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# **“But to die as lovers may”**

*An exploration of Victorian anxieties concerning  
female sexuality in Sheridan Le Fanu’s ‘Carmilla’*

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# Abstract

Le Fanu's decision to couple innocent Laura with vampiric Carmilla coincides with the Victorian anxiety concerning the rise of female sexual knowledge. To put it simply, their relationship deviates from the Victorian marriage ideals, and therefore assuming the position to threaten male authority. This thesis aims to discuss how Laura's inability to understand her sexual feelings is a manifestation of her repression, and how her introduction to sexual knowledge through Carmilla was seen as threatening to Victorian society because of it possibly leading to the degeneration of male authority. Even though it is possible to see Laura as a representation of the repressed angel of Victorian society, there is ample evidence to argue that Laura is not as passionless as is hoped. Carmilla, as the vampire, metaphorically spreads her knowledge by killing young women; the killing of women can be seen as a non-procreative spreading of knowledge. Looking at the narration, the similarity between death and knowledge, and the metaphorical sword, this thesis will show that women had knowledge, but not authority. By starting to gain this authority, they threaten the already dominant male authority, stating the degeneration of men.

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## Introduction

Carmilla is presented with many forms, a cat, a black mass, and a beautiful girl. She refuses to be bound by anything other than her own restrictions, separating herself from the heteronormative society that the Victorian era applauded themselves with promoting. A vampire, a monster, often seen as the epidemic of people's fears could, in this novella, be presented as a sexually knowledgeable woman spreading her freedom to others. Victorian society, however, did not take this spreading of knowledge lightly; women were supposed to be ignorant, asexual, and innocent. The homoerotic relationship between Carmilla and Laura could therefore, despite being the epitome of female liberation, be seen as a threat to the male part of society, discarding them of their well-guarded dominance.

How, then, does Le Fanu present the complexities of experiencing sexuality for the first time after a lifetime of repression, using this repression to discuss how reimagining women as sexual beings could threaten the heteronormative ideals of "the angel in the house", causing the degeneration of male authority and dominance? By focusing on the repression of Laura, the narration finds itself unreliable, bringing forward Laura's psychological alienation from her male counterparts, as well as her inability to fully understand Carmilla's advances towards her. By coupling innocent, pure Laura with the deceitful, vampiric Carmilla, Le Fanu presents both the ideal and the threat of Victorian society, which is the creation of a non-procreative spreading of knowledge that produces hysterical women, something that could start the degeneration of male authority.

## The angel in the house

Although the "angel in the house" has survived centuries, she is generally closely related to the nineteenth century, where her role is connected through becoming an object of exchange for male success. In view of this objectification, according to Joan M. Hoffman, the ideal of "the angel in the house" struggled with the conflicting decision of wanting personal authenticity or conforming to the dictates of society (Hoffman 265). In *Carmilla*, this ideal is seen through Laura's conflicting feelings concerning whether to conform or delve into homoerotic feelings. She was expected to uphold the house in her own secluded sphere, disconnected from her husband's public world, bound to the framework constructed by society's strict norms of conformity. Ironically, her role was to produce children, while remaining a pure, asexual being.

Her role, in contrast to the degrading vision of her seclusion, was also perceived as superhuman; the woman, the mother, was at the top of the generosity scale, eternally feminine and perfect. There was no space for experimenting, no space for exploring one's own person.

Hoffman states that, because of social roles sanctioned for the husband and wife, marriage endorsed a dichotomization, a divide, of the sexes (265). The masculine and the feminine is then placed in a hierarchy where the "natural" distinction between the two is based on male dominance and female submission (Hoffman 265). Because of the divide of the dominant and the submissive, a father had, by default, full dominance over his daughter's future, where his success would increase by marrying her off to another man who then receives the dominance over her, continuing the cycle of repression.

In *Carmilla*, Le Fanu presents this attempt at maintaining a successful household through Laura's father marriage proposal between Laura and General Spielsdorf: "I wish our good friend, the General, had chosen any other time; that is, I wish you had been perfectly well to receive him (Le Fanu 73)", "You are going to the Ruins of Karnstein? [...] I hope you are thinking of claiming the title and estates? (76)" Here, both the wish for a marriage, and the expectation of the woman as a perfect specimen, is present. The first citation hints at the disappointment Laura's father feels when he sees that she does not present herself how a potential wife should. The second shows a hopeful father with a wish to exchange both title and estate of his late wife through a marriage between the general and Laura. As a result, Laura becomes an object of exchange for the success of Victorian society.

