot genuinely love a human woman) is the last echo of the novel's pathologizing logic, and it is proven wrong.

Moreover, the endings of the three texts crystallize their differences. Le Fanu's Carmilla is killed by the Baron, acting with the authority of expert knowledge, and by Laura's father, acting with the authority of patriarchy. The General, whose niece Carmilla previously killed, completes the triad of masculine vengeance. Laura is separated from Carmilla and returned to the domestic order. The story is then bound

into Doctor Hesselius's casebook, the final act of containment. Queer desire is narrated, pathologized and entombed. As Nina Auerbach notes:

[J]ust as Laura's life is melting into Carmilla's, the story is forced on track by the entrance of the General, whose daughter was Carmilla's previous victim. The General thus restores male authority on both a diabolical and a domestic plane. (Auerbach, 1995, p. 46)

The Hammer films follow the same plot structure (Carmilla is beheaded, the male order is restored) but the meaning is different. The death is now also a visual climax: it is the final eroticized image, the moment the monster gets what she deserves. The trope of the queer character eventually killed is not a moral necessity (as it was under the Hays Code) but a narrative formula that the exploitation market found profitable, the lesbian must die because the audience paid to see her desire, and then paid to see her punished for it.

The KindaTV series inverts this completely. Carmilla does not die, Laura and Carmilla survive together: the goddess of death and suffering takes pity on them after Laura is killed by the Dean and revives her, allowing Carmilla to have her lover back. The series ends with the two women walking out of the wreckage holding each other. Crape emphasizes this as the decisive break: "the rehabilitating of queer feelings and connections reframes authority within the narrative" (Crape, 2023, p. 1). The Dean's absolute authority is defeated not by any single rival authority, but by the combined efforts of queer character who each contribute their own way of understanding the world. The final episodes reveal that Laura's role as "storyteller" is the key to defeating the Dean. Storytelling, not expert knowledge, not visual spectacle, is what saves them. Finally, every adaptation constructs its implied spectator differently: Le Fanu's novella imagines a reader who is educated, literate and comfortable with the apparatus of scholarly discourse – the frame narrative, the medical terminology and the legal documents. This reader assumed to share the cultural consensus that queer desire is a form of pathology or perversion. The story can be enjoyed as Gothic sensation precisely because its moral and medical frameworks are secure.

The Hammer films imagine a heterosexual male spectator: the camera positions him to watch women, to desire them and to feel validated when they are destroyed. The films do not imagine a lesbian viewer; if one watches, she must perform the camp reading that Andrea Weiss describes – identifying with the vampire’s “secret, forbidden sexuality” while refusing “participation in one’s own victimization” (Weiss, 1992, p. 108).

The KindaTV web series explicitly imagines a queer female audience. Laura addresses the camera in the intimate direct-address style of the YouTube vlogger: she speaks to “us” as her confidantes. The fan community is woven into the series’ production: the creators produced bonus content in response to fan enthusiasm, maintained character Twitter accounts that interacted with viewers, and attended the fan-organized *CarmillaCon*. As Kumar notes, “Carmilla’s online fan culture can also be understood as an archive of lesbian feeling” (Kumar as cited in Crape, p. 4). The series does not just tolerate a queer audience; it is built for one.

The journey from Le Fanu’s 1872 novella to the 1970s Hammer films to the 2014 web series is not a linear progression toward a better representation. Each adaptation makes different trade-offs. The literary text grants Laura interiority and narrative control but confines her story within a medico-legal frame that pathologizes queer desire. The Hammer films liberate lesbian desire from the closet of subtext – they show it on screen for the first time – but they show it through a visual apparatus that objectifies the women and punished them for the pleasure they provide. The KindaTV series restores narrative authority to a female storyteller and normalizes queerness without spectacle, but it operates in a post-censorship, post-network media environment that makes representation easier than it was for either of its predecessors.

What remains constant across all three is the figure of Carmilla herself, the lesbian vampire who refuses to stay dead, who keeps returning to be adapted, reclaimed and reimaged. Laura’s final words in Le Fanu’s novella are: “the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations – sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw in the ruined church” (Le Fanu, 2008, p. 319). That ambiguity – the oscillation between affection and horror, visibility and concealment, subject and object – is the space that adaptation itself inhabits. Each new version decides, through its medium, which pole of that alternation to privilege.

CONCLUSIONS

The cultural significance of *Carmilla* lies not only in Le Fanu's original novella but also in the extensive network of reinterpretations that have reshaped its meaning over time. Whether through its reclamation as a foundational queer text or through its commercialization within exploitation cinema, *Carmilla*'s afterlife has been fundamental to the novella's survival and continued relevance. Indeed, it can be argued that *Carmilla* would not occupy its current position within literary, cultural and queer studies without the numerous adaptations and critical reinterpretations that have continually reimagined the character for new audiences and historical contexts.

