

Maia McDonald

26 October 2020

Victorian Vampires and the Question of their Monstrosity

Literature has been a mode of expression for horror and monstrosity for centuries. Novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* have produced some of the most famous instances of horror and monstrosity. These two books in particular continue to inspire and serve as reference points for different expressions of horror and monstrosity in more recent times. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire* are also examples of literary expressions of monster and horror. In *Carmilla*, the monster is a vampire seductress named Carmilla and the horror is her sensuality and lesbianism. In *The Blood of the Vampire*, Harriet Brandt is biracial, bisexual, and a vampire; the horror is her mixed racial identity and her sexuality. Both these stories that were produced in the Victorian era are reflective of the time's fears surrounding female sexuality, queer sexualities, race, and xenophobia.

Film and television take horror to another dimension by having a more active role in the way the audience experiences the story. Directors and producers are able to choose the exact feelings they want the audience to feel through choices of music, camera angles, and timing. They can also choose how to portray the monster. In more modern horror productions, the monster is more likely to be humanized or redeemed in some way shape or form. The monster is no longer obligated to be the other; rather, the monster may also be those in leadership roles who are corrupt. This differs from traditional literature which, prior to the 21st century, almost always made the monster representative of societal outcasts. An example would be the web-series adaptation of *Carmilla* created by Jordan Hall and Ellen Simpson. The series takes Sheridan Le

Fanu's version that makes Carmilla the lesbian vampire the monster and makes the monster a person of high leadership.

With the web-series version of *Carmilla*, the writers, and directors took the initiative to subvert certain tropes and stereotypes that the novel perpetuated. This can be attributed to the fact that the novel and the web series are directed to different audiences; the novel is to readers during England's Victorian era and the web show is to queer teens and young adults of the 21st century. Despite the xenophobic undertones of *Carmilla*, the novel's vampire upholds Euro-centric standards of beauty with her unnaturally white skin. The only character of color that the novel mentions is briefly described as a "hideous black woman, with a sort of colored turban on her head... with gleaming eyes and large white eye-balls, and her teeth set as if in a fury" (Haefele-Thomas 102). The web series subverts this completely by giving this character a name and character.

Matska Belmonde is a black woman who is the second-in-command of a vampire cabal and is also Carmilla's adoptive sister. She is a dark-skinned black woman who is shown to be a fierce, professional woman who is fashion-forward and strikes reverent fear in those she comes in contact with. The web series creators took something that was reflective of racist attitudes of the Victorian era and made a character with depth and nuance. Matska is a character with moral ambiguity which she directly attributes to her matter of being a vampire and centuries old. There is a trope of making secondary cast members of color best friends or enemies; they either aid the main character in their moral and/or physical journey or they exist to completely oppose the main character and, in doing so, embody racial stereotypes. Matska Belmonde defies both of these. While she too is a vampire, she is neither completely evil nor horrible. Often she challenges Laura's black-and-white worldview by highlighting moral gray areas that a

19-year-old college student might not be privy to. Simultaneously, she does not do this for Laura, the protagonist's benefit, she does it in defense of her own morals and existence as a vampire. Matska explains to Laura that to survive for centuries "you stop judging, there's almost nothing in this world that's absolute" ("Co-Existence"). In response to Laura's insistence that her morals will prevail, Matska says "you know what the world is? It's a fight to the death. Either you have the power or you serve the power. If you think any other rules apply, they're blindspots that get you killed" ("Concerned Parties"). This completely challenges Laura's worldview in which she believes that evil can always be vanquished. While Matska does not directly oppose this, she emphasizes that power is still power whether good or bad. With that, everyone is divided into servants and rulers.

Matska Belmonde shows that monsters do not have to fall into perfectly evil or perfectly good. Often stories give monsters complete redemption in order to justify the fact they are monsters, but Matska shows that neutrality is possible. With that, it serves as a reflection of the human race and broader society. Black people, often painted as monsters in horror stories, do not have to be perfectly good or evil in order for their existence to be justified. They also do not also have to be servants (whether literally or figuratively) to the often white protagonists. Matska exists for herself and survives for herself. She never feels the need to justify or explain herself but does so when she pleases. She is a powerful and beautiful woman who is fully aware of and embraces both of these things.

The tagline for the web-series version of *Carmilla* is "love will have its sacrifices" which directly relates to the storyline that *Carmilla* the web series takes. Carmilla and Laura go on this journey together where their morals and ideals are tested and shaped by events that literally bring about an apocalypse. In this *Carmilla*, is a "monster" being that she is a vampire, and while in the

beginning Laura and her friends attempt to kill her, by the end she realizes that her ideas of wrong, right, and what makes a true monster is tested. This differs from the novel in which Laura's role — and to some extent, Carmilla's — is rather passive. Laura isn't a near-victim recounting her time with a monster; she's a young adult recounting a coming-of-age story in which she learns the truth of the world.

