

Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*: the Monster of Female Sexuality

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Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873), more known as Sheridan Le Fanu, was an Irish writer and journalist. He is credited as the “father of the Victorian ghost story.” His novella *Carmilla* came 26 years before Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.

Carmilla is considered a great contribution to the horror genre by introducing the vampire to English literature.



Plot Summary

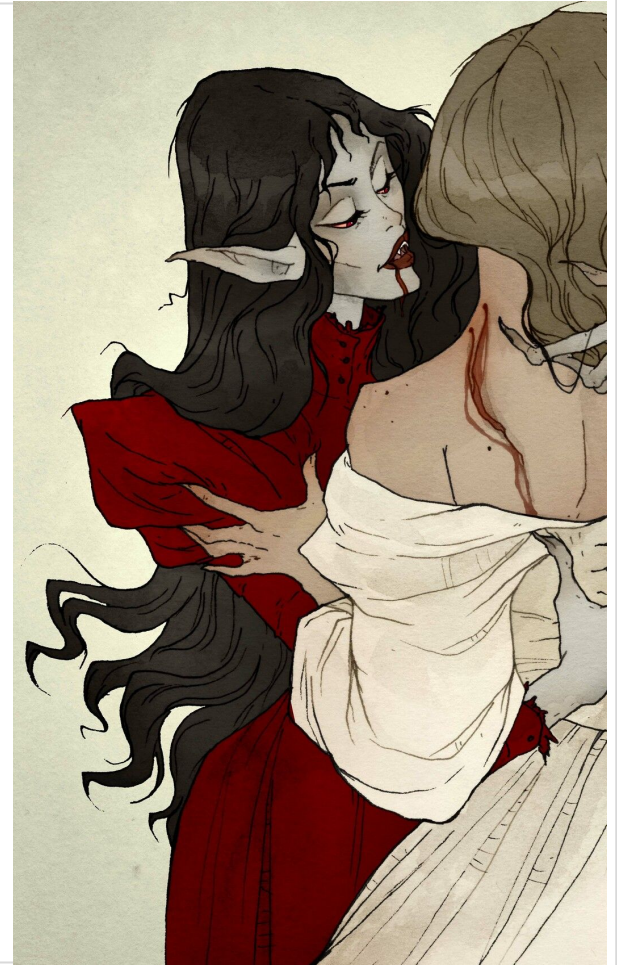
Carmilla comes to stay with Laura, the protagonist, and her family. Laura and Carmilla start a very affectionate, yet strange friendship. Carmilla confesses her love for Laura leaving Laura embarrassed and confused. Laura is visited by a large, black cat (Carmilla in disguise) who bites her on the breast. Laura starts to feel strangely ill.

Carmilla disappears; upon her return, she blames it on sleepwalking. Laura and her father investigate Laura's strange illness. General Spielsdorf, whose niece recently died of an illness resembling Laura's, tells the tale of a girl named Mircalla who came to stay with them shortly before his niece's death. The General reveals that Mircalla and Carmilla are the same and that she is a Countess who should have died years ago. They go to the Countess' tomb and find Carmilla there covered in blood and breathing shallowly. They kill her. Laura recovers but remarks that she is forever changed by this experience.

The Monster of a Lesbian Seductress

Carmilla is a vampire — a monster that generally symbolizes sexuality. Carmilla specifically represents fears surrounding female sexuality, particularly lesbianism.

- ❖ Carmilla is seen as a temptress and her beauty is the most notable part of her. Extreme beauty and allure is associated with vampires.
- ❖ Carmilla's desire for the blood of young women implies that female sexual desire — specifically lesbianism — is threatening.
- ❖ Most of Carmilla's danger is her seemingly effortless seduction. Laura is just as attracted to Carmilla as Carmilla is to her, even if Laura isn't completely aware of it.



Is Carmilla a Monster?

- ❖ Carmilla never seemed to have purely nefarious intentions. While she did hurt Laura with a bite that caused Laura's mysterious illness, she also tried to give Laura the closest thing she could to love.
- ❖ A vampire may be a monster, but not every vampire has the sole desire of murder. Monsters are often scary from the moment they're introduced until the end, but Carmilla always gave Laura a sense of comfort.
- ❖ What makes Carmilla different from other monsters is that her appearance doesn't warrant feelings of disgust or fear, her true nature of desiring blood and killing people does.
- ❖ Carmilla may have taken the form of a monster, but were her actions truly monstrous?

"Sometimes after an hour of apathy, my strange and beautiful companion would take my hand and hold it with a fond pressure, renewed again and again; blushing softly, gazing in my face with languid and burning eyes, and breathing so fast that her dress rose and fell with the tumultuous respiration. It was like the ardor of a lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet over-powering; and with gloating eyes she drew me to her..." You are mine, you shall be mine, you and I are one forever."



Modern Adaptations

Sheridan Le Fanu's novel has since been adapted into a popular web series — with sequel movie — in which Carmilla is no longer a villain and lesbianism (among other forms of queer identity) are no longer monstrous.

Part of what makes this adaptation so powerful is that the sexuality of the characters is never a spectacle. There's no coming out, there's no homophobia. The sexuality and gender identities of the characters is as normal as their names which flips the original novel's depiction of female sexuality and homosexuality as horrifying traits.

Compare and Contrast

Novel

- ❖ Laura never fully acts on her feelings for Carmilla
- ❖ Carmilla is the monster
- ❖ Female sexuality and lesbianism are demonized
- ❖ Carmilla is killed
- ❖ Laura is a rescued damsel in distress
- ❖ Men are huge authorities and have presence in the story

Both

- ❖ Carmilla is a vampire
- ❖ Carmilla's mother is a villainous character
- ❖ Love and sexuality important elements of the story

Show

- ❖ Carmilla and Laura become lovers
- ❖ Carmilla and Laura fight monster(s) together
- ❖ Female sexuality and lesbianism normalized
- ❖ Carmilla lives
- ❖ Laura becomes the hero of her own story and has a sense of agency
- ❖ Men have a minimal place in the storyline, act as background characters