As this thesis has sought to demonstrate, the vampire has always functioned as a cultural barometer of social anxieties. From the eighteenth-century vampire panics associated with disease, death and the fear of bodily corruption, to the sophisticated literary vampires of the nineteenth century and the queer reinterpretations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the figure has repeatedly served as a vehicle through which societies articulate and negotiate their fears. The vampire is therefore never a fixed entity; rather, it is remarkably adaptable cultural symbol capable of absorbing changing concerns about gender, sexuality, race, class and social belonging. The first chapter traced the historical and literary evolution of the vampire, highlighting how later authors transformed the figure from a folkloric revenant into a psychologically complex literary character. Each vampire examined reflected the specific cultural tensions of its historical moment. Goethe's bride in *The Bride of Corinth* embodies anxieties surrounding female desire, repression and religious conflict; Hoffmann's Aurelia in *Vampirism* occupied an abject and unstable space between desire and madness; Polidori's Lord Ruthven represents aristocratic decadence and the threat posed by elite corruption. Within this genealogy, *Carmilla* emerges as a decisive turning point. Unlike her predecessors, she is neither simply a monster nor merely a seducer. Instead, she embodies a form of female autonomy that challenges patriarchal structures through her refusal of heterosexual norms, her pursuit of same-sex desire and her persistence beyond death. Her significance derives precisely from her ambiguity: she is simultaneously threatening and attractive,

monstrous and sympathetic, condemned by the narrative yet never entirely silenced by it.

The second chapter explored how this ambiguity enabled later feminist and queer critics to reclaim *Carmilla* as a foundational text of queer Gothic literature. Although Le Fanu wrote within a Victorian cultural framework that frequently associated female same-sex desire with deviance and pathology, the novella repeatedly destabilizes its own mechanisms of containment. Through the theoretical perspectives of Judith Butler and Barbara Creed, *Carmilla* was examined as a figure capable of exposing the inability of normative categories of gender and sexuality. rather than reading vampirism exclusively as a metaphor for corruption, these approaches reveal its potential as a site of resistance, transformation and alternative subjectivity. The comparison with *Dracula* further emphasized this distinction. Whereas Stoker ultimately restores patriarchal order through the reassertion of masculine authority, Le Fanu leaves unresolved traces of female desire that continue to haunt the narrative even after *Carmilla*'s destruction. It is precisely this unresolved tension that has allowed subsequent generations of reader to reinterpret *Carmilla* not merely as a monster but as a symbol of queer possibility.

The third chapter demonstrated how adaptation has played a crucial role in shaping the modern understanding of *Carmilla*. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's conception of adaptation as reinterpretation rather than replication, the chapter examined how different media have produces radically different versions of the character. Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* illustrates the emancipatory potential of adaptation by transforming the vampire into a Black queer protagonist whose existence is defined by reciprocity, chosen kinship and self-determination rather than predation and punishment. Gomez develops possibilities only hinted at within Le Fanu's text, turning the vampire into a figure of liberation and community.

By contrast, the cinematic adaptations analysed in the final section reveal a very different trajectory. The Hammer *Karnstein Trilogy* and related exploitation films appropriated *Carmilla*'s lesbianism as a source of visual spectacle designed primarily for heterosexual male audiences. Through eroticized cinematography, voyeuristic framing and the repeated punishment of the desiring female vampire, these films transformed queer desire into a commercial product. Yet the legacy of these

adaptations remains deeply paradoxical. While they reinforced damaging stereotypes by associating lesbianism with predation and monstrosity, they also provided some of the most visible representations of female same-sex desire available during a period when mainstream sited of late queer reclamation, demonstrating how audiences can produce meanings that exceed the intentions of creators.

The trajectory from Le Fanu's novella to contemporary adaptations ultimately reveals the extraordinary flexibility of Carmilla as a cultural figure. Across more than a century of reinterpretations, she has functioned as monster, seductress, victim, feminist icon, queer ancestor, object of erotic spectacle and symbol of liberation. Each version reflects the concerns of its historical moment, yet all remain connected by the tensions already present in Le Fanu's original text. Carmilla's lasting power derives not from a single stable meaning but from her capacity to sustain contradictory interpretations simultaneously.

Ultimately, this thesis has argued that the cultural importance of *Carmilla* lies precisely in its ambiguity. Le Fanu created a character who embodies Victorian fears of female autonomy and same-sex desire, yet he also produced a narrative that cannot fully suppress those possibilities. The history of Carmilla's reception demonstrates how texts continue to generate new meanings long after their publication, becoming sites of negotiation between competing cultural values. From nineteenth-century Gothic fiction to contemporary queer media, Carmilla has remained a figure through which questions of gender, sexuality and power can be explored, challenged and reimagined. More than a century after her creation, she continues to haunt literature and popular culture, not simply as a vampire, but as one of the most enduring and transformative figures in the Gothic tradition.

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