When forced into a restricting ideal, women could already be considering their deviation ages before they act on it. When somebody is constantly limited to their surroundings, without a change of scenery, the thought of diversity could push them to rebellion. This, I believe, is what happens to Laura when Carmilla is introduced and a relationship between them is established. As a matter of fact, her rebellion is foreshadowed in chapter two by her father: "[...] I feel as if some great misfortune were hanging over us. I suppose the poor General's afflicted letter has had something to do with it (Le Fanu 21)." The general's letter expresses his sadness over the loss of his ward, ignorant of Carmilla being the face of the perpetrator, and the second after Laura's father makes this comment, Carmilla's carriage arrives, signaling the beginning of the end of Laura's sexual ignorance.

## A state of repression

Without an in-depth reading, one could assume *Carmilla* was a story concerning the conflict between vampire and human. However, reading between the lines, it may be conceivable to read it as a story of the introduction of knowledge, establishing a conflicting duality within a confining society. In «Carmilla: The Arts of Repression», William Veeder argues that *Carmilla* is ultimately a tale of repression and that Laura experiences situations where what she wants is conflicted with what she should want (Veeder 198). As he states:

Those who see “Carmilla” as the tale of a Victorian heroine saved from a deadly predator will define the dualism as vampire-human; those who find a second, sexual layer will add lesbian-heterosexual (Veeder 197).

Veeder’s quotation introduces what Le Fanu comments on in the prologue: Laura’s account of her experience with Carmilla is described as “some of the profoundest arcana of our dual existence (Le Fanu 9),” strengthening Veeder’s argument of the story’s duality. From my perspective, considering Veeder’s comment, the dual existence of Laura’s account could illustrate the conflict between conforming to heterosexuality and experiencing homoerotic desire. I base this on how Laura tries to rationalize and divert to heteronormativity in moments of passion with Carmilla, for instance in chapter four: “What if a boyish lover had found his way into the house, and sought to prosecute his suit in masquerade, with the assistance of a clever old adventuress (Le Fanu 36).” Laura describes her conflicting feelings as “a tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable [...] mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust (Le Fanu 35)”, presenting her conflicting dual existence provoked by the pressure of conformity.

Laura begins her exposure to passion through Carmilla, which raises the question of whether women had passion or not; *Carmilla* says yes, they do. The clear conflict when Laura experiences sexual pleasure, but cannot understand it, conjures up the argument that the society in which she was raised has affected her ability to understand sexual feelings. This idea of female passion suddenly being perceived as factual, I feel represents how Laura is, as Veeder states, “too implicated emotionally to understand and explain events fully (200).” To rephrase, Laura is not passionless, but she is unable to fully present a veracious account of her feelings. Tamar Heller ties this thought together by saying that Laura’s knowledge about her desires exists on a point of conscious self-censorship (Heller 85-86). In conclusion, she knows her confusing feelings are connected to Carmilla’s caresses, but because she represents the ideal

Victorian woman, she simultaneously represses them and discards them as something out of her limits of understanding.

As mentioned, Laura's upbringing influences her ability to clearly convey her experiences; because her repression acts as a mode of self-censorship, her narration becomes unreliable. She comments on her unreliability in the novella: "I have said that this is a very lonely place. Judge whether I say truth (Le Fanu 11)", this comment is made post-Carmilla, as her account consists of what has already happened, and presents the equivocality of her narration. She makes a presumption that her home is lonely, but simultaneously states that her presumption might be wrong. This brings back Heller's argument considering the conscious self-censorship, as Laura expresses that there might be faults in her narrative.

Veeder contributes to the argument about her unreliable narration by bringing forward the syntax of abrogation, a grammar modification driven from guilt (201). I see the use of abrogation as Laura unconsciously withdrawing her subjectivity from her own experiences, as she feels guilt from deviating from the social norms of Victorian society.

From these foolish embraces [...] I used to wish to extricate myself; but my energies failed me. Her murmured words [...] soothed my resistance into a trance, from which I only seemed to recover myself when she withdrew her arms (Le Fanu 35).

