

## Chapter 4

### *Reading Carmilla as the Origin of Vampiric Fiction*

As of now, *Carmilla* seems to be a popular work of vampiric fiction with several spinoffs coming in later years. The one thing that strikes me right after looking at the cover of the novella is the subtitle used by *Pushkin Press*. In 2020, Pushkin Press published its version of the novella, titling it *Carmilla: The Cult Classic that inspired Dracula* (see Fig. 11 in the appendix). The striking feature, as I already said, is the subtitle, calling the novella a cult classic and becoming the inspiration for Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*, which tickles my fancy to investigate it further. Signorotti in "Repossessing the Body: Transgressive Desire in *Carmilla* and *Dracula*" says, "many of the earlier tales provide little more than a collective history of the vampire lore Stoker incorporated in *Dracula*, but Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's little-known "Carmilla" (1872) is the original tale to which Stoker's *Dracula* served as a response" (607). So, what makes it a cult classic? Why is Pushkin Press saying it inspired *Dracula*? Are there any similarities between the two fictions...?

#### 4.1 LIFE OF STOKER AND *DRACULA*

Like Le Fanu, Abraham "Bram" Stoker (see Fig. 14 in the appendix) was an Irish author and short story writer most known for his Gothic novel *Dracula*, published in 1897. Bedridden with an unknown illness until he started school at the age of seven, Stoker was a brilliant athlete at Trinity College, Dublin, where he studied from 1864 to 1870. He earned an honours degree in mathematics, served as president of the University Philosophical Society, where his first article was on "Sensationalism in Fiction and Society," and was the auditor of the College Historical Society (the Hist). An interesting

fact about Stoker is that during the initial phase of his career and with the publishing of *Dracula*, “readers cannot see him as the author of only one novel” (Senf 54). Throughout his life, until he died in 1912, Stoker wrote 12 novels and three collections of short stories.

Stoker’s obsession with vampires and Gothic tales reflects his keen interest in the genre. Born and brought up in Ireland, a country that is full of folkloric and mythological stories, Stoker is no exception when anyone talks about Gothic fiction (see Fig. 13 in the appendix). “Why should anyone believe in such a weird superstition as vampirism? Why should anyone believe that corpses rise from their coffins at night to suck the blood of the living? Yet they did. And have done so from the beginning of time.” (Farson 107) The quoted question from Farson’s *The Man Who Wrote Dracula* points to the fact that the cult of vampirism caused a great deal of fiasco. These questions could possibly be the inspiration for Stoker to pursue writing *Dracula*.

“*Dracula* is an epistolary novel, written as a collection of realistic, but completely fictional diary entries, telegrams, letters, ship’s logs, and newspaper clippings, all of which add a level of detailed realism to Stoker’s story, a skill he developed as a newspaper writer. At the time of its publication, *Dracula* was considered a ‘straightforward horror novel’ based on imaginary creations of supernatural life. Interestingly, the character of Dracula has remained popular over the years, and many films have used Dracula’s character as a villain. As of 2009, a total of 217 films have featured Dracula in a major role, a second number only to Sherlock Holmes (223 films)” (Stoker 3).

*Dracula*, as an epistolary novel, is narrated through letters, diary entries and newspaper articles. Jonathan Harker, one of the protagonists on a business trip to stay at Castle Transylvania, encounters Count Dracula. When Harker realises that Count Dracula is a vampire, he escapes the castle. The Count moves to England, and the plague starts to affect the seaside town of Whitby and to stop Dracula from further affecting the people. An investigation and hunt happen, later becoming the scene of the death of Count

Dracula. Setting the earlier scenes in Romania, Stoker creates a “Romania has had an ambivalent relationship with Count Dracula for decades. While it makes good economic sense to draw attention to the country’s link to one of the most famous literary characters ever created and entice a steady stream of tourists down the trail to Bran Castle, the ‘original’ Castle Dracula (Huebner), the pop culture transformation of a national hero into a bloodthirsty, Satanic vampire has understandably been the cause of some resentment as well” (Killeen 174).

