

Chapter 3

Sexuality and Gender Dynamics in Carmilla

As a novella, *Carmilla* put forward the never-ending question of the trope of lesbianism in nineteenth century Ireland. Le Fanu portrays Carmilla as a young, beautiful, harmless companion of Laura. However, she is an old creature that has existed for more than a century. She also embodies the figure of a more sexually experienced woman. As written and published in the nineteenth century, Le Fanu's novella introduces us to the first lesbian vampire in gothic fiction. He uses the idea of retaining a vampiric figure, but what he has done in the novella is mind-blowing. The nineteenth century marked the period when gender roles started to become more fatal than ever, and even the notion of male and female sexuality became too much of a concern for the people, not just in Victorian England but even around the globe.

3.1 THE TABOOED WORLD: *CARMILLA* AS A LESBIAN VAMPIRE

Lesbianism or a lesbian vampire in literature, especially in Gothic writing, is a trope that started in the early twentieth century. The concept is to circumvent the heavy censorship of lesbian characters in the realm of social realism. The main motive behind this is to draw attention to the socio-political condition of the working-class people, critiquing the power structure. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* also showcases the socio-political structure as well as power structure, which made Le Fanu use a lesbian vampire in his novella (see Fig. 9 in the appendix). Carmilla, whose desire to be with her prey describes a lot about her sexual desires, but also points out the need for a female and a lesbian vampire in the plot. The nineteenth century, which is notorious for subduing women's sexuality, displays their lived experiences of women and the societal

constructs that have led to women's subordination and oppression (Hiwarkhedka and Sharma 1230).

The norm from traditional to non-traditional works marks a significant change in the history of English literature, especially with genre-based work. Le Fanu, coming from the Victorian period, showcases the dominance of men over women and reflects upon the changes that have followed until today. *Carmilla*, as a prime example of a female vampire as well as a lesbian vampire, breaks certain norms that were prevalent during the nineteenth century, and Le Fanu, with his novella, breaks those norms that were embedded in the Victorian world. In a patriarchal-dominated world where societal norms favoured men over women, Le Fanu wanted to break free from those norms. Despite living under the constant eye of the English government, his "problem was not with Catholicism and the Irish identity but with Ireland's radical break from the English government" (Coşkun 80).

Le Fanu's choice of having a lesbian vampire directly at the front of Victorian society defines that he wanted to tell the world that there is a change, especially in the way it functions: where every decision has to be taken by men and women have zero to no say in decision-making. With the Catholic church being at the front, Le Fanu's vampire case, "the supernatural plot paves the way for dealing with both women's sexuality and Ireland's Catholic legacy that threatens the union of England and Ireland. In this context, the vampire story cover means that *Carmilla's* character cannot be censored because of her sexual perversity or rebellion against patriarchy since her vampire nature already makes her a social outcast" (Coşkun 81). In that way, it reflects the rebellious nature that is channelled by *Carmilla*, an offset play by Le Fanu, showing his frustration with the English order.

3.2 SEXUALITY AND GENDER DYNAMICS IN *CARMILLA*

In *Carmilla*, the notion of gender dynamics and female sexuality becomes the centre of concern for every other scholar to explore. Because it challenges the usual norms of gender and sexuality (see Fig. 12 in the appendix). Le Fanu

puts forward a lesbian vampire upfront, throughout the novella, he challenges or, more precisely, dismantles those norms that were running during the Victorian period. *Carmilla*, as a century-old vampire, has much more agency than any other female character in the novella; she is sexually mature and knows how to show her sexual feelings towards Laura. On the other hand, Laura has never thought that whatever happened in the dream is connected to a direct sexual connection. Degler in “What Ought To Be and What Was: Women’s Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century” says that “the nineteenth century was afraid of sex, particularly when it manifested itself in women” (1467). The point is that once the property is contaminated, it is not yours, and the world was functioning with the old traditions of settlement and why women were considered as pure property. And here we have Le Fanu, who seems to be going in a different direction and showcasing the notion of female sexual desire in *Carmilla*. During that time, it was considered that if a woman showed any sign of sexual desire, she was trying to resemble a man. It feels like that indeed the nineteenth century was afraid of women’s sexual desires, and scholars were more inclined towards why female sexuality should be suppressed; however, it became a field of exploration for researchers.

