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# *Female Identity in the Victorian Age: Transgression and the Gothic in Carmilla*

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## Introduction

The concept of femininity has always fascinated me, especially its evolution through the ages. For this reason, when I had to think about the topic of my thesis, I decided to analyze the concept of womanhood concerning a specific historical period, i.e. the Victorian Age. In particular, I wanted to focus on the concept of womanhood during this period and link it to the first gothic female figure in literature: “Carmilla” written by the Irish writer Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu.

I read this novella a few years ago and was particularly struck by the topics it portrayed, which some of them I find particularly modern for the time it was written. The main peculiarity of this novel is the main character of the whole story: the first female vampire in literature. For this reason, I thought I would analyze the woman's figure in her dual nature by relating it to the two main female characters in the novella.

In the first chapter, I survey the Victorian era. The period in which Queen Victoria reigned over Great Britain and its wide empire (1837-1901) was an important one, in which many changes occurred. This society was allegedly based on ideals of perfection and morality, in which citizens had to behave properly according to their social class. A fundamental role for the spread of this ideology was the family, and, more precisely, to the figure of the mother. Women and mothers from every social class were constantly questioned during this period and were often compared to their male counterparts.

I later discuss “the woman question” and the female point of view of this historical period. Thanks to Karl Ittman's overview of the social condition of the Victorian era, it is possible to understand how the social, as well as the working system, influenced the perception of the two genders. In addition, I focus on the double nature of women, as Victorians intended it. I explain the distinction between the so-called “Angel of the House”, as an embodiment of purity and maternity – quoted by M. Jeanne

Peterson – and the figure of the “Fallen Woman”, an unconventional female figure, who acts according to her instincts and desires.

What distinguished a good woman, as well as a mother, from an evil one was her behavior: in the nineteenth century, it was thought that certain behaviors were caused by mental disorder, especially in women.

In the second chapter, I write about on moral deviances during this period. I focus on the main form of transgression throughout the nineteenth century: misbehaviors were the consequences of an unconventional vision towards sexuality since sexuality has always been perceived differently from men to women. I mention Nancy F. Cott’s words, for whom women had a specific slant towards sexual activity and had to be appealing to men to meet their needs. At the same time, women had to act in a modest and pure way, and this sort of attitude suggested that they should be sexually subjected to men.

However, women who lived their sexual life freely and impurely were frowned upon by their society and in most cases rejected by it. Thanks to Braun’s work, it is possible to understand that female sexual freedom was a reflection of the sense of guilt that women were made to feel. Furthermore, the idea of transgression does not only refer to an instinctive sexual desire but also to the contradictory behavior of mothers. Motherhood was considered a fundamental prerogative of women. They had to embody specific ideals in order to be accepted by Victorian ideology. In addition, when a mother exhibited particularly aggressive behavior towards her child, she was identified as mentally ill.

Consequently, I discuss the ways in which the female body was perceived by Victorians. Kelly Hurley suggests reasons for depictions of the female body as 'imperfect' compared to the male. The female body, and more specifically the female reproductive system, was supposed to be healthy in order to generate offspring, whereas, on the contrary, a diseased body suggests a sort of abnormality. I try and explain how certain anomalies related to the concept of Gothic. I introduce the concept

of Gothic in general, and more specifically of Irish Gothic, – as I deal with an Irish writer. I also focus on the conjunction between female deviances and Gothic literature, in particular in the figure of the vampire.

In the last chapter, I analyze the gothic novella “Carmilla” by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, published in 1872. I decided to focus on the concept of femininity using this novella as an example because it deals with the first female vampire figure in literature. In addition, I find that the two protagonists represent two different ideals of women, one the opposite of the other.

I start by presenting the novella and its main characters and I later introduce the social dynamics that characterize it. In particular, I am interested in detecting how the two female characters, Laura and Carmilla, who are described as very different from each other, they share a deep friendship and solidarity among women. Thanks to the work of Shirley Ibach, I identify the characters of the two protagonists and what binds them not only as mere friendship but also as a loving relationship. Furthermore, I include the gothic elements on the figure of the vampire, in particular the features in which Carmilla differs from other vampire characters. Amanda Paxton’s work helped me analyze motherhood in “Carmilla” and the figure of the anti-mother, since she is a destructive figure who sickens, or even kills people. In addition, I analyze the parasitic nature of the vampire whose purpose is to attack and to enter her victim’s body in order to reproduce herself and thus propagate her offspring of vampires. In conclusion, I mention how “Carmilla” was perceived by readers and, above all, how Le Fanu's story contributes to a more open and forward-looking way of thinking, compared to the average Victorian thinking. According to William Veeder, Le Fanu's vampire story was highly successful with Victorian readers, even though the themes he wrote about were particularly odd for the period. However, "Carmilla" has never censored, but instead, it

offered an open interpretation about the dualism of the human nature. In conclusion, “Carmilla” gave a great contribution to the Gothic genre and to gothic novelists as well, in particular the female vampire was an anticipatory figure of the Count Dracula written by Bram Stoker (1897). The two stories are considered the most important works of modern vampire stories.

## CHAPTER 1

### **The Victorian Age: Social Aspects and the Female Condition**

#### 1.1 The Victorian Age

The year 1837 marked the beginning of one of the most glorious periods for the British Empire: the Victorian Age. During the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), many important changes occurred. Throughout these years the British Empire progressively grew as the world's leading imperial power (Alexander, 2013: 259) It had a stable government, a strong monarchy, and a growing state thanks to the phenomenon of industrialization. The Victorian Era was a period of increasing information and knowledge: due to the birth of new scientific branches, such as psychoanalysis, and due to the second Industrial Revolution in 1870; these events demonstrated that Victorian people had a deep optimistic belief in progress.

The rise of the British Empire was triggered by a strong economy which continued to rise between 1820 and 1873. Thanks to the phenomenon of industrialization, the economy of the country expanded and led to great profits. However, with long working days and in harsh and bad hygienical conditions, a lot of workers were exploited by this system. The power that Britain achieved was fundamental not only in terms of internal affairs but also, and even more, for its foreign policy, especially when Victoria obtained the title of "Empress of India" in 1877. The expansion of the empire and the birth of British colonies created constant and multidirectional traffic of goods, and people as well. The English crown under Victoria's power expanded widely, making the empire one of the most powerful countries. (Alexander, 2013: 260) In the aftermath of this phenomenon, there was a growing sense of superiority by the British colonizers towards other countries and its colonies, which could be summed up by the phrase of the "white man's burden".

Internal policies succeeded in passing laws improving the social conditions of many and, moreover, attempting to avoid political revolutions. During this period, many Acts were passed: in 1832 the Reform Bill extended the right to vote to all males



owning properties; when the second Reform Bill was passed, not only the lower middle classes, but the working class had access to this right.

Victorian society was rigidly structured. It was organized hierarchically into three different social classes: the upper class, the middle class – or bourgeoisie – and the working class, which, due to the Industrial Revolution, occupied a high percentage of the population. If on one hand, we see a strong, powerful and structured society, on the other we can observe that it was deeply marked by contradictions and hypocrisy. Victorian people were particularly devoted to Queen Victoria due to her strong sense of morality and duty. This society was built upon the idea of power and perfection, but in reality, it showed social unrests. Inner contradictions and a deep sense of hypocrisy were the most relevant problems, which Victorian society was involved in. In this period a new term was brought out to englobe this contrasting social situation: “the Victorian Compromise”.

## 1.2 The Victorian Compromise

The Victorian society was complex and with strong contradictions. It was the age of progress, economic stability and important social reforms, as well as a period of great social unrest. After a period of prosperity in the first phase of the era, Britain faced many problems, such as unemployment, desperate poverty and rebellions.

The Victorians were particularly devoted to the ideal of hard work and strict morality. Furthermore, they were interested in being polite, dutiful and proper. They tried to achieve the high behavioral standards that society required for them, but what they showed through facts was different. In other words, they pretended to behave according to a particular social code, but in fact, their attitude was contrasting. This indicated the sense of hypocrisy within Victorian society.