Veeder argues that even though the "I" believes she is capable of resisting Carmilla, she eventually gives in and blames "my energies" and "my resistance" for her inability to resist (201). Managing to recover from the embraces, she brings back the personal "I", seemingly because the danger is over and there is no use feeling guilty anymore. In my view, Laura only feels connected to her own subjectivity when she tries to resist, something that can be connected to how her homoerotic feelings is not yet a part of herself. Concludingly, because of the pressure of the ideal of "the angel in the house", and because Laura is pushed into a state of repression, she becomes what we know as an unreliable narrator.

As a result of this repression, Laura merges into a feeling of isolation and alienation. Veeder argues that her repression is both a cause and an effect of this isolation (201). Using his statement, I find it feasible to argue that Laura's repression causes her to become psychologically alienated from her male counterparts. Veeder uses juxtaposition to present the picture of the separation of Laura and men. "Two servants and Madame were to sit up in my room that night; and the ecclesiastic with my father kept watch in the adjoining dressing-room (Le Fanu 105)," this scene occurs following the discovery of Carmilla's grave, possibly

signaling a sexual side-taking where Laura is separated from the influence of men (Veeder 202). There was a male sphere and a female sphere.

Her separation hints to how Laura is still influenced by Carmilla's knowledge and has not turned against her, as well as the sudden clear divide between the sexes. Laura also fears that she will become a laughingstock because of her father's lack of trust in her beliefs. "I remember my father coming up and standing at the bedside [...] and laughing very heartily at one of the answers (Le Fanu 15)," this citation, suggests how Laura is not taken seriously by her own father. Connecting this to the narration, her complete avoidance of her father's name amplifies the alienation from her father, consciously omitting it as a form of power. This pressures her even further into rebellion, and therefore strengthens the psychological alienation Laura experiences from men.

Owing to the fact that Laura's name is not mentioned until the end of chapter eight, it is possible to argue for the notion that Laura represents a part of society who all struggle with achieving knowledge. Veeder credits her lack of name to the fact that Laura represents every person, in every era, who overdevelop the conscious, who are not able to know themselves fully (199). Furthermore, when having attained this knowledge, Laura is named and starts noticeably changing, weakening and getting distinguishable from her old self. In my view, this is a representation of how women were not allowed any choice to develop their own personality; they were "devoid of any real power or actual personhood (Hoffman 265)," and criticized if they accomplished this. As a matter of fact, the initial mention of her name is made by her father with a comparison between her current state and her old self: "I wish my poor Laura was looking more like herself (Le Fanu 68)". When anonymous she represents all women, when named she represents her own being, as well as the women who deviate from Victorian society.

Laura's father's comment about his daughter's appearance presents a silent critique of Victorian women evolving outside of society's norms when connected to Veeder's previous argument. Her past self was repressed and therefore socially acceptable, but her new self is knowledgeable and therefore socially deviant. I consider this comparison necessary to the argument because it pushes the narrative that her father idealizes the innocent, pure nature of his daughter, and saddens when discovering that she is changing. Laura, however, has no insight into her father's assessment, and connects his statement to the only factor important for her at that moment: Carmilla's beauty: "Her beauty was, I think, enhanced by that graceful languor that was peculiar to her. I think my father was silently contrasting her looks with mine." I see



this as an example of how, when confronted with this newfound change, Laura craves what Carmilla symbolizes, the beauty of knowledge.

Heller states that the thread that bound together the Victorian domestic ideal was the notion of female passionlessness (Heller 79); using this statement I would argue that when Laura and Carmilla discards this ideal, Le Fanu presents society's fear concerning the sexual aura surrounding female friendships. Laura, the perfect example of a good-natured, innocent Victorian girl was suddenly thrust into a seemingly homoerotic relationship with Carmilla, a malicious vampire hiding behind a beautiful girl. "I did feel [...] 'drawn towards her,' but there was also something of repulsion. [...] the sense of attraction immensely prevailed (Le Fanu 31)." This is, I believe, an example of the conscious self-censorship Heller talked about. She circles around her attraction towards Carmilla, retracting to disgust when she considers the repercussions of her feelings, but ultimately backtracks and decides the attraction proves superior. In the presence of Carmilla, Laura was suddenly everything but passionless, her repressed sexuality peeking around the corner. I see this as a clear example of Le Fanu showing what he thought sexually loaded friendships or exposure to sexual knowledge could lead to - hysterical contagion. Laura is slowly, but surely, "infected" by Carmilla's hysterics, marking the end of Laura's innocent, docile character, possibly starting her rejection of the role as the passive bystander.