With Le Fanu, what he is asserting marks the start of a new age of Vampire Fiction. He is not portraying a basic vampire to the world; first of all, he is dismantling the entire notion of gender roles and then giving us a vampire who is lesbian (homosexual), which was/is considered a subject of taboo. He is defying gender boundaries by exploring female sexuality through a lesbian vampire and deliberately explaining that society assigns women the role of powerless victims and men as powerful forces. Because of this binary in society, he challenges the nature of masculinity by giving masculine features to a female vampire to mark a change in the Gothic World. Le Fanu is “engaging with the challenge that conventional horror offers, of female victims and sexual voracious monsters, they have revived and reinterpreted the vampire to their own radical ends. They revalue the Mother, infuse their work with the disruptive power of the erotic, and centre-stage the vampire in

a variety of challenging forms: rock star, flâneur, gay/lesbian/queer. These figures provide social critique, highlighting and questioning the enforced fixity of roles and behaviors” (Punter 2015). Here, Punter is asserting that by engaging with the challenges of Gothic Fiction Writing, Le Fanu is challenging the concept of female sexuality and why we cannot let women show their sexual desires. Firstly, in the novella, this absence of the mother creates a deep hole in Laura’s life, which leads the story into a sentimental mode, and that’s what becomes the selling point for Le Fanu. He puts this pseudo-woman (*Carmilla*) in place of Laura’s mother, who works more as a helpmate, but slowly and steadily, she gains Laura’s trust and becomes the mother symbol in her life; this is what leads to the start of a dangerous sexuality in *Carmilla*. It is about embracing the fact of radical alternative behaviour to celebrate otherness, and *Carmilla*, as a lesbian vampire, is doing the exact thing, while also dismantling the patriarchal reductive binaries and behaviour process. For vampires,

“Sexual life, they insist, cannot be separate from questions of morality and generativity and it can find its meaning only through a fully conscious process of living with the other. Then alone will sexuality be fully humanized and lovers be able to realise that the body is sufficient because it is so completely constituted within this temporal, fleeting world; that erotic desires are worthy because they express a fascination with the actuality of the lover’s body which is marvellously here on this earth and shares with others the life of this day.” (Bhalla 11)

In *Carmilla*, the concept of sexuality works with the traditional framework of Freudian psychoanalysis, which focuses on the fear of castration felt by men from grazing women, who anatomically embody the grotesque concept of the absence of a penis, largely ignoring women’s effect on other women. *Carmilla* who is sexually more mature than Laura is, “in the shape of an erotically exquisite woman, she has, at the same time, the strength to hold any living body with the unshakeable grip of death; “You are mine, you *shall* be mine,

you and I are one forever.” Then she had thrown herself back in her chair, with her small hands over her eyes, leaving me trembling” (48).

In the nineteenth century, the idea of women feeling any sexual desire was considered immoral, as they were not supposed to showcase any desire leading to sexual pleasure. Symptoms such as anxiety, shortness of breath, fainting, nervousness, sexual desire, insomnia, fluid retention, heaviness in the abdomen, loss of appetite for food or sex, sexually forward behaviour, and trouble-making tendencies were once considered part of the medical diagnosis of female hysteria. Hysteria is commonly used to mean the omnipotent emotional excess and can refer to a temporary state of mind or emotion. In the nineteenth century, female hysteria was a physically diagnosed disease among both men and women. The basis for the diagnosis is believed to have been based on the belief that women are predisposed to mental and behavioural conditions; the interpretation of gender-related differences in stress response. The exertion about women’s sexuality led to hysteria, marking the start of this uncommon lesbian romantic encounter in *Carmilla*. Though neither Carmilla nor Laura is involved in complete sexual intercourse, the novella gives the sense of strong sexual tendencies. This entire point of female hysteria is portrayed through the first love bite in her dream: “She caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling; I felt immediately delightfully soothed, and fell asleep again. I was wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment, and I cried loudly” (13-14). The dream in itself is the starting point of an erotic relationship. Because of this incident, doctors were called to examine her, which was when the notion of female hysteria started to take hold. Laura says, “I was very nervous for a long time after this. A doctor was called in, he was pallid and elderly. How well I remember his long saturnine face, slightly pitted with smallpox, and his chestnut wig. For a good while, every second day, he came and gave me medicine, which of course I hated” (15). Bhalla in *Politics of Atrocity and Lust* says,