Due to the development of the industrial sector, urbanization was one of the most effective phenomena of the Victorian context: people had started in the previous century to leave the countryside and move to the cities to be employed in factories. This situation changed not only the number of the population within the city of London, to name one example, but also the structure of the entire society. The displacement of people led cities to become out of control. Besides this, citizens were marked by a

profound sense of anxiety. City dwellers were often worried about what they did not know and, most of all, about what they could not control. According to this, the Victorian society was quite selective: they had to follow the rules that the society demanded them, not only through their social classes but through their behavior as well. Only by obeying their social norms, could they feel part of a specific class. Certainly, some people differed from the average system, which consisted in belonging to a specific social status. These individuals were considered “others”, i.e. people who act differently by breaking the rules, such as mad people or “fallen women” as examples. As a result, they were not helped or assisted as they should have been; they were merely rejected from the community and they could not take part in any form of social commitment. Here is where the contradiction within the Victorian society lies.

There was plenty of moral poverty as well. If poverty is usually related to a material lack, in Victorian times this concept expanded towards the lack of moral values, which, in some cases, was even worse. Indeed, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new branches of science arose in order to find methods to cure every sort of behavior. People who manifested abnormal behaviors or strange tendencies were analyzed by specialists. During this age, in order to avoid these misbehaviors, psychoanalysis spread widely during this period, and, according to this science, many scholars questioned how our mind could affect our behavior. Deviances and transgressions enhanced the most studied cases by specialists.

Apparently, most of the studies about abnormal behaviors were based on female patients. Women were the focus of social debates more than ever in this period; indeed, society expected more of women than men. Female instincts and sexual deviances in women were debated matters of study.

### 1.3 Victorian Literature

The nineteenth century was a fruitful period along with literary production. As Louis Cazamian claims: ‘the decade between 1830 and 1840 traced the beginning of a new age in English literature and society.’ (1927:1087) Literacy progressively increased during this period due to the many reforms on compulsory education which were passed. Due to technological developments in printing, books, periodicals, and

newspapers were widely available to the public. Novels and long works were frequently published in serial form: this technique served to stimulate the curiosity of the reader in order to keep buying them. ‘The Victorian Age is the first in which the lower middle classes, and the greater part of the common people, have real access to culture.’ (Cazamian, 1927: 1091)

The nineteenth century is known as the age of the novel, which became the most popular form of literary entertainment. The Victorian novels were used as a means of describing the social condition at that time. The main aim of the novel was to describe society – with both its positive and negative aspects – through realistic descriptions. Indeed, ‘the general influences of the age tended to favor the taste and search the truth in art.’(Cazamian,1927: 1199) The most popular novels – during the first phase of the Victorian Age – were the so-called “novels of manners”, which described a specific class of people and their social issues; or it could be identified as the “social problem novel”, which dealt more with the economic turmoil of the 1840s. Writers tried to faithfully represent their own society and denounce it for its bad aspects and disadvantages.

Charles Dickens is an example: he is still considered as one of the most popular novelists of the nineteenth century. Through his tales and characters he complained about the inner hypocrisy and about the unrest and pain that his society was founded upon. He added autobiographical information in his writing, e.g. about the exploitation of children within workhouses, as he denounced it in his novel *Oliver Twist* (1838).

Writers often took inspiration from their own life experiences. As I mentioned before, the entire atmosphere in towns dramatically changed during this age: urban districts became dark and gloomy and became inspirational places for crimes and murders. As there were documented cases of murders in the London district of Whitechapel, by the hand of “Jack the Ripper” (1888), we can assume that the disturbing environment of towns induced people to commit murders.

The *urban gothic* is an accurate term that englobes these changes in the cities. This concept implied a “domestication of the gothic”, which means that danger could hide just around the corner. During the second phase of the Victorian Era, gothic fiction was a very popular and innovating genre: the invention of supernatural elements brought an unfamiliar sensation, which can be resumed to the Freudian term of the

“uncanny” – a sort of new ‘sublime’. According to Freud, the term “uncanny” comes from the German term for “unheimlich”, which literally means unhomely. It expresses the sensation of something unfamiliar, which hides something frightening in it because it is not known. As a result, this creates a contrasting feeling, in which the individual is intrigued by it. (1919: 219)

This contrasting feeling can be found in Gothic fiction, through the invention of unconventional characters. The creation of gothic creatures, more specifically the *undead people*, was a way to represent the “outcasts” under different and grotesque aspects. Vampires, zombies, and ghosts were the main characters of many novels and tales, who embodied the dangers and unrests of their age. Writers such as Bram Stoker, Robert Louis Stevenson and Oscar Wilde were considered the masters of gothic fiction, who created extraordinary characters and settings, and who are still an inspiration for writers nowadays.

What we can notice from the literary production of the nineteenth century is that, for the most part, the plot of novels revolves around male characters. The appearance of women in novels – most of all as main characters – is quite low; the female characters in Victorian novels play an average and stereotyped role. A young girl falls in love with a handsome young man, but his love does not return back to her: this is the common feature of many novels during this period.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde (1890), for instance, the female character of Sybil Vane played this role: a young and beautiful girl who fell for the charming Dorian Grey; but, in the end, she understands that his love was different from hers, and after this illusion, she let herself die. Usually, female characters were considered as minor figures (and not only in novels) compared to men: they play a supportive role for the main male character and often they disappear from the scene due to tragic endings.

Women’s role in literature reflects their social condition in the real life: it was quite a rarity to read novels with a woman as the main character, but nevertheless, it is not impossible to find it. In Victorian literature, for instance, we can find some of the main female characters but most of them are created by female writers; the unconventional figure of *Jane Eyre* written by Charlotte Brontë (1847) as an example. However, in Irish literature, the situation was different. In the gothic novella by Joseph

Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla* (1872), we see a different vision of a “woman”. The story focuses mainly on the relationship between two young girls with very distinctive personalities. What Le Fanu came up with revealed the temperaments and the instincts of the female gender through the two main characters in the novella.

The woman question is dealt with in many studies during the nineteenth century: women were constantly questioned by the society according to their behaviors and instincts, especially towards their men. In addition, what we read about them is a common observation intertwined with the misogynistic point of view of the period. In most cases, the description on paper of a woman is what a man perceives of her.

#### 1.4 The Woman Question

The Victorian ideology on gender was developed through the model of the family. As Karl Ittman claims, ‘the idea of the home as a manufactory represents the antithesis of Victorian ideals that pictured the home as a separate sphere removed from the marketplace’. (1995:141) During this historical period, the ideology of the family was the subject of intense debate, especially within working-class families. Due to the rise of factories and the development of urban life, there were changes in the concept of home and family. The main aim of the family, according to the Victorian social convictions, was to embrace domesticity and men and women should be seen as an example for their children. As Ittman affirmed: ‘Conflicts between work and home, between the needs of children and the limits of parents and between men and women over resources and sexual power all existed in the Victorian family’. (1995:142) The dichotomy between man and woman was well-represented through their working roles, e.g. men could enter the public world of business, and politics as well, because of their alleged intellectual power and aggressiveness, as the patriarchal society dictated at that time; whereas, on the other hand, women, depicted as maternal figures, were supposed to take care of the house, to bring children up and to support their men. According to the social behaviors that Victorian people tried to emulate, working-class men had to follow some moral values, such as protect their wives and children and assure them economic stability. This was an example of duties of manhood and an assertion of masculinity. (Ittman, 1995: 146) If, on one side, men were obliged to take part in the public sphere, on the

other women did not have the same pleasure or responsibility. Wives and mothers who had the opportunity to work were frowned upon because they differed from the average convictions that a woman had to stick to her role as a mother, and so they were conceived of as 'idlers and criminals' (Karl Ittman, 1995: 155)

The question about gender, and more specifically, about the role of women in Victorian society, has often been discussed by various scholars. Victorians had this sort of need to place people in a certain category; not only through their social classes but through their behavior as well. The distinction between men and women during this era was considered quite evident: Victorian women were constantly in the spotlight and society was particularly demanding with them. Based on theory they should embody the image of an angel, i.e. to be loving and devoted mothers to their children, to be faithful and obey their husbands, to take care of domestic life, and most importantly, to be on a lower step compared to their men.