The web series' version of Laura subverts the ideas of a traditional heroine who sticks to her morals and defeats everyone who goes against them, reminiscent of the likes of Nancy Drew and the Scooby Doo gang. Her love story with Carmilla introduces her to a world where morals are far less binary than what Laura has come to believe. At a critical point, Laura poses the question "Wasn't she supposed to try and be better? The story goes: you fall in love with a monster and then they stop being all monster-y" ("No Heroics"). Laura is very clear that she expects Carmilla to change for her which serves to be ironic because Carmilla is nearly three centuries old and Laura is merely 19. Laura is disillusioned by her morals because she believes that as a monster Carmilla is inherently bad and needs to change her ways in order for their love to be valid. Following their momentary break-up, Carmilla said "[You want] the trail of thoughts and justifications that you can follow back to somewhere safe. You want the kind of love that clicks like a key into a lock, but I don't have any of that to give you" ("Compulsory Violence"). Through this Carmilla is explaining to Laura that she cannot fulfill the idea of love that Laura has and that, while she loves her, she cannot give her this perfect vision of love. Carmilla shows Laura that when you love a monster, the monster part does not evaporate. It also forces Laura to decide whether or not Carmilla is truly a monster and whether Laura's ideals are uncompromisable and ideal. With this, the show explores something the novel never does and poses the question of who gets to decide what morals are truly virtuous and what morals are not.

Simultaneously, the novel poses the question of how morals exist within the confines of a relationship.

Through the subversion of Laura's characterization comes the subversion of Carmilla's. At one point, Laura betrays Carmilla by indirectly killing Matska, her sister. This serves to be the breaking point for Carmilla and she says to Laura "[mocking] Be good for me, Carmilla. Change for me, Carmilla. Burn down everything you've ever loved for me, Carmilla" ("Co-Existence"). Carmilla is criticizing Laura's morals by showing her how her expectations for Carmilla do nothing but hurt her. In a split moment, Laura becomes the monster by betraying someone she loved for the sake of her own self-interest. Carmilla becomes the victim. This exchange represents the issues with believing a monster can or needs to stop being a monster to be loved. Carmilla tried to conform to Laura's ideas of love and shed her perceived monstrosity, but even that is not enough for Laura. Laura becomes an active agent in the storyline and in the destruction which differs greatly from her literary portrayal. Carmilla becomes a victim after succumbing to her feelings of love. Carmilla embodies the tagline of "love will have its sacrifices" because, for Laura's love, she sacrificed herself and one of the only people she truly loved.

The web series adds depth to the experiences of a monster by having the monster in this series make sacrifices for the one they love. *Carmilla*, the web series, humanizes the monster in a way that the novel never did. Carmilla is a monster that can feel, love, and grow. Throughout the series, her character develops in every sense emotionally differing greatly from the static character that was Carmilla the vampire in Sheridan Le Fanu's novella. While Carmilla had a significant impact on Laura in the novel, the web series gives them a dynamic relationship in which Laura and Carmilla influence and impact one another. Laura's ideas of true monstrosity

are challenged as she realizes that Carmilla's vampirism does not make her a monster and that the true monsters are those that prey on the weak and use them for their own goals and ideals. Simultaneously, Laura learns that her morals can be tested through characters such as Matska who shows her that there is no such thing as a black-and-white world.

Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire* both serve to question ideas that British Victorian society views as threats. Sheridan Le Fanu and Marryat created stories that show how "queers — and in this case multiethnic queers — move within literal and metaphorical geographies, across continents, traversing and reinventing languages and places, disturbing the 'natural' order" (Haefele-Thomas 100). Carmilla is representative of Victorian fears surrounding Eastern Europeans while Harriet Brandt is representative of Victorian fears surrounding biracial and bisexual people.

Haefele-Thomas makes the connection that both these stories come at a time when Britain is trying to maintain its place in the world and there is an increase in fears surrounding this. The main female victims of both novels are both British women who are being threatened in places outside of Britain; *Carmilla's* Laura in Styria and *The Blood of the Vampire's* Margaret in Belgium. The vampires in both of these stories are from non-British places and are reflective of the xenophobic attitudes that Victorian Brits held. *The Blood of the Vampire* takes this further by making Harriet a biracial vampire from Jamaica whose mother was enslaved and a practitioner of Jamaican magic called Obeah and whose father was a British man. Harriet serves to be "a hybrid of an English 'beauty' and a Jamaican 'other', a woman and an animal and a rube and an aristocrat" (Haefele-Thomas 110). Haefele-Thomas does not mention this, but there is importance in the fact that Jamaica is a British colony which could also be representative of "imperial worries and the subsequent fears of reverse-colonization" (Haefele-Thomas 108).

Within this context, the subject of these vampire women's queerness is magnified especially in the case of *The Blood of the Vampire* where Harriet's otherness is multiplied by her being biracial and bisexual. While *Carmilla* serves to be more subtle with the way Carmilla an eastern European ex-countess seduces a young woman of Anglo-Saxon descent, *The Blood of the Vampire* is far more overt with making Harriet "the cannibalistic other who wants to devour English babies" (Haele-Thomas 110).