## The infection of the hysteric

As a result of the repercussions of living under the ideal of "the angel in the house", Laura struggles with the feeling of repression, a feeling that separates her into a dual existence where society's norms and ideals conflicts with her own desires. This repression, however, does not mean she is passionless, and with the help of Carmilla's charm, Laura's knowledge takes a turn and shows how she consciously self-censors her sexual knowledge because of the repression. What's more is how Carmilla triggers the passion in Laura, and how this could be connected to how society saw lesbian relationships as an infection of the hysteric.

In "The Vampire in the House - Hysteria, Female Sexuality, and Female Knowledge in Le Fanu's 'Carmilla'", Tamar Heller argues that sexual knowledge is pertinent when talking about hysterical contagion in *Carmilla* where one hysterical girl "infects" another. Drawing parallels to Victorian medicine, the word hysteric derives from the Greek word *hysteria*,

meaning uterus (Tyson 81), increasing the misogynistic thought that sexual women were hysterical. She mentions the French physician Falret and his comment on hysterics:

These patients are veritable actresses; they do not know of a greater pleasure than to deceive... the life of the hysteric is nothing but one perpetual falsehood; they affect the airs of piety and devotion... while at the same time secretly abandoning themselves to the most shameful actions (qtd. in Heller 81).

Carmilla's strange behavior is being passed as natural occurrences; her disappearances during the night explained as sleepwalking, her refusal to tell Laura about her lineage was "conducted with so pretty a melancholy and deprecations, and even passionate declarations of her liking for me [...] that I could not find it in my heart long to be offended with her" (Le Fanu 34). To look at it one way, Le Fanu created Carmilla as a depiction of the threatening lesbian woman. Victorian societies were trying to demonize female friendships, creating a narrative where lesbians were "infecting" young girls. To tie this argument to the story, I see Carmilla as a perfect example of Falret's description, as she is a master of deception and uses this to manipulate and kill her female counterparts. One could say that Le Fanu presents a stereotypical image of what Victorian society believed was the actions and behavior of the "female hysteric".

To strengthen my previous statement of Carmilla as the "female hysteric", one can look at how the moon was thought to influence hysteria in women. Heller discusses how the full moon was thought to evoke the menstrual cycle, signifying an introduction to female nervousness and hysteria (82). In chapter 5, the full moon is mentioned before one of Carmilla's episodes:

How beautiful she looked in the moonlight! [...] she quickly hid her face in my neck and hair, with tumultuous sight, that seemed almost to sob, and pressed in mine a hand that trembled (Le Fanu 47).

The moonlight pushes Carmilla into a fit of hysteria, invoking the fears of the sexually insatiable woman hiding behind her innocent façade. Just before Carmilla's carriage arrives, Mademoiselle De Lafontaine, Laura's governess, described that the effect of the moon "indicated a special spiritual activity. [...] It acted on dreams, it acted on lunacy, it acted on nervous people (Le Fanu 20)." Since the moon is at its highest when Carmilla arrives, it reinforces the idea that Carmilla is powered by the moon which supports the belief that hysteria was a female problem. For Carmilla it strengthens her knowledge and words as a base of power, while for Victorian society it works as a tool for further demonizing female sexuality.

Returning to the concept of Carmilla spreading an “infection”, the general knowledge in the context of the vampire bite is that it ends in death. However, from Carmilla’s perspective, death can be seen as romantic and sexual. Heller points to the sexual themes around Carmilla’s blithe attitude towards death:

”You are afraid to die?”

“Yes, everyone is.”

“But to die as lovers may – to die together, so that they may live together” (Le Fanu 43).

This quotation brings forward a pun on death and orgasm, where Carmilla attempts to convince Laura that women can also be sexual, and that it is natural for women to be sexual together (Heller 85). Heller states that nineteenth-century literature tried to depict sexual women as perversions or unnatural, but the way Carmilla enlightens Laura with her knowledge, is with a wish to strengthen and normalize female sexuality, especially homoeroticism (85).

Carmilla’s comment about death, and how it connects to orgasming, continues towards her analogy comparing caterpillar/butterflies to girls, arguing that the process of turning into a butterfly is similar to the process of achieving sexual knowledge. I believe that to compare women to caterpillars, is to metaphorically describe how women are bound until they set themselves free. “Girls are caterpillars while they live in the world, to be finally butterflies when the summer comes (Le Fanu 43).” The act of becoming a butterfly would then be interchangeable with achieving sexual knowledge. Heller’s statement about the similarity between death and orgasming would then bring a new element to the caterpillar analogy: dying would be to metaphorically become a butterfly, which again are both metaphors for the act of becoming sexually knowledgeable.