As M. Jeanne Peterson affirmed in her pamphlet on the Victorian myth, the socio-psychological profile of a woman is contained in one phrase: the "angel in the house" (1984: 677). The fact that a woman was compared to an angel implied a strong sense of responsibility not just for herself, but for the sake of the whole family. 'The greatest test of the Angel in the House as a model of Victorian upper- middle-class womanhood must be that of personality and character, for the angel was first and foremost the religious woman, the peacemaker, the comforter, and the submissive woman-submissive to father, perhaps to brothers, certainly to husband' (Peterson, 1984: 701) The relation between a woman and her husband came from the relation that she had with her father: he was meant to be a leading figure for his daughter and, in particular, for her educational life. If a young girl grew up obeying her father according to the patriarchal system of that period, she could aspire to become the average angelic figure in her own house and to behave according to the norms of her male counterpart. (Moghari, 2020: 167)

As Shaghayegh Moghari claims, there were different opinions about the role of women during the Victorian Age. According to Nina Auerbach, in *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (1982), women who stands under the categories of an angel, of demon, and of a fallen woman was taken from fiction, art and memoir; and moreover, they assumed "bad characteristics when they did not stick to the rules of men

of their time” (2020: 168). Mariana Valverde (1989) suggested that, due to the male-orientated society, women had an admiration for frivolous things, such as fashion and thus was their tragic flaw, which have led them to go astray and to lack from moral values, which sometimes led them to fall into temptation, such as “prostitution and whoredom” (Moghari, 2020: 168). Therefore, women showed a particular interest in their physical appearance and self-care, which often made them fall into sinful temptations. And in conclusion, in *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1993), Barbara Creed analyzed how women have been considered as monsters by men. She claims 'that men did not love women as sane creatures but they hated them as insane and monsters and were afraid of them as castrators'. (Moghari, 2020: 168)

In other terms, the relationship between man and woman was not as we expect it nowadays. The vision that men had upon women was purely misogynistic; indeed, women were defined as the “man’s Other”, i.e. “she is less than a man; she is a kind of an alien in a man’s world.” (Tyson, 2006: 96) Thus, women differ from men not just for physical appearance, but because they could not be compared to them. The female gender was supposed to be weaker than the male one; physically, economically and mentally speaking. “Victorian criteria and standards of good and evil in regards with women are surrounded over the submission and lack of submission of women. Submissive women are good and women who are not submissive are evil”. (Moghari, 2020: 174)

In contrast with the figure of “the angel in the house”, there is a different category of woman: the so-called “Fallen woman”. The term “fallen” can be intertwined with a term used in the religious poem *Paradise Lost* by John Milton (1667) to identify its main characters. Satan was also named the “fallen angel” because he fell into temptation by going against God; at the same time, in the Garden of Eden, Eve was the first who was tempted by the serpent and ate the forbidden fruit. Therefore, throughout the biblical tradition, the first original sin was tempted by a woman, and this issue a different opinion on women, rather than men.

In the Victorian Age, the concept of morality, as I mentioned before, was one of the most important principles and, moreover, these principles were particularly associated with women. They had to embody the average lovely and maternal figure,

that the social system required for them. Certainly, some women manifested contradictory behaviors and, in doing so, they were categorized as *fallen women*. According to Sara Kühl, this label has formed a significant and negative part of the Victorian society. (2016: 171) Libertine women with a sexual obsession, maiden women with children, or even madwomen were seen as a threat of some kind: their misbehavior was in contrast with the repressive attitude that characterized the Victorian society.

The contrast between genders was particularly evident during this Age: while it was accepted that a married man could frequent prostitutes, on the other hand, women were taught that there was no greater sin than having an extra-marital relationship (Kühl, 2016: 176). A “Fallen woman” was represented as a woman without honor, without self-respect, and with a domineering attitude, especially towards a man. Women who showed behavioral deviances were analyzed in relation to their sexual activity. Once fallen by showing these types of inclinations, a woman was labeled as an outcast of her own society. Furthermore, these women were not supported by other people, but were alienated and abandoned to their fate by their own community. Sexual deviances in women were taken into question during the nineteenth century: a lot of psychological and anatomical studies were carried out with the purpose to find explanations for these phenomena, such as cases of hysteria in women, subsequently studied and analyzed by Sigmund Freud.





## CHAPTER 2

### Moral Deviances in the Victorian Age and the New Gothic

#### 2.1 Gender Transgressions

In order to recognize signs of deviance or misbehaviors, Victorians took into consideration the attitude that people had toward sexual activity. In particular, they paid attention to the inclinations that different social classes could assume. The Victorian society could be divided into two identifiable and opposing sexual ideologies, which run roughly along class lines. On one hand, ‘sexual repression characterized the bourgeoisie’ (Fee, 1978: 632); on the other, ‘less constrained forms of sexual expression characterized the new working-class’. Hence, the bourgeoisie showed a more strict behavior towards sexuality than the working class. The values that the bourgeoisie sought to promote included hard work, sense of responsibility, and sexual restraint; in contrast, the vices that they tried to conceal concerned idleness, lewdness and drunkenness. (Fee, 1978: 633)

The opinions on this issue within the working-class were different: as a lower class, their misbehaviors were more justified by the society itself. According to the psychology of that time if the ideal bourgeois was characterized by virtue and by mental health and sanity, the working class, instead, was marked by vices and both mental and moral insanity. The health individual is distinguished by both self-control and self-discipline. As Fee claims: the individual tended to exhibit the triumph of the higher faculties over the lower passions and instincts in different contexts of its life, i.e. in sexual life, in work, and in human life. (1978: 634)

In accordance with the social norms of the Victorian period, every human being had to be in control of him- or herself. In particular, Victorian people were well trained in the first place, by their parents, and secondly, through working activities. Indeed, as Fee stated: “after heredity, the next important contribution to mental health was the role of the parents and especially the mother in training the child in proper habits of self-discipline” (Fee, 1978: 635). The newborn child had to be trained by his mother to recognize the norms of good manners that society imposed; and moreover, to have the control of the passions and sexual instincts. The maternal figure was fundamental for

the growth of her child in society; a good mother could be able “to reproduce the achievements of civilized life in the psychic structure of the developing child”. (Fee, 1978: 636)

After childhood, the most effective method to reassert individual self-control was through the discipline of work. Hard work allowed the individuals to retrain its mind and will. Workplaces during the Victorian Age were particularly strict and rigid: employees in factories were subjected to both physical and economic coercion. The exploitation of labor was increasingly frequent, so much so, that this led to the birth of trade unions for workers in the second phase of the Era. In Victorian times, the acquired moral values had to be passed on to the children: in fact, a good man and a good woman were destined to marry and educate their children properly. As a result, the marriage bond was based on reciprocity of values. Furthermore, romantic love was characterized by the purity of the marital bond, and sex was a way to enhance the spiritual closeness within the couple (Landale, Guest, 1986: 149).

Nancy F. Cott maintains that in Victorian society, women had a specific aim, especially from the point of view of sexuality: they had to be appealing to men. The concept of modesty – as a code of conduct in those years – turned into a sexual ploy, in which the objectification of women was emphasized. By acting modestly, they were implicitly sexually passive: furthermore, without affection, they had to be – as Cott suggests – “passionlessness” (1978: 220) compared to men. A woman lacking any surge of passion and with a distinct temper evoked the ideal nineteenth-century woman. In addition, “belief in female passionlessness could aid a woman to limit sexual intercourse within marriage and thus limit family size” (1978: 234). Nevertheless, pre-bridal pregnancies were common during the Victorian Age, which was a sign that the sexual activity outside the marriage was increasing. This represented great individual and sexual freedom for both sexes. However, this sexual emancipation was a way to indicate the vulnerability, as well as the exploitation of women. (Cott, 1978: 230)

If, on one hand, sexual expression within marriage could be an aid to reinforce the couple's bond, on the other hand, sexual expression outside marriage was relegated to people characterized by poverty of values and to lower instincts. Furthermore, moral insanity did not divide sexual behavior from morality itself, but it represented a view of social deviance from the perspective of bourgeois ideology (Fee, 1978: 636). As a

result, the bourgeoisie demonstrated a rigorous attitude towards sexual activity. They experienced sexuality in a more discreet way being a higher social class than the lower classes.

According to Morse Peckham, Victorian society was also characterized by a “counterculture”, especially concerning sexual virtue. As he states, the nineteenth-century society was based on different sexual ideologies: a public culture of sexual constraint, a remissive culture of the license, and an emerging one concerning sexual repression. What these ideologies have in common is the great emphasis upon the importance of sexual behavior (1975: 260). In the common imagination, aggressiveness was more likely to be assigned to men, and a more submissive attitude was usually assigned to women. The two attitudes offset each other; in fact, submission – or seduction – is a way to reduce the aggressiveness in the male counterpart. However, there are exceptions to this: as a “counterculture”, “the concept of aggressiveness and submissiveness can be shared by both sexes” (Peckham, 1975: 267).