#### 4.2 SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN *CARMILLA* AND *DRACULA*

While reading both *Carmilla* and *Dracula* side by side, several similarities have caught my attention. Most of them are related to the characters’ behaviour, use of landscape, spatial tropes and how Stoker takes inspiration from *Carmilla* to include some of the same historical events by which Le Fanu also got inspired and decided to give Gothic Fiction its first-ever female-lesbian Vampire (well, not quite so). Between Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* and Stoker’s *Dracula*, 1871/72–1897, a 26-year gap exists, which implies that Stoker was indeed inspired by Le Fanu’s lesbian Vampire novella, *Carmilla*. In Stoker’s biography, *The Man Who Wrote Dracula* (1975), this particular fact is proved by none other than his great-nephew, Daniel Farson.

The striking feature in both of them is that they have mentioned the idea of vampirism and the presence of vampires in their fictional works, *Carmilla* and *Dracula*. It showcases that the presence of vampires was always there in the fictional world; however, no one decided to implement it as they did.

“The stranger, having seen all this, came down from the steeple, took the linen wrappings of the vampire, and carried them up to the top of the tower, which he again mounted. When the vampire returned from his prowlings and missed his clothes, he cried furiously to the Moravian, whom he saw at the summit of the tower, and who, in reply, beckoned him to ascend and take them. Whereupon the vampire, accepting his invitation, began to

climb the steeple, and so soon as he had reached the battlements, the Moravian, with a stroke of his sword, clove his skull in twain, hurling him down to the churchyard, whither, descending by the winding stairs, the stranger followed and cut his head off, and next day delivered it and the body to the villagers, who duly impaled and burnt them” (Le Fanu 132).

“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” (Le Fanu 148).

“I must say they were not cheering to me, for amongst them were ‘Ordog’—Satan, ‘Pokol’—hell, ‘stregoica’—witch, ‘vrolok’ and ‘vlkoslak’—both mean the same thing, one being Slovak and the other Servian for something that is either werewolf or vampire.” (Stoker 15-16)

In Stoker’s *Dracula*, the character of Count Dracula in some ways has the undertones of Vlad the Impaler or Vlad III or Vlad Dracula (see Fig. 15 in the appendix), who was a three-time ‘Voivode of Wallachia’ (one of the Romanian rulers) between 1448 and 1476/77. He belongs to the house of ‘Drăculești’, which means ‘devils’ in Romanian. While there are no similarities between Carmilla’s and Dracula’s appearances, Dracula looks similar to Vlad the Impaler. In Chapter 2 of *Dracula*, “Jonathan Harker’s Journal Continued,” Harker describes Count Dracula,

“His face was a strong, a very strong, aquiline, with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils, with lofty domed forehead, and hair growing scantily round the temples but profusely elsewhere. His eyebrows were very massive, almost meeting over the nose, and with bushy hair that seemed to curl in its own profusion. The mouth, so far as I could see it under the heavy moustache, was fixed and rather cruel-looking, with peculiarly sharp white teeth.” (27)

Dracula and Carmilla exhibit comparable conduct as vampires. They tend to sleep late in the day and target individuals from nearby villages, while also visiting their preferred victims. Both come from prominent, ancient families.

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Despite their differences, Dracula and Carmilla share the trait of fixating on a specific person as their prey. Dracula focuses on Lucy and eventually Mina, while Carmilla targets Laura. In both cases, the victims are young, beautiful, and fragile, and the vampires gradually drain their blood. Stoker also uses the story of Countess Bathory (see Fig. 17 in the appendix), like Le Fanu, to emphasise the point of sucking the blood of young girls, making it important for Count Dracula and for Countess Bathory to keep themselves young or restore youth.

