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Carmilla

The emergence of Irish Gothic Literature brought about such novels as *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, a classic in terms of its popularity. In fact, *Dracula* is so popular that a great deal of how society understood vampires and gothic literature as a whole for a significant amount of time was based on *Dracula*'s descriptions of such creatures and settings. Stoker's vampire tale is undoubtedly the most popular, most criticised, and most well-known of these types of tales; yet, it is through works such as this that the female character is objectified and used most commonly for male pleasure. As Elizabeth Signorotti contends in her work "Repossessing the Body: Transgressive Desire in *Carmilla* and *Dracula*," "*Dracula* seeks to repossess the female body for the purposes of male pleasure and exchange . . ." Many of Stoker's writing on the female character are unsettling and therefore seemingly become a characteristic of the gothic genre. However, *Dracula* is not the only Irish Gothic vampire tale that deals with the female character; Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu wrote the lesser known *Carmilla* in 1871 *before* Stoker's *Dracula* in 1897 and it was in fact an influence on Stoker's work. Thus, I contend that it is Le Fanu's use of the female vampire and female interactions that add femininity into the gothic, vampire genre, a genre which may have otherwise been dominated by male control. Through an exploration of the gothic genre itself as well as the female character in *Carmilla*, most specifically in terms of

sexuality, power, and dominance I seek to discover the importance of Le Fanu's contribution to the genre.

First, as Jarlath Killeen asserts in "Braindead: Locating the Gothic," "... Sheridan Le Fanu [was one who] pioneered the nineteenth-century tradition of Irish supernatural fiction . . ." Therefore, it can be assumed that Le Fanu's work in *Carmilla* is worth further investigation; however, to discover the true significance of *Carmilla*, a look into the gothic novel and views on gothic literature are helpful. Most specifically, a greater understanding of control, sexuality, and the female are imperative to the discussion within this paper. George Haggerty writes about the gothic in his article "Mothers and Other Lovers: Gothic Fiction and the Erotics of Loss." He asserts,

A Gothic trope is fixed: terror is almost always sexual terror, and fear, flight, incarceration, and escape are almost always coloured by the exoticism of transgressive aggression. Gothic fiction, moreover, is not about homo or hetero desire as much as it is about power; but that power is itself charged with a sexual force—a sexual-ity—that determines the action and gives it shape. (157)

If this is true, then it can be easily assumed that the main characters in *Carmilla*, Laura and Carmilla, are engaging in this type of terror. On the other hand, Haggerty makes further claims when discussing the writing of Ann Radcliffe; he states, "as she tells story after story of female victimization, she constructs an alternative reading of the family: the disowned and dishonoured heroine often searches for a lost mother in the confines of a castle or a convent, and at the same time she flees the aggressive attentions of an overly erotic father or father surrogate" (158). His assertions here show what is true in much gothic literature; the female is the victim, terror results

due to male domination, and sexual tensions claim a great deal of the difficulties. Due to this, it is relevant to look at the work of Le Fanu to understand his contribution to the genre and the importance of the female in *Carmilla*.

Just as Haggerty asserts, Laura is without a maternal figure and in search of some kind of replacement, which is seen as she states, “I and my father constituted the family at the schloss. My mother, a Styrian lady, died in my infancy, but I had a good-natured governess, who had been with me from, I might almost say, my infancy” (Le Fanu 2). The novel begins with this acknowledgement by Laura that she is lacking a maternal figure. Other than her pleasant (enough) governess, Laura is mainly raised and influenced by her father. However, what differs in *Carmilla* from other gothic literature is twofold: 1) the female plays a central role and 2) there is no overly erotic father-figure which Laura must flee. Instead, Laura is pursued by a female vampire and it is this female vampire, Carmilla, who exerts confidence, terror, and dominance. Thus, it is pertinent to explore how Le Fanu is successful at creating terror through the use of mainly female characters and how this gives the female power over male.

To do so, one must look at just how it is that the female plays a central role in *Carmilla*. Signorotti writes on the topic when she claims,

Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*—the first vampire tale whose protagonist is a woman vampire—marks the growing concern about the power of female homosocial relationships in the nineteenth century. All of *Carmilla*’s predecessors—Lord Ruthven, Varney, Melmoth—were men. Le Fanu’s creation of a woman vampire anticipates the shift toward the end of the century to predominantly female vampires. (Signorotti 610)

Through the novel, *Le Fanu* brings forth a female vampire that catapults the genre forward. The female presence within the novel creates a completely new dynamic within the genre of gothic/horror. The men within the novel are not in control as has, up until this point, been typical within gothic literature. Signorotti asserts, “*Le Fanu*’s men suffer exclusion from male kinship systems because they are unable to exchange women. Instead, women control their own exchange” (611). Women’s control of their own exchange is true again and again throughout the novel, most certainly with *Carmilla*. Even within the second chapter there is the loss of a father’s control over her daughter when General Spielsdorf writes, “I have lost my darling daughter—for as such I loved her . . . I have lost her, and now learn *all*, too late. She died in the peace of innocence, and in the glorious hope of a blessed futurity” (*Le Fanu* 7). The ‘futurity’ or future that Spielsdorf mentions in his letter to Laura’s father most certainly would include his marrying her off, controlling her path; however, *Carmilla* steals the control away from him, using his daughter for *her* own pleasure.

Furthermore, Spielsdorf’s lack of control of the female (and therefore male over female) is demonstrated once again at the end of the novel. Signorotti claims,

Spielsdorf’s attempt to subject *Carmilla* to his own desire—by stabbing her with his sword—fails, as does his attempt to correct this transgressive scene.