Elizabeth Fee claims that the so-called ‘Victorian Frame of mind’, that she reads as sexual anxiety, denial, and fear of the unknown, derived from the literary productions of the educated upper-classes (1978: 632), in fact, in Victorian literature, physical chastity in female characters is usually compromised and an outcast state is practically inevitable. Female sexual impurity in Victorian culture reflected on the sense of guilt that women were supposed to feel. Forms of transgression – such as homosexuality or masturbation – were intertwined with mental insanity, which was another means for blaming women (Braun, 2015: 344). In the figure of the “fallen woman”, it is easy to recognize certain attitudes that go against the culture and ideology of the time, sexual freedom above all. Women with contradictory behavior – moreover, with a strong sexual instinct – were objects of discussion, especially from a scientific and medical point of view. Misbehaviors and unconventional inclinations were linked to mental illnesses such as schizophrenia or even hysteria in women. which could be expressed in different ways, not only through sexual emancipation, but, in some cases, even through dramatic and extreme deeds, such as murder. These actions could be carried out by both men and women, but ‘the medicalization of the crime was more successful with female offenders than with male’ (Fee, 1978: 638).

Moral deviances in women tended to be depicted as a form of madness that had

to be cured. What the bourgeois ideology demanded for them was to be ‘excessively emotional, perhaps, but nevertheless gentle and kind’ (Fee,1978: 630). Aggressiveness behind female crimes challenged the familiar characteristics of “woman’s nature”, and furthermore, it was easier to interpret these actions as evidence of insanity, rather than as a “normal” criminal action. In the common imagination, crimes committed by men were the reflections of antisocial behavior, instead, female crimes were seen as a form of mental illness (Fee, 1978: 639). Before Freudian psychoanalysis, sexual and other forms of transgression from the bourgeoisie were not simply intertwined with sin, but were perceived as forms of disease, or stated as “moral insanity” (Fee,1978: 640).

Mental disturbances were considered a reflection of physiological problems in the body, which had to be cured by medical treatments as a correspondence of an illness of the mind. Besides this, there was a link between social deprivation and symptoms of physical issues: in particular, the latter were a reflection of the former. According to Freud, the inner struggle of the Victorian society, the conflict between the higher mental centers (i.e. the superego and the ego), and the primitive one, as the child-like aspect, were strongly connected with one another and the outcome of this struggle was expressed through the state of mental illness. Sexual repression, individual self-discipline, and social control were the main qualities that Victorian people were supposed to own. In fact, these were the characteristics that formed the dominant sexual ideology of the twentieth century. (1978: 642)

## 2.2 Female Body Perception in the Fin-de-siècle

During the nineteenth century, studies were carried out to analyze people’s instincts and what made a person react in a certain way. As a matter of fact, women were supposed to have a particular drive towards maternity: indeed, the maternal instinct was the rule in Victorian society. Despite this social convection, motherhood could hide a dark side, in which violent actions – such as cases of infanticide – could be committed by mothers. As a result of an unnatural and dangerous deed, ‘destructive maternal behavior was at once pathologized and identified as the seamy underside of woman’s nature.’ (Paxton, 2019: 5) Motherhood was a vexed site in the Victorian imagination, in which the female body took on a double facet: representing the ‘sacred self-sacrifice’ by giving birth to a

child, and at once, 'female sexuality' throughout sexual practice. (Paxton, 2019: 4)

The female body and, more importantly, the female reproductive system, was seen as a fundamental physical prerogative in women. In general, the absence of physical pathologies was a prerequisite for a healthy body, capable of carrying a pregnancy. Despite this prerogative in women, the physical distinction between the two genders was particularly prominent in nineteenth-century culture. Along with an older tradition, the identification of women as human entities was only due to their bodies, which was in contrast to men. In compliance with nineteenth-century medicine, 'women were theorized as incomplete human subjects': they missed something that the male counterpart already possesses. (Hurley, 1996: 119)

According to Kelly Hurley, the female body was considered pathological, and the person inhabiting that body was identified as "erratic and unstable" (1996: 101); this alleged incompleteness in their body brought women to possess not-quite-human an organism. In the fin-de-siècle, the disorders related to the female body, for example hysteria and infertility, were linked to the female reproductive system: sexuality emerged as a cause of female abhumanness. Furthermore, as Michel Foucault affirmed in his masterpiece *The History of Sexuality*, within late nineteenth-century sociomedical discourses, 'the feminine body was analyzed as being saturated with sexuality, whereby it was involved in medical practices, as a result of a pathology intrinsic to it' (1976: 104). Hence, the female body was seen as imperfect compared to the male one. In addition, woman's misbehavior was considered marked by lack of rationality, volition, and self-control acted for being considered as a 'Thing': a body imperfectly animated by a human mind and a human spirit. (Hurley, 1996: 120)

In the nineteenth century, the perception of a woman was split between a corporeal and animalistic identity, thus in contrast with the Victorian ideal of woman as domestic angel. The representation of women tended to go in two opposing directions: women were either saintly or demonic, "guardians of domestic happiness or unnatural monsters". (Hurley, 1996: 123). This correlation between a monstrous creature and an unconventional female figure could be often found in Gothic literature. A woman depicted as a monster is a reflection of social issues and opinions on the female gender during the nineteenth century.

For Hurley, in literary production, individuals who deviate from social rules and

structures lead to a process of “gothicisation” of their own body. A person— especially a disturbed mind – not only is represented as “other” and, so on, as a threat, but, in literary production, takes on grotesque appearances as well.

In late-Victorian Gothic literature, the concept of femininity is questioned and the female body thus takes on features that can be traced back to the Gothic world. The notion of grace and purity, which had been expressed by the Victorian society through the relation between body and femininity, was now extorted and made repugnant. Even the idea of motherhood was called into question. The woman who committed extreme acts due to hysterical behaviors – a sort of stress disorder concerning exclusively women – no longer embodied the loving and benevolent figure of the mother but, on the contrary, she could be identified with the term 'dirty'. (Michelis, 2003: 15). The appellation “dirty mama” – suggested by Angelica Michelis – refers to the reversal of pureness and kindness of the maternal figure and to the aggressive behavior that a disturbed woman might have executed on her child.

This expression not only reflects the aggressiveness involved in the mother-child relationship of the nineteenth century, but suggests that the bad mother incites an attack in order to retaliate on her child, including poisoning through breastfeeding. In fact, the maternal sphere, rather than being described as a 'safe' place, is depicted as a grotesque place, in which the figure of the mother plays the role of a monstrous figure, and not as a life carrier. (Michelis, 2003: 15). According to Freud, the figure of the mother and her maternal body occupy a strange position: indeed, the development of her own identity and subjectivity are positioned as both central and marginal locations. Moreover, as Michelis claims, gender identity and, in particular, femininity is based on the prohibition of the mother by confining her to the past; the arise of her own identity is seen as a negative aspect of her emancipation within the society. In the fin-de-siècle, gothic writing and psychoanalytic evaluation are combined together as a result of the concept of anxiety within the cultural construction around motherhood. (2003: 9)

### 2.3 The Irish Gothic

Gothic literature derives from various historical, artistic, and cultural backgrounds. The primary meaning of the term Gothic is literally something related “with the Goths”, i.e.

with barbarian northern tribes, and is therefore linked to the concept of barbarism. From the eighteenth century on, the notion of “Gothic” changed. It was used in opposition to the term ‘classical’: while the classical was ordered, the Gothic was chaotic; where the classics offered a set of rules to be followed, on the other hand, ‘the Gothic represented a product of the uncivilized’. (Punter, 1980: 6).

Figures from ancient folklore populate the pages of the eighteenth- and nineteenth- century Gothic literary production. The main features of Gothic fiction were the presence of supernatural elements, the correlation of “Gothic” and “terror” in the literature, narrative complexity which included themes such as incest, violence, and other transgression of the boundaries between the natural and the human and the natural and the divine. (Punter, 1980: 19)

Through the nineteenth century, writers invented gothic scenarios in response to the sense of fear over the changes of their times, such as the French Revolution in 1789. Social and political conditions served as backgrounds for writers to convey their thoughts and opinions concerning these issues and to allow people to estrange themselves in the most intense moments as well. Gloomy settings, creepy plots, and, above all, grotesque creatures were means to describe the unrest that society had to face – in addition, these gothic elements were about to enhance this situation even more. Gothic fiction somehow reflected or anticipated what might happen, or what could go wrong; and, at once, it also reflected the desire to believe once again in the supernatural that had characterized previous ages.