Using Laura’s father’s comment about her changing appearance could introduce another angle to the argument of the “infections” vampire, that being how Carmilla could be seen as an externalization of Laura’s sexuality. Heller states: “For, while Carmilla’s caresses of Laura can be read as homoerotic, they are also autoerotic, if we see Carmilla not just at the demonic outsider, but [...] a “mirror image” of Laura and thus an externalization of her own sexuality (Heller 82-82)”. She continues this argument by mentioning how Carmilla’s heritage, the Karnstein family, is known for its “atrocious lusts”, a note that reflects the stereotypes occurring in the Victorian era, where the racial Other was often seen as an embodiment of transgressive sexuality (83). Seeing as their similar ancestral background connects Carmilla and Laura

intimately, it strengthens the idea of Carmilla being an externalization of Laura's sexuality. I see Carmilla as Laura's lost connection to her mother's side, her long-lost connection to her own sexual knowledge.

Heller precedes to explain that while, in this case, the "atrocious lust" connected to Carmilla is often believed to be homosexuality, it could also be masturbation; such an act was said to cause hysteria in young women, originating often from the consummation of red meat (83). "I had grown pale, my eyes were dilated and darkened underneath (Le Fanu 61)"; Laura's symptoms is what Heller describes as, according to nineteenth-century medicine, classic symptoms of the masturbator (83). In other words, masturbation was seen as draining and sinful for women, therefore not acceptable. To further this observation, I feel it is important to state that Carmilla and Laura's caresses only transpire when they are alone together. Carmilla feeds off her blood – her way of consuming red meat – and reduces Laura to a weakened state. These nighttime caresses, including Carmilla feeding on Laura's blood, can be seen as a metaphor for masturbation. To put it differently, Carmilla embodies Laura's knowledge and experience after discovering personal pleasure.

Returning to Laura's aforementioned statement about Carmilla's beauty, the idea that Laura represents the repressed, innocent Victorian girl and Carmilla the sexually knowledgeable lesbian is strengthened by their contrasting appearances. Laura, the repressed, weakens when Carmilla, the knowledgeable gains power. A popular nineteenth-century discussion depicted female masturbation as "a vampire feeding on the lifeblood of its victims" (Heller 83), portraying female sexuality as a scene where the innocent is assaulted by evil incarnate. This creates an idea that sexual women had an entity inside of them controlling and weakening them, creating hysterical girls "infecting" each other with their knowledge.

It is also important to note that Laura's character is deeply ambivalent, for, even though she is seen through a lens of purity, she sometimes feels sexual attraction so powerful that she becomes the primary aggressor. "Certain vague and strange sensations visited me in my sleep. [...] My heart beat faster, my breathing rose and fell rapidly. [...] a sobbing, that rose into a sense of strangulation (Le Fanu 60-61)." If I focus on Carmilla as an externalization of Laura's sexuality, connecting it to the thought previously mentioned about masturbating women having an entity inside of them, these moments of powerful lust could represent a metaphorical merging of Carmilla and Laura. In a moment of passion, Laura becomes sexually enlightened, with Carmilla as this "entity", strengthened by their similar maternal lineage.

Heller expresses in her article that lesbianism in *Carmilla* starts a mental or intellectual parthenogenesis where one woman's knowledge gives birth to another's (88). She talks about how this non-procreative sexuality would not be accepted within the advocates of the domestic ideal, given that the perfect outcome for a Victorian woman would be to produce a child, again stressing the importance of "the angel in the house". I agree with this argument, as it depicts how women learning from each other was seen as disruptive to Victorian society, ultimately demonizing the transference of knowledge between women. As Laura states: "The precautions of nervous people are infectious, (Le Fanu 54)," Le Fanu's use of this non-procreative sexuality is therefore a clear reaction from a society who fear the liberation of women.

## The fear of degeneration

As this mental or intellectual parthenogenesis continues in *Carmilla*, Laura drifts further and further from male authority. The male characters experience a jump in attention, and slowly realizes what might have caused the strange malady terrorizing the village, starting the beginning of the end of female knowledge.