Uncontainable by male systems of exchange, *Carmilla* shifts shape—refusing to be bound by the restrictive, one-dimensional roles available to women—and leaves at her own pleasure. (615)

Spielsdorf was unable to control his daughter’s path in life—a major disappointment—and was once again overpowered by the female when he was unable to avenge her death by exerting

power over Carmilla. Le Fanu does not grant the male domination that is so characteristic of many other gothic tales, such as *Dracula*.

Not only is it evident in Spielsdorf's relationship with Carmilla, but such is true with Laura and her father as well. As Signorotti writes, "female homosocial bonds potentially carry tremendous power to subvert or demolish existing patriarchal kinship structures, which is precisely what happens in 'Carmilla'" (609). Prior to Carmilla entering the household, it is Laura's father who holds the control and he who influences the structure of Laura's life. But, when Carmilla comes to stay this relationship of control is completely turned on its head. From her first entering the house Carmilla begins her manipulations, which can be seen as she states, "If you were less pretty I think I should be very much afraid of you, but being as you are, and you and I both so young, I feel only that I have made your acquaintance twelve years ago, and have already a right to your intimacy; at all events it does seem as if we were destined, from our earliest childhood to be friends," (Le Fanu 19). Knowing that Carmilla is in fact a vampire (immortal) the manipulative nature of this statement can easily be seen. She simply desires to gain Laura's trust, pull her away from her father, and hold control over her. In order to do so, Carmilla hopes to win Laura's trust by describing their commonalities—young, pretty, connected—when in fact what they have in common is simply manifested by Carmilla. Yet, this statement is enough to win over Laura's affections, which is seen when she asserts, "I did feel, as she said, 'drawn towards her,' but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed," (Le Fanu 19). Laura immediately begins to exhibit signs of a kinship with Carmilla and as this grows it is only natural that her relationship with her father should dwindle.

Le Fanu's writing contains a great deal of female power through the loss of a father's power over his daughter; however, this is not the only dynamic used by Le Fanu to bring about female power in *Carmilla*. Laura and Carmilla's relationship exhibits female power over another female and most specifically the power of a female *vampire*. As stated above, Carmilla has a manipulative nature that severely affects Laura's interactions with her. When she makes the statement, "'Darling, darling,' she murmured, 'I live in you; and you would die for me, I love you so,'" it becomes clear that she holds some type of power over Laura (Le Fanu 34). Carmilla would not ask for death from Laura and expect her to react positively if she did not hold power over her.

Additionally, the relationship between Carmilla and Laura furthers the separation between that of Laura from her father. This is different than the male loss of control over the female, because in this instance it is Laura who allows the female to control her rather than the male she has been accustomed to for her entire life. This is demonstrated as Signorotti claims that "Despite her mingled attraction toward Carmilla and her fear of Carmilla's often painful midnight visits, Laura refuses to alert her father to Carmilla's frightening behavior. Instead, she joins Carmilla in claiming for themselves the right of bestowal and, in so doing, eliminating male control over social linkage" (614). The interactions between Carmilla and Laura bring about a deeper relationship, one that has been contemplated by various critics as both homosexual in nature and maternal in nature. Either way, the pair is an example of a female in power, which is one way that Le Fanu changes the way that the gothic genre is perceived.

For instance, Angelica Michelis writes in her article "Dirty Mama: Horror, Vampires, and the Maternal in Late Nineteenth-Century Gothic Fiction" about the underlying maternal nature of

the Carmilla's relationship with Laura. Michelis describes Carmilla when she writes, "The lady is pretty and an image of horror; she soothes and frightens; she caresses and bites" (18).

Carmilla is both frightening and enticing to Laura; she scares her in the night and pleasures her throughout the day. This reaches its peak when Laura begins to accept the fact that she may die and that thought no longer frightens her. She states, "Dim thoughts of death began to open, and an idea that I was slowly sinking took gentle, and, somehow, not unwelcome, possession of me" (Le Fanu 42). Carmilla's control is something that Laura welcomes and is therefore something that she takes pleasure in. As Michelis asserts, Carmilla stands in as a maternal figure for Laura, which is shown as she asserts,

The vampire, particularly as she appears in Le Fanu's story, rather than being read as a threat to identity seems to function much more as a trope for the identity of horror and as such as the horror of a concept of identity that fuelled by anxiety, has to refer constantly to that eternal combat with the maternal, reproductive body, rather than being stable and fixed and under the sway of patriarchal law.

(Michelis 19)

It is clear that Laura and Carmilla's relationship is dominated by female power, as Michelis states, "The maternal is the very, *mater*, material, and matter of the specific horror evoked in the tale" (Michelis 21).

Throughout Le Fanu's *Carmilla* a sense of female domination is garnered, one that interrupts the predominantly male genre of gothic literature. At the start of the novel, Laura is as Signorotti puts it, "Fixed firmly within the parameters of her father's power as well as his 'patrimony,' Laura looks forward only to the infrequent visits of General Spielsdorf and his

charming niece Bertha Rheinfeldt” (612). It is not until Carmilla enters the scene that the true nature of Le Fanu’s work is understood; the female begins to emerge at the forefront of the novel. It is when this occurs that Le Fanu creates a shift in the genre, one that changes the way the gothic novel is viewed. In fact, by placing the female at the forefront of his novel, Le Fanu puts feminity into the gothic for the first time and influences future writers’ views of how the gothic/horror genre can be portrayed. Le Fanu’s work in *Carmilla* reaches so far as the most widely known Irish gothic novel, *Dracula*. The strong, female characters within *Carmilla* become a major influence on the work of Bram Stoker in *Dracula*, where he works to undo the progressive nature of Le Fanu by reinstating male domination and female passiveness throughout the novel. Thus, without the work of Le Fanu, the gothic genre would be lacking female power and domination.

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