In the late nineteenth century, Gothic fiction brought a new perception of the term ‘horror’. Rather than being located somewhere outside the British context, the new Gothic was staged, instead, on familiar and domestic territory (Michelis, 2003: 16). Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, the concept of Gothic passed through two phases: the early Gothic narratives and the “modern” Gothic. The former focused on social relationships, such as sexual ones as a threat to stability; the latter, instead, engaged with issues of beauty, as well as the concepts of sublime and grotesque. This new perspective of the literary production traced the modern development of the Gothic genre. The origins of literary modernism lie in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century, a time when important Gothic writings were published. In compliance with the generic references, the idea of Gothic would be traceable to the British tradition due to



the fact that, during this Age, the English literary production was particularly prominent.

In reality, some Gothic masterpieces were traceable to different geographical background, such as in Ireland. As Christina Morin claims, ‘Irish Gothic’ and ‘the Gothic novel’ shared the same themes, settings, and topoi of the Gothic literary tradition. The Irish Gothic elaborated a narrative that explored the mixed fears and desires of a minority Anglo-Irish population, which was threatened by the Catholic Church. (2018: 3) Both ‘the Irish Gothic’ and ‘the Gothic novel’ could not be seen as two separated bodies of literature, but, on the contrary, they possess a correlation of traditions in themselves.

That intercourse between Ireland and Britain was characterized by a strong sense of superiority from the latter. Along with the English historical context, there were evidence of the English Crown exploiting the Irish population in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These factors brought a prosperous literary production. Writing has always been a process to extern the inner struggle, and in the case of Ireland, Irish writers seek to express their unrests and social issues through writing. Furthermore, Irish writers participated in an inclusive literary phenomenon to reflect on the Gothic origins (Morin, 2018: 9). The concept of Gothic spread not only in the Irish geographical area, but authors carried on this concept with other countries as well, such as Britain and other European countries.

During this period, scholars have begun to question the origins of the Gothic literary production. The early mention of this literary genre, according to them, was with the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* written by Horace Walpole in 1764 (Morin, 2018: 8). Besides this, in Irish culture there are several gothic stories and characters, which are still present in today's literary production. In the Victorian period there were two important Irish writers: Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker. They both dealt with the same gothic subject, i.e. the vampire. I intend to dwell on the figure of the Irish writer Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873).

As Jim Rockhill affirms, he was considered as the emblem of Gothic novellas, and, as many critics affirm, he was in the first rank as a writer of ghost stories in particular (2020: 27). Le Fanu was born in Dublin in 1814 from a Protestant family. He was a jurist, a novelist, a journalist, and an editor, and thus became well-known in the

public sphere. He was considered an excellent conversationalist until his wife's death in 1858. Afterwards, he retired from public life – earning the label of 'The Invisible Prince' – and produced a constant stream of novels, short suspense stories, and supernatural fiction. Le Fanu continued writing and editing his works until 1873, a few months before his death (Rockhill, 2020: 30). He was appreciated for his ghost short stories and mysterious novels, but above all, he is remembered for the invention of the first female vampire figure in "Carmilla" (1872).

#### 2.4 The Myth of the Vampire

The vampire is considered one of the most prominent figures in the horror genre. In popular culture, the figure of the vampire comes from folklore. In most cases, the vampire embodies the figure of the "revenant", who breaks the laws of nature. These un-dead people are corporally possessed by evil spirits or can be human transformed after being bitten by another vampire. This main gothic figure changed the idea of the interaction between humans. In fact, as James Twitchell claims, 'the vampire had become the eidolon of Romantic consciousness, an apt mythologeme for a new view of human interaction' (1980: 83).

In the nineteenth century, the culmination of literary interest in the figure of the vampire is traceable with the character of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, published in 1897. There were other authors who had written about this recurrent figure, such as John Polidori, who published *The Vampyre* in 1819, in which the new figure of the vampire is described. In Irish literature, the Gothic novella "Carmilla", written by Le Fanu in 1872, had introduced the first female gothic figure in literature and new perceptions about love between women. *Dracula* is the most studied and well-known vampire story, although the two previous ones gave a substantial contribution to it, in sense of content and of its main character. However, the terms "Dracula" and "vampire" have become indistinguishable nowadays (Twitchell, 1980: 84).

The vampire follows a recurrent scheme within the literary production. He is usually an old and mysterious man who both terrorizes and seduces young women with his charm. By captivating his victims, he induces them to trust him and, when they are

at the edge of their vulnerability, he attacks them. He feeds on blood, in particular, by biting them on the neck. This action could lead to two different possible actions: he could bite them and kill them instantly; or he could attack them and make them immortals like him. The latter process allows him to carry on the lineage of the vampire, which means that he could extend his dynasty from the committer to the victim. The female victim is usually sleeping when vampirized, which suggests that she is unconscious of what is happening at the moment of the attack (Twitchell, 1980: 85).

What distinguishes the vampire from other gothic creatures is, first of all, his/her appearance. Even though he is an elderly man, he is charming and good-looking, as he must seduce his victims. Besides this, another fundamental difference is the treatments that his victims receive. According to Twitchell, the vampire's actual attack is notable for its lack of violence; in fact, he does not rip bodies apart, he only bites them and sucks their blood. He leaves them intact without defacing their beauty: "He is always polite and deferential, and his victim is almost always equally decorous in return." (1980: 84). The vampire character can be seen as an oxymoron: on one side, he is depicted as evil, bad, sucking other people's lifeblood; on the other, instead, he is alluring and seductive towards his victims. In the common imaginary, the male vampire tends to be superior to the female: he debases her image by making her an outcast throughout his attack. On the contrary, the female vampire is not that interested in the male as he is in her: although she has been transformed into a vampire, she does not mortify him (Twitchell, 1980: 90). This different perception between genders is the result of the inequality between man and woman that was in force at that time.

As previously mentioned, the concept of womanhood and the role of motherhood during the nineteenth century were fundamental models in a society that puts women exclusively in the private and domestic sphere. However, when referring to the gothic genre, the figure of the mother, in particular, is visibly absent. Indeed, as Angela Michelis affirms, it seems that "the mother and the maternal sphere cannot be contained in the Gothic form" (2003: 16). Although the union of these two elements did not find any meeting point, in the Gothic novella "Carmilla", the mothering figure appears instead, but under different aspects. The mother of Carmilla is not the average loving mother, but one who leaves her daughter in the care of someone else. In addition, Carmilla herself shows some maternal instincts towards Laura, the hosting girl, but in

an unusual way. The whole story and, particularly, *Carmilla* is an example of an unconventional Gothic story, in which what at first seems to be a simple friendship between women turns out to be deeper and mysterious.

According to Amanda Paxton, Le Fanu's focus is different from Stoker's. He wanted to stress the Victorian anxieties over motherhood and female sexuality, the correlation between human and animal, and above all, the emancipation of women from patriarchal control. In "*Carmilla*", the undermined patriarchal family structure ends into a turning point, in which this aspect is culturally constructed and considered as 'parasitic' (2019: 2). Le Fanu described a different type of woman and of Gothic character, and to introduce the relationship between two opposing female figures. Furthermore, he gave a different and more modern perception of love that in those years was seen as a threat and as form of mental illness and transgression.

Furthermore, thanks to Le Fanu's work, it is possible to understand how female deviance, given by homosexual attitudes, is related to a gothic creature such as the vampire. In particular, this dynamic within the novella leads to a distorted view of the role of women in Victorian society, which consists in marrying and becoming mothers.



## CHAPTER 3

### **“Carmilla”: a New Figure of Vampire and Womanhood**

#### 3.1 Plot of the Gothic Novella “Carmilla”

The Gothic novella “Carmilla” is one of the main reasons for the success of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. Written in 1872, the female vampire story results in being one of the masterpieces of the Irish writer: in the first place, for the presence of a female gothic creature as main character. However, this story does not exclusively tell the appearance of the vampire figure – as can be found in other references in literature – but presents, in particular implicitly, more complex themes.

The novella begins with a prologue, in which an unknown narrator reveals that the following events are based on a real story. This tale is a study case collected by a recurring figure within Le Fanu’s works, i.e. Doctor Hesselius. The unnamed narrator decides to publish the events reported by the protagonist of the whole story, which is dead and, hence, unable to give further details about it.