“Laura’s tale of lesbian and predatory sexuality is simultaneously a discourse on love and those conditions which prevent men from making their unique place in the pluralities of the world. For Le Fanu lesbianism is the sterile fantasy of sexuality without responsibilities and is the structural equivalent of the desire for property by men without any social morality. In terms of the economics of sexuality, lesbianism is the expenditure of energies in seeking pleasure for oneself alone. It is the narcissistic dream of someone who is absorbed in the erotic of her own body that she neither reaches out to another who is equal to and utterly different from herself nor longs for a future.” (31)

This particular quote narrates a very significant point. *Carmilla* marks an important time frame in Gothic Fiction by having a lesbian vampire at the centre of the story. Le Fanu is doing something different; however, the nineteenth century was not ready for that. The fact that homosexuality takes up most of the storyline in the novella, he is exploring the limits of homosexual identity. Le Fanu, who lived in a heterosexual society, liberates women’s sexuality, especially through a lesbian vampire. Le Fanu points out pleasure-seeking ideas through *Carmilla*. Besides this, he is also showing that because Carmilla seeks pleasure from Laura, he is making a victim become a victimiser, because Carmilla is sucking the life out of Laura, which evidently weakens her. Though Le Fanu does not set an amazing example through *Carmilla*, he does some justice by staying closer to his idea of homosexuality in the novella, because it feels like there is no social morality in the novella. After all, this pleasure-seeking-centric idea in the novella is very much condemnable. After all, somehow this pertinent notion of homosexuality is only giving pleasure to one person, and pleasure is only going in one physical direction, not into an intimate relationship. And the aftermath of it will create instability in Irish society.

Carmilla, who belongs to the revenant category of vampire, showcases her sexuality only to the people whom she loves the most; for Carmilla, that person is Laura. The reason why she is only attracted to Laura

is that she is the sexual feast for her, who is building a relationship through the position of a victim. Carmilla's and Laura's relationship is far more of a compatriot. Carmilla only feasts on Laura (sexually) because Laura also portrays the same features that the cult family of Karnstein looked for in their prey. This utmost desire for Laura shows that without Laura she is just a powerless lesbian vampire; "I don't know which should be most afraid of the other," she said, again smiling—"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. I wonder whether you feel as strangely drawn towards me as I do to you; I have never had a friend—shall I find one now?" She sighed, and her fine dark eyes gazed passionately on me' (40-41).

The entire notion of sexuality in *Carmilla* works on the fact that in the nineteenth century, the sexuality of women was suppressed by society due to the rise of capitalism and the bourgeoisie. This control over women's sexuality and linkage to the bourgeois dates back to the feudal era; the entire point is that women were/are considered the personal property of men. Even in the novella, while Laura has a female companion in the form of Carmilla, we still see that her father has full control over her. The aristocratic or feudal nature implies that men controlled women's sexuality to ensure a pure lineage and the laws of inheritance. While this might seem like a negative or regressive kind of growth, it protects the angels of their house. Foucault, in his work *The History of Sexuality*, points out that the world of perversion, which includes the sexuality of children, the mentally ill, criminals, and homosexuals, piqued society's interest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the nineteenth century, sexuality was openly explored through confession and scientific inquiry. And Le Fanu does the same thing in *Carmilla*, rather than suppressing his characters sexuality he builds upon it and portrays them as a lesbian couple, however, in some lines he goes too far

with too much expression; “She held me close in her pretty arms for a moment and whispered in my ear, Good night, darling, it is very hard to part with you, but good night; tomorrow, but not early, I shall see you again.” (42).