Harriet's tryst with a wealthy British wife and mother, Margaret Pullen, directly challenges European fears about race and sexuality. However, despite Harriet being the seductive vampire, "the text underscores that it is Margaret who has made the first eye contact with Harriet" potentially implying that it is Margaret who initiated the flirtation (Haele- Thomas 110). Throughout their interaction, "queer sexual longing and miscegenation co-mingle" (Haele- Thomas 110). Throughout the text, there are implications that these interactions do not tell the "tale of Harriet victimizing an innocent, white, heterosexual English mother," but rather endow Margaret with an agency that women of her caliber and character in both these stories and Victorian society are deprived of. At one point, Margaret recounts a look that Harriet gave her as "so full of yearning affection" and regards it with amusement (Haele-Thomas 112). Margaret then acknowledges the existence of sapphic women and the similarity of her situation with Brandt to those sapphic women. Haele-Thomas explains that "giving agency for both the recognition *and* the flirtation to the maternal, heterosexual married English woman and *not* the spinster, Marryat turns a stereotype on its head" (Haele -Thomas 112). The queer desires are not present in places that neither audiences of the past nor present would traditionally expect them to be. In this way, Margaret's character serves to be the true threat to Victorian society rather than Harriet, the monster.

Margaret is already a mother and wife “which makes the danger of Harriet’s vamping her even more complex and fraught with tension” because she “may actually be more vulnerable than young, menstruating women who only have the *potential* to become mothers and subsequently aid in defining a stable British home” (Haefele- Thomas 113). The disruption of a “perfect” British wife and mother is a direct threat to the societal boundaries of the Victorian era. Simultaneously, as she continues this flirtation with evil, “Margaret Pullen has agency in this situation” (Haefele- Thomas 112). Margaret Pullen's existence as a character serves to strike fear in the hearts of those that see perfect Victorian wives as a symbol of domesticity or civility. Margaret reveals the vulnerability of the Victorian British when they come in contact with those who challenge the very structures of their society such as racial miscegenation, queerness, and women’s sexuality.

Despite the obvious re-enforcements of British Victorian society, Marryat shows that the story serves to be more complex. When confronted with the truth of her monstrous nature and her tendency to drain the life of those she shows affection to, Harriet commits suicide. Unlike the ending of *Carmilla* in the novel where Carmilla’s death is treated as a victory over Carmilla’s “corrupt” nature, “there is no sense of triumph at the death of this vampire” (Haefele- Thomas 119). Harriet takes her life following the death of her husband whose heart was said to be as big and as soft as a woman's. She is in despair over her unchangeable nature that drains the life of those she cares about. There is an undercurrent of shame that is centered around her marginalized identities and the combination of which proves fatal to her and her loved ones. Haefele- Thomas emphasizes that Marryat’s *The Blood of the Vampire* “gives us room for sympathy as well as space to wonder about the author’s true intent” (Haefele- Thomas 119). The ending is ambiguous and leaves readers to wonder what the true meaning is which leaves space to believe that

Marryat's idea of a monster is one that is far more nuanced than we have come to find. Harriet is a monster whose actions were completely unintentional and whose nature was dictated by her parents rather than her. She was a societal outcast who longed for love and affection yet died broken-hearted and lonely. Despite being the cause of two deaths, there is a larger implication that she is also a victim of societal and literal isolation based on her biracial and bisexual identities which left her with no allies or comforts.

Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire* and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* is two Victorian horror stories that center around vampirism, sapphism, xenophobia, racism, and morality. Both stories take nuanced takes on what each of these subjects means in Victorian society while also challenging that very society's notions of what makes a monster and what makes a hero. Modern adaptations reference these ideologies first introduced in these texts and work to subvert their oppressive connotations while emphasizing their more uplifting ones. The web-series adaptation of *Carmilla* serves to question the strict ideas of morality that the novel proposes. The web series subverts the idea of a monster by having the protagonist embody monstrous characteristics that ultimately hurts Carmilla, the original monster. The web series emphasizes the idea of sacrifice that is inevitable in any relationship that transgresses traditional societal boundaries. Simultaneously, the adaptation subverts ideas of race and brings depth to a black character that the novel painted a caricature of. Both *The Blood of the Vampire* and *Carmilla* (and its adaptation) emphasizes the question of what makes a monster and introduce the idea of sympathy for those monsters.

Works Cited

- Hall, Jordan. “Co-Existence.” *Carmilla*, season Season 2, episode 30, 10 Sept. 2015.
- Hall, Jordan. “Compulsory Violence.” *Carmilla*, season Season 2, episode 22, 13 Aug. 2015.
- Hall, Jordan. “Concerned Parties.” *Carmilla*, season Season 2, episode 26, 27 Aug. 2015.
- Hall, Jordan. “No Heroics.” *Carmilla*, season Season 2, episode 15, 21 July 2015.
- “‘One Does Things Abroad That One Would Not Dream of Doing in England’: Miscegenation and Queer Female Vampirism in J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* and Florence Marryat’s *The Blood of the Vampire*.” *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic: Transgressing Monstrosity*, by Ardel Haefele-Thomas, 1st ed., University of Wales Press, 2012, pp. 96–119. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qhdw4.8. Accessed 23 Oct. 2020.