The narrator is Laura, a young girl who lives in a ‘Schloss’ – a castle – in Styria, Austria. She lives with her widowed father, estranged from the outside world. The place in which Laura lives is picturesque but, at the same time, is depicted as lonely, as she affirms repeatedly in the first pages. During her childhood, she lacked the presence of a friend of her own age, as the only women who assisted her were the two governesses. Following this, Laura recalled an episode from her childhood that still disturbed her: one night she woke up in her sleep and realized she was completely alone in her bedroom; after looking for her maid, she saw a very pretty face looking at her from the side of her bed. Laura was not afraid of her, but she felt soothed and felt asleep again. She woke up with the sensation of two needles running deep into her breast. This episode troubled her so much that she could not be able to sleep alone at night.

Some time after, Laura was told by her father about the untimely death of Bertha, the niece of General Spielsdorf, who would have been a friend of her, even though they have never met. Despite of this dramatic event, a new person will enter

Laura's life. When Laura and her father were having a walk, they were interrupted by a carriage crash. Laura's father took care to help the two victims of the accident: an adult woman and her young daughter who had been injured in the crash. The lady affirmed that she was on an urgent journey and she had to continue it even without her daughter. At that moment, Laura asked her father to let her daughter stay with them until her mother returned in three months.

The young girl, Carmilla, was thus housed in the castle and Laura took care of her. Laura was impressed by her beauty and this encouraged her to establish a strong friendship with her. The two girls became great friends, although some attitudes and habits of Carmilla disturbed Laura. During her stay in the castle, Laura noticed some odd behaviors about her guest, such as waking up late in the morning. Carmilla showed a particular affection for Laura, so much so that Laura could not understand it since their brief acquaintance.

One night, after a walk in the moonlight, Carmilla decided to express her love to Laura. That night, Laura accompanied Carmilla in her room, and then she went to bed with a strange sensation. While falling asleep, Laura saw a sooty-black animal, similar to a cat, in her bedroom and she felt a sinister sting on her breast. The next morning, Laura tells what happened during the night to Carmilla and her governesses. Another awkward episode occurred, when, after dreaming about Carmilla, completely drenched in blood, Laura realized that Carmilla has disappeared. The entire castle searched all day and night and they finally found her only the next morning. Carmilla may be sleepwalking, which could explain her behavior.

Laura felt weak after that night and she became ill. In the meanwhile, her father received a letter from General Spielsdorf, who was arriving to visit them. He was still upset about her niece's death that he did not believe in a natural cause for her to pass away. They all traveled towards the ruins of the Karnstein – from which Laura's Mother descended – and during that journey, the General told the story of her niece, Bertha. Once in life, Bertha and her uncle were invited to a luxurious masquerade; he stumbled upon a beautiful masked lady who was struck by Bertha, and her name was Millarca. She was encouraged by her mother to stay with them while she was on an important journey. The young girl moved to them and, suddenly, Bertha felt ill. Laura recognized that Millarca's behaviors are similar to Carmilla's. During their journey to the ruins,

they met an old woodman who tell them the story about an attack from a vampire in the village. Then the General went on with his story: Bertha was observed by a physician from Graz, who affirmed that she was probably attacked by a vampire. General Spielsdorf wanted to be sure of that hypothesis, and so, he hid in Bertha's bedroom to witness the attack. He waited in her closet, and he saw a strange dark creature approaching her. He tried to attack, but the creature changed form in Millarca and she disappeared.

When the story was finished, they all entered in an ancient chapel. In that moment, Carmilla appeared and the General was shocked by her image. The General tried to hit her with an axe, but Carmilla dodged him and caught him by her tiny grasp by the wrist. Carmilla run away right after, and the General revealed that Carmilla and Millarca are the same person, and the Countess of Karnstein as well. Her name is an anagram, which descended from the same root. After the attack, a baron called Vordenburg, a descendant of a men who defeated vampires, arrived to help to locate the tomb of the Countess Mircalla.

Laura returned to the castle with her father. The next day, the General and Laura's father arrived to the tomb of Mircalla and, after opening it, they both recognized the body of their perfidious and beautiful guest. Her body was still intact, even after centuries. They drove a sharp stack through her heart and killed her definitely. After this tragic ending, Laura and her father travelled around Italy, but the image of Carmilla is still alive in Laura' imagination.

### 3.1.1 Dynamics among Characters in "Carmilla"

The novella begins with the description of the place in which the protagonist Laura lives. The first theme that le Fanu emphasizes is loneliness: after describing the place where she lives, Laura states that it is a 'lonely and primitive place' (Le Fanu, 1872: 8) The young girl feels lonely and isolated, not only physically but also psychologically, from the rest of the world (Veeder, 1980: 201). She is motherless, her only reference figure is her father, whom she describes as the kindest man on earth. Although Laura cherishes her father, in the text, there are references to a male-orientated social system



such as the patriarchal one: the naive and carefree figure of Laura is usually in contrast with more authoritarian and powerful male characters, such as her father and the General Spielsdorf for example. As Gabriella Jönsson stated: 'The arrival of the General marks the re-immersion of Laura into a patriarchal narrative frame' (2006: 38) This mechanism concealed in the novella reflects a recurring system during the Victorian Age. The female figure is seen to play a more reserved role than man, who is more publicly exposed. Soon, this melancholic feeling of Laura is unhinged by the encounter with Carmilla. When Laura visited her guest for the first time, she was particularly struck by her appearance, as she 'saw the very face which had visited me in my childhood at night' (1872: 43) The face she saw remained fixed in her memory even after years: Laura recognized the melancholy expression on her face that she had the first time. At the same time, Carmilla also remembered Laura's face in one of her dreams. From this coincidence, it seems that these two girls were destined to meet sooner or later.

The encounter between the two ladies is fatal for Laura, who changes radically: 'I was a little shy, as lonely people are, but the situation made me eloquent, and even bold.'(1872: 44) Laura becomes more confident with the presence of her mysterious guest. Their acquaintance develops into a strong friendship, even though they have two opposite temperaments. Laura has a weaker and more innocent disposition than Carmilla, who has a stronger and more manipulative character.

What characterizes the two young girls is the absence of a maternal figure. Laura's mother died when she was an infant, whereas Carmilla's mother leaves her in the care of Laura's family after their accident. They both lack a female role model, but this is offset by their friendship. Indeed, as Shirley Ibach affirms, Laura is attracted to Carmilla on an emotional level because she fulfills the role of both a caring mother and a doting child at the same time. (2014: 23) Although Carmilla is sometimes very reserved about her personal life – she does not say much about her family's origins – Laura is fascinated by the elegance of her answers. The feelings that Carmilla provokes to Laura are quite contrasting, as she states: "I experienced a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable". (1872: 55) Carmilla often tempts to approach her, especially physically, holding her close and whispering in her ear; on the other hand, Laura feels a sense of abhorrence and adoration at the same time.

An additional aspect presented in the novella is the splitting and dissolution of boundaries, in which characters can no longer identify with themselves. In some passages, one notices how Carmilla identifies with Laura and seeks to possess her, as stated by Carmilla in the text: "I live in you, and you would die for me, I love you so." (1872: 79) Their relationship is based on a process of dissolution of boundaries, in which the two girls recognize each other. "Laura starts to resemble Carmilla more and more whereas the latter appears to turn into Laura." (Michelis, 2003: 19) Theirs is not a common friendship, but it becomes a real love affair and is made almost obsessive by Carmilla. She is convinced that she loves Laura and decides to express her feelings to her: "I have been in love with no one, and never shall unless it should be with you." (1872: 78) As previously mentioned, Laura evolves only when she meets her guest. Laura embodies an ideal of purity and innocence initially, which then turns into greater maturity and awareness, especially when the whole story is revealed. Carmilla is attracted by Laura's naive and inexperienced personality: in fact, nevertheless, her relationship with Carmilla seems to mark an important passage in her life, from a young girl to a woman.