While Carmilla openly shows her desire for Laura through her languid acts, Laura also experiences some strange feelings for her, “In these mysterious moods I did not like her. I experienced a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable, ever and anon, mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust. I had no distinct thoughts about her while such scenes lasted, but I was conscious of a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence. This I know is paradox, but I can make no other attempt to explain the feeling” (47). With this immense sexual thrust for Laura, Carmilla gets closer to her. It feels that she has finally found a match for her sexual desire for fulfilment, and she wants to die as a lover:

““I dare say, let us talk no more of it. You would not wound a friend?”

She looked languidly in my eyes, and passed her arm round my waist lovingly, and led me out of the room. My father was busy over some papers near the window.

“Why does your papa like to frighten us?” said the pretty girl with a sigh and a little shudder.

“He doesn’t, dear Carmilla, it is the very furthest thing from his mind.”

“Are you afraid, dearest?”

“I should be very much if I fancied there was any real danger of my being attacked as those poor people were.”

“You are afraid to die?”

“Yes, everyone is.”

“But to die as lovers may—to die together, so that they may live together.””
(58)

In Bhalla's words, *Carmilla* is the demonic temptation to believe that the rapture of the senses can make available alternate realms free from moral questions and the sheer worldliness of the world. She is the false enchantment of sexual desire; to yield to her is to risk the abyss (32).

As pointed out before in Chapter 1, Le Fanu dismantles the Victorian idea that women were merely men's useful possessions who relied on them and required their constant supervision; Le Fanu tries to alter the gender dynamic as well. Besides *Carmilla's* sexual desires, he tries to create a world where women have more authority over men, not vice versa. This idea of gender role and play of gender dynamics shows that the nineteenth century never wanted to give any kind of authoritative power to women; whatever they did all went under the supervision of the male gaze. However, Le Fanu changes the gender dynamics in *Carmilla*; there are a vast number of incidents where he shows women have more control over their voices and do not need male guidance. During the carrier incident when *Carmilla's* mother decides to leave her under Laura's father's supervision for the rest, there is a sheer amount of control that *Carmilla's* mother has over Laura's father, "There was something in this lady's air and appearance so distinguished and even imposing, and in her manner so engaging, as to impress one, quite apart from the dignity of her equipage, with a conviction that she was a person of consequence" (27-28).

One of the key factors in nineteenth century women was that they were not allowed to be outspoken; however, Le Fanu dismantles this old fact and displays that women can be diplomatic, as they also have the right to put forward their opinions not just in the private sphere, but also in the public sphere. *Carmilla* is shown as an outspoken woman in the novella; she puts forward her opinion whenever the men in the novella try to put patriarchal norms forward. During a conversation with Laura's father, there is a direct reference to how she outspoke him,

“All this,” said my father, “is strictly referable to natural causes. These poor people infect one another with their superstitions, and so repeat in imagination the images of terror that have infested their neighbors.”

“But that very circumstance frightens one horribly,” said Carmilla.

“How so?” inquired my father.

“I am so afraid of fancying I see such things; I think it would be as bad as reality.”

“We are in God’s hands: nothing can happen without his permission, and all will end well for those who love him. He is our faithful creator; He has made us all, and will take care of us.”