“The vampire live on, and cannot die by mere passing of the time, he can flourish when that he can fatten on the blood of the living. Even more, we have seen amongst us that he can even grow younger, that his vital faculties grow strenuous, and seem as though they refresh themselves when his special pabulum is plenty.” (Stoker 234)

On the other hand, in Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, blood-sucking is connected to the sexual desires of Carmilla. “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 two broad eyes approached my face, and suddenly I felt a stinging pain as if two large needles darted, an inch or two apart, deep into my breast. I woke with a scream” (75). Both quotes do not contain the same essence as *Dracula*; they are more related to the fact that Laura started to feel the presence of Carmilla around her, with the sense that it becomes her trauma or repressed memory. However, another angle is that Carmilla only sucks blood for the sake of killing her or converting her into a vampire. Nevertheless, it also connotes that any vampire needs blood to survive, and by biting their victims, they are also multiplying. Auerbach in *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995) argues that the yearning for connection with a human is what drives the vampire Carmilla and her most well-known forebears, while the urge to consume blood comes in second.

Le Fanu and Stoker both use the notion of shape-shifting, as both the characters Carmilla and Count Dracula are vampires. In myths, legends and imaginative literature, shape-shifting refers to the capacity to alter one's physical form using intrinsically extraordinary power, divine intervention, malevolent manipulation, magic, incantations, or inheriting the power. Both the characters use their ability to their advantage as vampires; Carmilla turns into a 'cat,' while Dracula can shape-shift into a dog, a wolf, and fog or mist. More or less, it feels like both of them are changing themselves into animals to keep an eye on their prey. In *Carmilla*, Carmilla is keeping an eye on her prey, which is Laura, while Dracula is preying upon Mina, Lucy and Jonathan Harker.

“But I soon saw that it was a sooty-black animal that resembled a cat.” (Le Fanu 74)

“He can transform himself to wolf, as we gather from the ship arrival in Whitby, when he tear open the dog, he can be as bat, as Madam Mina saw him on the window at Whitby, and as friend John saw him fly from this so near house, and as my friend Quincey saw him at the window of Miss Lucy.” (Stoker 234)

“There was a dog howling all night under my window, which may have had something to do with it.” (Stoker 12)

Besides shape-shifting, both of them use spatial tropes in the plot, which include the coffins, tombs, intimidating Carfax castle or schloss and most importantly, their death. “The vampire of the folklorists lives either in some gloomy ruins or against the tombs in a graveyard. The space of its habitation is, thus, the contrary of the home or the public square where men define themselves and discover their kinship with each other” (Bhalla 9). Le Fanu sets Laura's schloss in old Styria, “It stands on a slight eminence in a forest. The road, very old and narrow, passes in front of its drawbridge, never raised in my time, and its moat, stocked with perch, and sailed over by many swans, and floating on its surface white fleets of water lilies. Overall, this schloss

shows its many-windowed front; its towers, and its Gothic chapel” (10). Laura describes the general area of the schloss with an irregular and very picturesque glade before its gate, an open forest, and on the right a steep Gothic bridge (10). Besides Laura’s schloss, Le Fanu also gave us a picture of the chapel of Countess Mircalla, Karnstein (see Fig. 10 in the appendix),

“we soon mounted the ascent, and were among the spacious chambers, winding stairs, and dark corridors of the castle.... That is the chapel of the Karnsteins, down there.... The squared block of wood, which lay on the grass-grown pavement of the chapel, formed a bench on which I was very glad to seat myself,.... Under a narrow, arched doorway, surmounted by one of those demoniacal grotesques in which the cynical and ghastly fancy of old Gothic carving delights, I saw very gladly the beautiful face and figure of Carmilla enter the shadowy chapel.” (127-130, 140-141)

On the other hand, Stoker sets Count Dracula’s castle, known as Castle Dracula, in Transylvania, a historical and cultural region in Central-Eastern Europe, central Romania (see Fig. 16 in the appendix). Stoker’s inspiration behind Castle Dracula comes from the New Slains Castle in Aberdeenshire, a place he often visited. The first description is given by Jonathan Harker when the calèche reaches the courtyard of the castle: “We kept on ascending, with occasional periods of quick descent, but in the main always ascending. Suddenly, I became conscious of the fact that the driver was in the act of pulling up the horses in the courtyard of a vast ruined castle, from whose tall black windows came no ray of light, and whose broken battlements showed a jagged line against the sky” (23).