A turning point in the story occurs when the real nature of Carmilla is revealed. When the general recounted the sad fate of his niece Bertha, Laura realized that she has had a similar experience as well, such as being attacked at night by an unidentifiable dark figure. After the general recognized Carmilla as the same creature who attacked his niece under the name of Millarca, the whole truth was disclosed. Carmilla is a vampire, is intelligent and calculated by following a similar pattern for her victims: she enters the families of wealthy people and establishes a strong friendship with their daughters, such as Laura and even Bertha, and then attacks them in their sleep. The threat from the vampire ended with her death by Laura's father and general Spieldsorf. In the text, it is often noticed how Carmilla, unlike Laura, is not bound to male figures, and this would suggest a detachment of the character from a patriarchal vision that instead is noticed with Laura. At the very end of the text, Carmilla's death was due to men. However, the death of Carmilla does not suggest the end of her existence for Laura, but instead, she will always live inside Laura's memory and affection, as she states in the last lines: "and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing room door." (1872: 102)

### 3.2 Laura and Carmilla: between Purity and Transgression

In this novella, Le Fanu focuses on Laura's memory of Carmilla. The story is not only about vampirism, but about a type of love affair that, in those years, was badly perceived: a homoerotic relationship between two women. Reading through the pages, we distinguish Laura's figure from Carmilla's. The two characters differ from each other. At the beginning, we are presented with the figure of Laura: a simple, naive, and solitary girl, who lacks the presence of a friend to spend time with. On the other hand, there is Carmilla, a beautiful, mysterious girl who does not expose herself too much, especially about her origins and her family. From the description of the two girls, we can deduce that Laura embodies the ideal of the Victorian woman: a good girl, who follows the rules and does not oppose them. Her character could therefore be traced back to the figure of the so-called "Angel of the house". Carmilla, on the other hand, seems to embody another type of woman, i.e. the "Fallen Woman". According to her temperament and inclinations, especially from a sexual point of view, her character seems to go against social conventions typical of the Victorian Age, and she seems not to repress any kind of transgression as a woman.

At the beginning of the story, their relationship is based on an apparent simple friendship, but this soon turns into a deeper feeling. In particular, Carmilla shows an almost obsessive feeling towards Laura, who is still too naive to understand certain dynamics. Carmilla is attracted by Laura's naivety and uses her cunning to seduce her. She praises her beauty and sweetness so much that Laura feels transported towards her as if she could not stay away from her. Their relational dynamics are very complex. According to Shirley Ibach, "Carmilla", as well as other gothic stories, follows "the psychology of 'the Beauty and the Beast' motif as a means of expressing forbidden love and desire through the monster and its victims." (2014: 23) According to this logic, the "beauty" is represented by Laura, who is in love with and is terrified at the same time by her "beast", Carmilla. Furthermore, the character of the Beast was for Le Fanu a useful literary device to discuss about unconventional issues, as reported in the novella, where topics such as female sexuality, motherhood and homosexuality are combined. (2014: 29)

A further theme uniting the two young ladies is the feeling of love. Given her young age, Laura is inexperienced regarding this feeling: she has never had any kind of relationship with the male world. Carmilla, on the other hand, seems to have experience in this field and tries to make Laura aware of this. The encounter between the two girls suggests that Laura reflects the period of adolescence, while Carmilla seems to reflect a more mature life such as adulthood. If the feeling of love, in its pure meaning, is expressed by Laura, on the contrary, the feeling of love expressed by the female vampire is closer to lust and desire. Indeed, Carmilla's driving force is her passion for Laura, who had contrasting feelings for her. Her longing is mentioned several times in the story: in particular when Carmilla, in false guise, tries to attack her victims. Laura affirms that a large animal attacked her in the night, and she felt as if two needles pierced her chest; this scene reassumes Carmilla's carnal desire for Laura.

Another concept that allows the two girls to be distinguished is the idea of repression. During the evolution of their friendship, Laura tries to repress her feelings towards Carmilla, who, on the contrary, tries more and more to express them. In addition, as William Veeder claims, this attitude of Laura can be traced back to her lifestyle: she has always been isolated from the external world, not only physically but psychologically as well. Through this alienation from the male world above all, Laura feels a sense of inadequacy within her society. (1980: 201)

There are different interpretations of the figures of Laura and Carmilla. In particular, the two ladies may be the same person. As mentioned in the story, Laura's mother comes from the Karnstein lineage as well as Countess Mircalla – i.e. Carmilla. Hence, the two girls belong to the same bloodline. However, according to Shirley Ibach, Laura and Carmilla are alter-egos of each other. 'Carmilla is the mirror image of Laura, darkly beautiful where Laura is light'. Moreover, Carmilla, driven by sexual desire, seems to represent the repressed sexuality of Laura (2014: 36)

### 3.2.1 Carmilla: The Vampire-mother against the Patriarchal System

The real nature of Carmilla is only revealed at the end of the story when General Spieldorf recognizes the girl as the same one who attacked his niece. She is a vampire who has spent centuries terrorizing the area of Styria by attacking and killing young

women in order to survive. The female vampire reappears repeatedly under false names – the Countess of Karnstein, Millarca, Mircalla, and Carmilla. The replication of her own name allows her to create a new identity each time and, at the same time, to establish the same relationship with her victims. As Angela Michelis states, the blood-sucking creature is never satisfied and the incessant need for new supplies has become its 'raison d'être'. Through its attack, the vampire renews itself and is able to give life to the body it is feeding on by transforming it into one of its own. (2003: 16)

The root of her name takes on different meanings. In the case of “Carmilla”, her name carries two meanings: *car*, such as 'the vehicle', and, *melli*, i.e. 'honey'. As a result, Carmilla's name implies that she gives sweetness to Laura's lonely existence. (Leal, 2004: 40) On the other hand, “Mircalla” carries the concept of 'beauty' (*calla*) and 'miracle' (*mira*), as she can slip through locked doors and miraculously vanish. Instead, the figure of “Millarca” allows Laura to connect with her past and her deceased mother since Carmilla and the Countess of Karnstein are the same person. (Leal, 2004: 43)

During the Victorian Age, the distinction between humanity and animality was particularly prominent in the cultural figurations of women, and motherhood in particular. In this case, the character of Carmilla takes on a particular connotation: she is not only a vampire but, as Amanda Paxton states, she is depicted as a vampire-mother. Through an association with the ichneumon wasp, a parasitic insect, the figure of the vampire-mother awakens the monstrous, destructive, and animalistic side of Victorian motherhood. (2019: 5) The female vampire is compared to a parasite: Carmilla – as well as Mircalla – infiltrates the lives and households of her victims as a wasp does. Carmilla's infiltration in Laura's father's castle, and Millarca's comparable infiltration in Spielsdorf's home, exemplify the parasite's figure as a social leech who preys on her host's goodwill. This parallel can be noticed clearly in a specific passage: Carmilla describes living inside Laura at one point. Like the other vampire's victim, Laura is infected at the point of penetration, leaving her vulnerable to the parasitic attack that follows. (2019: 9) As a vampire, Carmilla is motivated by a primal instinct that is almost animalistic. Indeed, when Bertha and Laura are attacked in the middle of the night, they assume it is a huge, dark, cat-like animal. Yet, there is a distinction between the two ladies: Carmilla acts according to her instincts and desires as an animal, unlike Laura who attempts to repress them. In Victorian England, this both animal and spiritual

nature was considered as a problem, especially concerning motherhood. However, these two themes set the basis for the monstrosity in Le Fanu's novella. (Paxton, 2019: 12)

Compared to other vampire novels, "Carmilla" has a unique feature: the vampire's spread involves only female bodies: a female vampire preys and attacks only her female host. This dynamic is a defining feature of the story. Female and male characters are distinct in the novella, particularly in terms of how they are depicted. Men are frequently shown as elderly, while female characters are depicted as young and beautiful. This distinction provides a sense of detachment from the patriarchal system prevailing at the time. Carmilla's female character, in particular, embodies the ideal of an unusual woman. (Veeder, 1980: 203)

Another significant element to consider is that the vampire is capable of reproducing herself without male involvement. (Paxton; 2019: 13) This aspect allows the reader to understand how Carmilla is alienated from the male authority and she acts independently, unlike Laura. In "Carmilla," Le Fanu follows the evolution of a vampiric relationship between two women: it becomes evident that the lesbian relationship between Carmilla and Laura opposes the traditional familial patterns. If previously the reference figure for Laura was her father, now it is Carmilla. As her power grows over Laura, so does the separation from the narrative's men and women. As Elizabeth Signorotti affirms: "Men's attempts to keep information about women hidden in 'Carmilla' – for example when the doctor tried to examine Carmilla – increase the alienation between men and women." (1996: 616)

As mentioned above, Carmilla almost embodies a maternal figure for Laura – even if a very unconventional one. This identification is traceable when Laura is attacked in her sleep for the first time: the little girl sees a dark figure near her bed caressing her face and trying to make her fall asleep. This gesture affects Laura particularly since she misses her mother. The female union in "Carmilla" proposes a different point of view to the patriarchal system. The matriarchy is exemplified through the fact that Carmilla invades her victim's home, depriving the father of his patriarchal power and domination. In this case, Carmilla can be portrayed as an anti-mother, since she does not embody the main feature of a maternal figure. (Ibach, 2014: 32)