“Creator! *Nature!*” said the young lady in answer to my gentle father. “And this disease that invades the country is natural. Nature. All things proceed from Nature—don’t they? All things in the heaven, in the earth, and under the earth, act and live as Nature ordains? I think so.” (57)

The gender dynamics in *Carmilla* alter when the witch trio is in the scenes; otherwise, things work in a normal manner. Not just in the case of Laura’s father, General Spielsdorf also faces the same calamity, which asserts that the women, especially the witch trio, are seducing men for their purposes. General says, “I became more and more curious to ascertain who she was, every moment. She parried my attempts to discover very adroitly and pleasantly. The knowledge she showed of many passages in my life seemed to me all but unaccountable; and she appeared to take a not unnatural pleasure in foiling my curiosity, and in seeing me flounder in my eager perplexity, from one conjecture to another” (112). This entire roller-coaster about the notion of gender dynamics in *Carmilla* shows that women have more power than men; they do not need any supervision by men. Le Fanu flips the traditional narrative of female suppression by portraying women as more powerful than men in the novella. This implies that the men, being weaker, are easily seduced. In the end, it is evident that as soon as the witch trio comes into anybody’s life, they will seduce the men of the family to have control

over them and weaken them so that they can initiate their plan for a lifetime loss of the important one in others' lives.

Well, throughout the novella, we encounter the (homo)sexuality and switch in gender dynamic, there is still something unsettling about the novella. As mentioned before, the major percentage of this novella is central towards the pleasure-seeking notion of suppressing women's sexuality and flipping the gender dynamic; however, something changes the tone of the novella. Though the novella hints at lesbian undertones, Le Fanu subverts expectations with a surprising twist. At the end of the novella, he restores heteronormality by killing Carmilla and getting rid of this century-old but young, beautiful lesbian vampire.

“Here then, were all the admitted signs and proofs of vampirism. The body, therefore, in accordance with the ancient practice, was raised, and a sharp stake driven through the heart of the vampire, who uttered a piercing shriek at the moment, in all respects such as might escape from a living person in the last agony. Then the head was struck off, and a torrent of blood flowed from the severed neck. The body and head were next placed on a pile of wood, and reduced to ashes, which were thrown upon the river and borne away, and that territory has never since been plagued by the visits of a vampire” (148).

The one thing that astounds me is that while Le Fanu restored the order in *Carmilla*, he let the men in the novella take charge of killing Carmilla. Because in the revenant culture, a vampire loves someone and creates mainly a physical love relationship with them, if he or she wants to free the victim usually the love(s) should kill the vampire, however, here it does not happen somehow male characters kill the vampire; “Among other things, he concluded that suspicion of vampirism would probably fall, sooner or later, upon the dead Countess, who in life had been his idol. He conceived a horror, be she what she might, of her remains being profaned by the outrage of a posthumous execution. He has left a curious paper to prove that the vampire, on its expulsion from its amphibious existence, is projected into a far more

horrible life; and he resolved to save his once beloved Mircalla from this” (155). Somehow, it feels like Ireland was not ready to see something unnatural in the normative structure, and after all, Le Fanu is saving the angel of the house by protecting Laura. The entire novella in the end becomes an opposition to homosexuality because we do not see any trace of Carmilla coming back into Laura’s life, not in the physical world, but maybe only in dreams.

3.3 A CLOSING PERSPECTIVE

The adventurous exploration of sexuality and gender dynamics in *Carmilla* discloses how *Carmilla* dismantles Victorian societal norms and challenges the restrictive paradigms of nineteenth century Victorian Ireland. By putting a lesbian vampire in the centre of the novella, Le Fanu critiques repressed female sexuality and questions the rigid binaries of gender roles. *Carmilla* embodies a contradictory figure—both victim and predator—whose sexual desire and others subvert the male-dominated framework of power and control over women. Her romantic/motherly relationship with Laura exposes the fear and fascination associated with female autonomy and queer desire in the nineteenth century, which was preoccupied with moral propriety. Le Fanu’s subtle portrayal of gender dynamics underscores the intersection of sexuality, societal expectation and power structure, offering a progressive commentary on the limitations imposed upon women by men. The analysis of sexuality and gender dynamics emphasises how *Carmilla* becomes a lens to understand the broader cultural anxieties in Victorian Ireland. The novella, though, does not directly depict an erotic relationship between Laura and Carmilla; however, uses it to interrogate and critique the societal structure that subordinates women.

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