The interior decoration, on the other hand, is still in good shape, and the library is well-equipped: “The table service is of gold, and so beautifully wrought that it must be of immense value. The curtains and upholstery of the chairs and sofas and the hangings of my bed are of the costliest and most beautiful fabrics and must have been of fabulous value when they were made, for they are centuries old, though in excellent order” (28).

Hacker falls asleep in the forbidden chamber: “I was now in a wing of the castle further to the right than the rooms I knew and a story lower down. From the windows, I could see that the suite of rooms lay along to the south of the castle, the windows of the end room looking out both west and south. On the latter side, as well as to the former, there was a great precipice. The castle was built on the corner of a great rock so that on three sides it was quite impregnable, and great windows were placed here where sling, or bow, or culverin could not reach, and consequently, light and comfort, impossible to a position which had to be guarded, were secured. To the west was a great valley, and then, rising far away, great jagged mountain fastnesses, rising peak on peak, the sheer rock studded with mountain ash and thorn, whose roots clung in cracks and crevices and crannies of the stone. This was evidently the portion of the castle occupied by the ladies in bygone days, for the furniture had more an air of comfort than any I had seen” (43-44).

Both *Carmilla* and *Dracula* belong to the class of aristocrats. They foreground hospitality and consent as necessary for vampiric seduction. As the king and queen of the night, whenever they travel outside their local homeland, they bring the plague with them. The belief in vampires flourished during the Middle Ages, particularly when the plague wiped out entire communities. The illness frequently resulted in mouth sores that bled, which the uneducated interpreted as a clear indication of vampirism. Individuals with an unknown ailment, whether physical or mental, were often branded as vampires. Some scholars have suggested that porphyria, a blood ailment that can lead to serious blisters on the skin that is exposed to sunlight, could have been connected to the myth of vampires. Le Fanu and Stoker use the idea of plague to indicate the start of a death cult. In *Carmilla*, the plague starts right after *Carmilla* joins Laura’s schloss. The reflection we have of the plague is when the young women were perishing away through an unknown disease:

““I hope there is no plague or fever coming; all this looks very like it,” I continued. “The swineherd’s young wife died only a week ago, and she

thought something seized her by the throat as she lay in her bed, and nearly strangled her. Papa says such horrible fancies do accompany some forms of fever. She was quite well the day before. She sank afterwards, and died before a week.” (Le Fanu 51-52)

““And this was once the palatial residence of the Karnsteins!” said the old General at length, as from a great window he looked out across the village, and saw the wide, undulating expanse of forest. “It was a bad family, and here its bloodstained annals were written,” he continued. “It is hard that they should, after death, continue to plague the human race with their atrocious lusts.” (Le Fanu 127-128)

In *Dracula*, the plague is considered as an act of vampiric disease, implying that whenever Count Dracula bites someone, they will turn into a vampire. It is one of Count Dracula’s abilities to turn others into creatures of the night. According to Van Helsing (one of the characters in *Dracula*), “When they become such, there comes with the change the curse of immortality. They cannot die, but must go on age after age adding new victims and multiplying the evils of the world. For all that die from the preying of the Undead become themselves Undead, and prey on their kind. And so the circle goes on ever widening, like as the ripples from a stone thrown in the water. Friend Arthur, if you had met that kiss which you know of before poor Lucy die, or again, last night when you open your arms to her, you would in time, when you had died, have become nosferatu, as they call it in Eastern Europe, and would for all time make more of those Un-Deads that so have filled us with horror” (211).