In "Repossessing the Body: Transgressive Desire in "Carmilla" and *Dracula*", Elizabeth Signoretti argues that, in *Carmilla*, because of men's lack of access to female dominated spheres, female friendships could potentially obtain greater power than heteronormative social structures due to them discrediting existing patriarchal social systems (609). To further her argument, I see it as a depiction of fears concerning the degeneration of male authority. As she states: "Le Fanu pushes his male characters, who lose all control over their women, toward the edge of his narrative (Signoretti 611)." As mentioned in my section about "the angel in the house", Victorian society relied on marriage and the exchange of women to uphold the Victorian social structures, for example through the arranged marriage between a woman and a man. It creates a bond between the two families, possibly starting an economically flourishing connection between them.

In *Carmilla*, the men are unable to exchange women because of Carmilla and Laura's homoerotic relationship, as well as Laura's psychological alienation from her male counterparts, spoiling possible future success and steering society towards a degeneration (Signorotti 611). At the end of chapter 6, Carmilla visits Laura in a nightmarish scene. However, Laura cannot contextualize the experience, and only mentions Carmilla as maybe playing a trick on her. This inability to place the blame on Carmilla, strengthens the argument that men

cannot exchange women because of their relationship. She is possessed by Carmilla's charm and knowledge and sees no interest in bringing her male counterparts into the plot. This is further understood in the next chapter where Laura refuses to tell her father about the terrifying scene, as she implies that he will not take her seriously:

I thought he would laugh at my story [...] I thought he might fancy that I had been attacked by the mysterious complaint which had invaded our neighborhood (Le Fanu 57).

As per mentioned earlier in the section about repression, the fear Laura experiences from the implication that her father will laugh at her, assumes an emotional and psychological alienation from her male counterparts, bringing forward the argument that this leads to a separation from male dominance. Signorotti's quote concerning Laura and Carmilla's relationship summarizes this argument perfectly: "Carmilla's sexual possession of Laura foils Papa's attempts to marry her to General Spielsdorf, a match that could reestablish the male bond and the male exchange of women (Signorotti 617)." Carmilla possesses Laura and continues to haunt her through every decision she must make. As a result, men lose the power over their submissive counterparts, and depicting the fear of the degeneration of male authority in Victorian society.

I see Carmilla as both a villainess and a progressive character, considering which part of Victorian society is asked. This I owe to the fact that her freedom could threaten male authority, while also spreading a feminist statement arguing for increased female rights. As mentioned, Carmilla's presence threatens the exchange of women, as well as the clear social roles described to the different sexes. Signorette argues that the novella presents a society where male characters are given powerless positions, whereas women assume aggressive roles (Signorotti 611). I wholeheartedly endorse what Signorotti states, because by repeatedly presenting herself in these aggressive roles, Carmilla shows how she refuses to be bound by male forms. In chapter 5, Laura is shown a likeness of Countess Mircalla, a girl who is later revealed to be Carmilla, described as: "about a foot and a half high, and nearly square, without a frame (Le Fanu 46)". Signorotti argues that the framelessness strengthens the way Carmilla refuses to be bound by male forms, not restricting her rampant sexuality (614). This argument could be advanced by adding how Carmilla's refusal to discuss her parental lineage; she never mentions a paternal relation, refusing to be exchanged for the success of Victorian society and male dominance.

There is a connection between Carmilla's framelessness and the narration of the novella. The novella starts with an excerpt from the notes from the essay of a self-proclaimed "metaphysical" doctor, called Doctor Hesselius, followed by Laura's account of her experiences living with Carmilla and the troubles that followed. This creates a framed narrative, where Laura's account is bound by Hesselius' notes. *Carmilla* ends, however, with Laura telling the receiver how she sometimes imagines hearing Carmilla's footsteps walking nearby: "[...] and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing room door" (LeFanu 110). Choosing not to end the story with another note from Doctor Hesselius' essay draws a connection between the metaphor of Carmilla's painting and the narration; Carmilla is not bound by male forms, and therefore Laura's account is not either. Simultaneously, I believe it hints to the success of the transference of knowledge by Carmilla, seeing as Laura has finally been freed from the boundaries pushed upon her by the patriarchy.

One clear distinction that separated men from women in stereotypical Victorian society was how the man was to be the provider, the protector, while the woman was the caregiver, the childgiver; in *Carmilla*, men continuously fail to protect their female counterparts. When General Spielsdorf, determined to catch the vampire feeding on his precious ward Bertha, catches Carmilla in the act, he fails in eliminating the threat that is causing harm to his family.