The vampire-mother represents both productive and destructive character who is considered as a threat to Victorian ideals of motherhood as spiritual and beneficent, and

furthermore, she exposes the parasitic nature of hereditary patriarchal lineage's need on the female body as a host for offspring. (Paxton, 2019: 6) Le Fanu's intent is not to moralize Laura and Carmilla's actions and desires, but to leave an open the possibility about the female sexuality as liberated and desirable as a result of their homosexual relationship. Moreover, their alliance reflects a revolutionary and countercultural perspective about marriage, and more specifically about motherhood. (Signorotti, 1996: 618)

### 3.3 “Carmilla” in Mass Culture

In writing *Carmilla*, Le Fanu introduces various dynamics around the female world. He does not represent them as sinful women who have to submit to the rules imposed by a patriarchal and male chauvinist heritage. The Irish author wanted to focus on female sexuality and the role that women may play in a male-orientated culture like in the Victorian Age. Furthermore, Le Fanu was one of the first writers to depict a female vampire in English literature, and he believed that the concept of Gothic and sexuality are linked together. (Ibach, 2014: 31)

According to William Veeder, Le Fanu was hugely popular in the literary context of those years and his stories were a popular form of entertainment for Victorian readers as well. LeFanu believed in the correlation between monstrosity and humankind. Indeed, like previous gothic writers, he turns the "monster's" discovery into a revelation of human nature itself. In the case of "*Carmilla*", Le Fanu refers to a recurring theme during the Victorian era, i.e. 'our dual existence'. (1980: 197)

*Carmilla*'s story is composed of various aspects that portray a dual condition: human-vampire dualism, homosexuality-heterosexuality, and man-woman. The dualism is seen between the two female characters as well, in which Laura represents the repression towards Carmilla, who is more emancipated. Moreover, in “*Carmilla*” both male and female characters are repressed, but despite this, Le Fanu chose female characters since he believed that Victorian women were more emotionally stunted. (Veeder, 1980: 198)

Besides being a female figure, the antagonist embodies a certain type of woman who was rejected by nineteenth-century society. *Carmilla*'s name would have seemed

both familiar and odd to Victorian readers, as her homosexuality itself. Her anagrammatical names reflect her "inverted" sexuality: she is indeed an onomastic and a sexual deviant at the same time. (Leal, 2004: 42) She is a deviant figure not only due to her gothic roots but because, as a woman, she follows her instincts and sexual desire freely. As Angelica Michelis states: rather than being read as a threat to identity, Le Fanu's vampire appears to function much more as an archetype for the identity of horror. The horror of a concept of identity refers to that eternal struggle towards maternity, and in particular towards the female reproductive body; 'rather than being stable and fixed and under the sway of patriarchal law'. (2003: 19)

The Gothic novel made a significant contribution to women's roles in literature. The earliest vampire story to present a female figure as a Gothic creature is "Carmilla." Previously, the vampire's role was reserved solely for male characters. In addition, Le Fanu's invention of a female vampire foresees the shift at the end of the century from a primarily male orientated society to a more open one for both genders. (Signorotti, 1996: 610)





## Conclusion

In this work, I have attempted to outline the woman's figure and her role in society, relating it to the main characters of Le Fanu's Gothic novella "Carmilla". In the first chapter, I delineated the main features of the Victorian Age, i.e. hard work, discipline, and morality that characterized the period of the Industrial Revolution; as well as the negative aspects, such as hypocrisy and pettiness according to the so-called Victorian Compromise.

I tried to outline the concept of femininity in the Victorian age by dealing with the dual nature of women and their categorization in society. Victorian feminine identity includes two distinct ideals of women: on one hand, "the Angel of the House", the embodiment of the ideal wife and mother who is pure and respectful towards her husband; on the other, "the Fallen Woman", a sinful woman who shows strong emancipation, towards sexuality in particular, and who breaks the social convention of her society.

During the nineteenth century, scholars started to find explanations about deviant attitudes, especially in women, and what makes them "fallen". Indeed, as stated in the second chapter, in order to recognize signs of deviance, both sexual activity and inclination were taken into consideration. Women were supposed to be more reserved than men when it came to sexual activity: as Nancy Cott interpreted, due to their modesty, women had to be sexually passive, as a consequence, in opposition to their male counterpart. Moreover, transgressive sexual behaviours in women were frowned upon since they were portrayed as faithful wives and mothers, and their main role was to be appealing to men's desires.

In particular, women were considered as entities only due to their bodies, which had to be healthy in order to carry a pregnancy. As a result, not only the psyche but the female body as well, could present problems such as infertility, which was regarded badly by society. However, forms of deviance could also include aggressive attitudes

towards their children, in this case the mother is no longer seen as an angelic figure but as a destructive one. As mentioned in the chapter, people who presented signs of mental illness were rejected by their society and described as “outcasts”. Furthermore, I could state that there is a link between these social conditions of marginalized people and literature, in particular the Gothic genre. Writers often use certain characters as a reflection of the social situation: during the Victorian Age, the Gothic genre spread as a major literary genre and new characters, often derived from popular culture, are employed to tell stories. The “Revenant”, such as the vampire for example, is a figure who breaks the laws of nature and its purpose is to disrupt the life of society like a parasite.

With his story, Le Fanu showed a new vampire figure in the Gothic genre. The great contribution that Le Fanu was able to make was to have a woman as a Gothic figure, who had never been introduced before. In particular, by analyzing both Carmilla's and Laura's character, it is possible to see how the two girls embody two different ideals of Victorian women. At the beginning of the story, Laura is described as a young girl living in the custody of her father, she is inexperienced about the outside world since she lives apart from society. Taking her attitude into account, she embodies the type of woman that Victorian society considered acceptable: a discreet and naive woman who shows respect to her father. This description makes Laura emerge as an angelic figure characterized by a purity of soul. Whereas, on the other hand, there is the character of Carmilla, who has different attitudes compared to Laura: she is a beautiful young girl who shows a deep attraction to Laura and her victims as well. She infiltrates other people's homes, and in particular also in the private sphere of her victims in order to prey on them and then to attack them. Not only does she act differently and uncontrollably according to her sexual instincts, but she is also a character who is hiding something mysterious. Carmilla is a vampire who has been searching for centuries for young women to seduce and to attack in their sleep.

Carmilla's possession of her victims suggests two important considerations: on the one hand, this allows her to propagate her lineage as a vampire; on the other, it suggests a detachment from the patriarchal system. I find that this last reference in particular is what characterizes this novel. Carmilla's presence is fundamental to Laura's growth and detachment from the male world, indeed, Laura feels different when Carmilla is around, she is more confident about herself and about her thoughts.

Another aspect to be taken into account is the relationship between the two girls. At first, it seems to be a simple friendship between two young girls, but in reality, you can see that their relationship is something deeper and more carnal. As mentioned in the story, Carmilla has a real feeling of love for Laura, who is completely unfamiliar with this kind of feeling. Moreover, Carmilla is driven not only by affection for Laura but also by a sexual desire for her: the vampire attempts to attack Laura by piercing her chest. This gesture by Carmilla represents an actual attempt at a sexual act towards Laura and her previous victims. As mentioned in the second chapter, it could be stated that homosexuality in the nineteenth century, and not only, was seen as a form of deviance in the individual. In the case of Le Fanu's novella, it is possible to understand how there is a homoerotic relationship between the two main characters. The main feature of this female homosexuality is not perceived as a transgression in the story, but it is portrayed as a departure from the patriarchal vision, in which relationships had to be heterosexual and the power had to belong to man. Indeed, the homoerotic relationship between the two ladies suggests that no male counterpart is involved in their romantic relationship.

In my view, it is possible to notice that in Victorian times the female figure and the idea of motherhood were often questioned, especially on the basis of her purity and morality. I also state that Victorian society pays a particular attention to the concept of morality linked to a sense of sanity: indeed, disturbed minds - especially in women - were portrayed as a threat. In addition, Le Fanu's story gave a fundamental contribution to the role of women during the Victorian Age, since he wrote about a woman as the

main character of the story, and because he described a type of woman who breaks the social conventions around the concept of motherhood and unhinges the patriarchal system in force at the time. Thanks to the Gothic novella “Carmilla”, it was possible to delineate the female figure in the Victorian era by associating her with social problems and bringing to life a new image of woman as a more modern and emancipated one.

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