### **4.3 TWILIGHT OF THE VAMPIRES: THE ENDURING SHADOWS OF *CARMILLA* AND *DRACULA***

Gothic history is full of terrifying mysteries where no one knows when they will find a connection between two novels. *Carmilla* and *Dracula* are two different stories, inspiring the works that came after each other. One is a lesbian tale dismantling the Victorian notion of women’s sexuality as well as

the gender dynamics, and another is a traditional tale of the Vampiric plague. Stoker's *Dracula* is the most prominent and most talked-about work of Gothic fiction, which takes a higher place than any other Gothic work. And subsiding any other work of Gothic fiction. Stoker, who open-endedly took a lot of inspiration from *Carmilla*, shows that every brilliant writer has to take inspiration from the past as well as from their contemporaries. "The blood is the life!" and "You are mine" quotes from both have the embedded concept of vampirism and the desire to be with loved ones, making them the main point in the works. The similarities and differences between the two provide a substantial amount of clarity as to why Stoker's *Dracula* is traditional, and Le Fanu's *Vampire* is a contradiction of the times. However, in one way or another, both tried to represent what Ireland was going through and the need for change.

All of this marks that Le Fanu's *Carmilla* indeed inspired Stoker to write *Dracula*. Further in my reading, the witch trio from *Carmilla* (Carmilla, Millarca and Mircalla) reminds me of the 'weird sisters,' "dared not wait to see him return, for I feared to see those weird sisters" (Stoker 56) or as I like to call 'vampire sisters.' In *Carmilla*, the trio operates as a cult that seduces young women to fall in love with them and later on, they prey upon them until they die. The trio represents young, beautiful women who unexpectedly come into the lives of their future victims, i.e., Laura and Bertha, as friendly companions; however, that companionship only lasts for three months, as it looks like that is a sufficient amount of time to kill their victims. In Stoker's *Dracula*, we meet the 'weird sisters' in the form of phantoms, as Hacker says, "the phantom shapes, which were becoming gradually materialised from the moonbeams, were those three ghostly women to whom I was doomed" (52). This trio of 'weird sisters' is much more dangerous than the trio of Carmilla, as they attack people if they do not sleep in the designated place, as Count Dracula has instructed them; they seduce people much more quickly and can be out of control. One of the famous lines that depicts this is when three of them try to feed on Harker without the Count's permission; he grabs them by

the neck and hurls them away, as he is not done with Harker. Later he assures them that he will hand over Harker to them once his business transaction is completed and offers them a squirming sack (which Harker assumes to be a human infant) as a gesture of goodwill, “Back! Back to your own place! Your time is not yet come. Wait! Have patience! Tonight is mine. Tomorrow night is yours!” (57).

Last but not least, their death marks the end of both vampires. Without any doubt, the way both of them are killed marks the end of a long series of narratives. As both of them are vampires, an easy way to protect yourself is to play a waiting game with them and let the sun do its thing. However, Le Fanu and Stoker decided to go with a different route, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the efficient and better way to kill a vampire is to have a direct attack on the ‘heart’; this will also stop the multiplication as well. In *Carmilla*, General Spielsdorf attacks Carmilla with an axe; however, Carmilla disarms him and disappears. Later on, with Baron Vordenburg (a vampire slayer), they locate the tomb of Mircalla, strike her head off from her body and then burn the body and the head to convert it into ashes, which they throw into a river. In *Dracula*, Van Helsing (the vampire slayer) and Mina (Jonathan Harker’s wife) kill the three weird (vampire) sisters. While Harker slashes Dracula’s neck, Quincey stabs Dracula in the heart. After Dracula turns into dust, he frees his victims from the vampiric curse.

Alongside all these similarities, the difference lies in the form. Le Fanu uses the novella form for *Carmilla*, while Stoker uses the novel form for *Dracula*. It showcases why one becomes more popular than the other. With the novel form of writing, Stoker gives us lengthy details about the incidents in *Dracula*, which also gives us a deeper look into the plot. On the other hand, *Carmilla* does not have the same kind of narrative structure; it is much smaller in pages, only going to no more than 100 pages. There is no detailed description of the characters; some characters are sidelined. Because of such a great difference in the narrative style, it is evident that whenever someone thinks about a vampire story, *Dracula* takes the first spot, which sometimes

decreases the popularity of other Gothic Tales. It defines that readers tend to read long narratives for the thrill, as it gives more space to readers to think about the story. Another difference is the theme of sexuality. *Carmilla* portrays homosexuality, while *Dracula* is purely related to heterosexuality, which shows a great deal of why readers in the nineteenth century and even today mostly read *Dracula* and not *Carmilla*. It entails that the world was not ready for a shift in style, and the heteronormative structure was what readers preferred for the thrill of Gothic Fiction, while politics in the world of fiction writing was much pronounced in the nineteenth century.