I saw a large black object, very ill-defined [...] spread itself up to the poor girl's throat, where it swelled in a moment, into a great, palpitating mass. [...] I now sprang forward, with my sword in hand. [...] I struck at her instantly with my sword; but I saw her standing near the door, unscathed. Horrified, I pursued, and struck again. She was gone! And my sword flew into shiver against the door (Le Fanu 99-100).

Le Fanu uses the general's sword shattering as a metaphor for his emasculation, and therefore the emasculation and degeneration of the male species. Veeder argues that Spielsdorf is "cut off from his manly sword, circumscribed by the vaginal crevice, impotent before the phallically swelling vampire... [with] the shattered sword as his emblem (Veeder 205). Veeder's quote shows how Spielsdorf's failure to protect could represent his impotence, his inability to restrict his ward's sexuality while simultaneously failing to force his own heterosexuality upon Carmilla. To analyze this further towards the theme of degeneration, I see this inability to control as a metaphor for how Victorian society could evolve backwards; men dominated women, but suddenly women were collectively demanding rights and using their voices to promote the rise of the fairer sex. If men were not capable of silencing this group, they would

simultaneously lose their power to oppress, creating an unbalanced power dynamic between sexes that disrupts the antiquated social norms based upon the “angel in the house”.

Carmilla is used as a scapegoat to place blame, Le Fanu using the scene of her execution as a way of reaching society’s denouement. Heller talks about how the scene of Carmilla’s “expulsion is one of the only where a horde of male authorities is present (89).” Regaining their authority after being pushed to the end of the story, the men ultimately put the pieces together – Carmilla has been masquerading as a human. It commands a considerable group of men to disarm her, which could represent how a crucial threat a knowledgeable woman was. Carmilla’s final death is formulated as a rape-like assault, “The body therefore, [...], was raised, and a sharp stake driven through the heart of the vampire, who uttered a shriek at the moment, in all respects such as might escape from a living person in the last agony (Le Fanu 106).” As Carmilla was the perpetrator, she needed to be terminated for the success of society.

Heller argues that the stabbing is an assertion of phallic power, considering how the vampire bite imitates the act of penetration (90). To contribute to this argument, I see it as a way of penetrating the victim, protesting her homoerotic interests, and forcefully demonstrating who commands the narrative. Carmilla’s shriek, “as might escape from a living person in the last agony,” further attributes to the societal anxieties concerning homoeroticism, as Carmilla’s last sound was uttered with the voice of the targeted human being she represents. Additionally, Heller argues that Carmilla’s decapitation represents cutting off the site of her knowledge (90), contributing to the belief that female intellect was seen as equally fearful as female sexuality, in this context indistinguishable. By writing Carmilla’s execution from a male perspective, excluding Laura from the act, Le Fanu metaphorically excludes women from executive decisions. Ultimately, executing Carmilla was a reaction to how the previously repressed women started the mental or intellectual parthenogenesis that excluded men, the act of stabbing her and the act of penetrating her often interchangeable in the way that both are a way to show power over the oppressed.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the evidence presented, I have shown that by coupling Laura and Carmilla, Le Fanu presents an ideal Victorian society and the threat to this society and male authority, which is how the repressed achieve sexual knowledge through a non-procreative spreading of knowledge between women.



I have shown that Laura represents the repressed, ideal Victorian woman, who has been affected by her repression in ways that make it hard for her to contextualize experiences. Due to her repression, the novella's narration is affected; she self-censors her explanations, presenting for the reader her inability to understand her feelings concerning Carmilla's caresses; instead of the singular "I", she pushes the responsibility towards her "energies" and her "resistance". Guilt guides her to the avoidance of blame.

This avoidance, however, pushes the narrative towards the inclination that Laura is not as passionless as Victorian society wanted women to be. She repeatedly describes her feelings for Carmilla as pleasurable, "a tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable (Le Fanu 35)," which gives the impression that she feels pleasure, but on a point of conscious self-censorship as a result of her repression. This homoerotic relationship was seen as, because of its deviation from Victorian ideals, a transference of an "infection" from one hysterical woman to another, the hysteric being a sexually knowledgeable woman. This non-procreative transference threatened male authority, because of the fear that it would cause women to become knowledgeable and therefore start an unbalanced power dynamic between the sexes.

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