Well, all of these marks that Stoker took great inspiration from *Carmilla* to create his version of Vampire Fiction. Reading *Carmilla* before *Dracula* might not make any sense unless or until one is aware of the fact that Stoker drew his inspiration from his compatriot Le Fanu, who started the cult of Vampiric Fiction. Several incidents and similarities from folkloric lenses show that they both used the same myths from Slavic mythology, and *Dracula*, as an epistolary novel, needed 26 years after *Carmilla* came into the vampiric fiction world.

#### 4.4 CLOSING THE COFFINS: FINAL REMARKS

The world of Gothic fiction is full of horror and terror, as well as some hidden gems. Le Fanu's Gothic novella *Carmilla* tells the tale of a century-old lesbian vampire who comes back from the dead and starts a cult which involves hunting down young virgin girls to stay with them as a companion. As time progresses, the vampire creates a layer of trust between herself and the victim, which sometimes takes the direction of going beyond the permitted limits of intimacy. Vampires have always been portrayed as antagonists in every storyline, making them a threat to the human race. *Carmilla* is the tale of a lesbian vampire who takes care of her victims but also weakens them by having a sexual relationship with them, which asserts same-sex love, which was not the norm in the nineteenth century. As a nineteenth century author, Le Fanu seemingly challenges the norms of gender and sexuality with his

novella. He gives something new to the world of Gothic fiction by challenging the heterosexual aspects and the standards of the fixed sexual tropes, and the novella works as a critique of homosexuality.

The novella shows the signs of Freudian repression in both Laura and Carmilla, who are trying to repress their traumatic experiences from the oppressive world. Carmilla, a century-old vampire, shows the nature of Cartesian dualism, which links to the mind-body connection that comes through anagrams. Another way in which dualism works is by killing Carmilla and protecting Laura, the “angel of the house.” The nineteenth century is famous for suppressing women’s sexuality, which shows that Le Fanu tries to push the boundaries by challenging the norms of sexuality. He dismantles the role of gender and creates a vampire who is sexually mature and dismantles the patriarchal system of society. Though it looks like it happens in the novella, Le Fanu flips up the entire structure and lets the heteronormality win in the end. It shows that the latter half of the nineteenth century was not ready for the changes in the heteronormative structure that Victorian society was following from the previous centuries. The entire idea of creating a vampire who is physically stable but mentally following the orders of her previous self gives the novella a twist from the classic Gothic tales. Both Carmilla’s and Laura’s sexuality can be studied through Freudian and Gustavian lenses of hysteria.

Though *Carmilla* comes before Stoker’s *Dracula*, it is also evident why most of the gothic fiction readers only know of Stoker’s vampire and not of Le Fanu’s. The reason comes in a full circle, as one is heterosexual and the other is a tale of homosexual love. It shows that even in the nineteenth century, mass readers only wanted to support the heterosexual vampire because, as it is mentioned in this dissertation, ‘the nineteenth century was afraid of female sexuality’ and homosexuality was considered a trope in 1872. Even in the twenty-first century, when Gothic Fiction has gained such a mass readership, most of the novels or novellas are centred towards a male vampire. By virtue of having a male vampire at the centre of the story, one thing that the author

clears up is the fact that male vampires were and are privileged by the readers, and whenever a female vampire comes on the scene, she usually works as a side character. Her position is more or less fixed by the gender roles; that's why it is evident that Le Fanu's Vampire did not gain much attention when it was published in 1872, and also in the twenty-first century, in some way, we are still lacking the presence of a female vampire who can challenge the norms of heteronormativity.

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