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Lesbianism and the Uncanny in Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*

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Contents

Introduction 2

1. The vampire in literature and popular culture 5

    1.1 Female vampires 10

2. Lesbianism and the uncanny in *Carmilla* 13

    2.1 Contextualisation 13

    2.2 Lesbianism and the Uncanny in *Carmilla* 16

Conclusion 23

Works Cited 25

Introduction

The figure of the vampire has been present in most cultures, and the meanings and feelings these supernatural creatures represent have been similar across time and space. For human beings they have been a source of fear and superstition, their significance acquiring religious connotations all over the world. The passing of time has modified this ancient horror and the myth has changed little by little, most of the time being softened, giving birth to diverse conceptions and representations that differ a lot from the evil spawn – originating in myth, legend and folklore – that ancient people were afraid of.

These creatures have been represented not as part of the human being, but as a nemesis, as the "other", and as something that is dead but, at the same time, alive, threatening the pure existence of the human by disrupting the carefully constructed borders that civilization has erected between the self and the other, the human and the animal, between life and death. They are, like Rosemary Jackson said, "our relation to death made concrete" (68) and thus, they "disrupt the crucial defining line which separates real life from the unreality of death" (69). That is one of the key factors that make the figure of the vampire so popular and everlasting, plus the fact that vampires, and other monstrous creatures in general, have functioned as embodiments of "the other", whatever contents the other has been filled with in different cultural and historical situations. In Dolar's words:

> The monster can stand for everything that our culture has to repress - proletariat, sexuality, other cultures, alternative ways of living, heterogeneity, the Other. There is a certain arbitrariness in the content that can be projected onto this point, and there are many attempts to reduce the uncanny to just this content (quot. in Gelder, 52).

We can see here, in Dolar's words, the relationship between repression and the uncanny in the gothic and horror genres.

Despite the grotesque depictions that vampires have received and the threats they pose for people, they have walked hand in hand along human civilization, morphing into more or less monstrous shapes, and finally coming to form part of popular culture. This may be because of the attraction death arises in human beings, and the vampire, apart from signifying death, also signifies life, transforming the issue of identity into a paradoxical and puzzling construction.

Carmilla is going to be the source text for the majority of the ideas I am going to deal with in this dissertation. Sheridan Le Fanu wrote a collection of five Gothic short stories called *In a Glass Darkly* (1872), and *Carmilla* is one of them, although its length qualifies it rather as a *novella.* The story, which is set in the Gothic environment of an isolated castle, contains a romantic relationship between the two young girls who live there, one of them being a vampire. The fact that this text includes the presence of a female vampire before the popularization of the creature with Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897) is quite surprising. And what makes this story even more interesting is the way the relation between Laura, the human protagonist, and Carmilla, the ancient female vampire, is described. The internal narrator and protagonist, Laura, presents an initially friendly connection between herself and the female vampire that slowly develops into Carmilla's passionate love for Laura, and the strong attraction mixed with repulsion that Laura feels in her turn. This relationship becomes increasingly strange because of Carmilla's attempt to convert Laura into a lesbian vampire.

The fact that Carmilla is a vampire is quite evident for our contemporary reader, although probably not that much at the time of publication, when few readers would have discovered the character's nature so easily. Nevertheless, Carmilla's actions, the way she behaves and the fact that she dislikes religion and men, give Carmilla an aura of strangeness. Just like Carmilla's nature as vampire would not have been so evident in the 1870s and 1880s, the relationship between

Laura and Carmilla would not have been perceived as offensively sexual. Rather than of a lesbian bonding, readers would probably have thought of a strong romantic friendship. It is precisely this interaction between the two girls in a mixture of lesbianism, sexual forwardness and repression, friendship and preying, that gives Le Fanu's *novella* a feeling of the uncanny that I will try to analyse in this essay. The main idea is that, in this text, the uncanny threat signified by the vampire is actualized in the erotic and sexual undercurrent that flows between both girls and the risks it poses for a patriarchal society.

This dissertation is going to be divided into two main chapters, moving from the general to the particular. After a general introduction to the figure of the vampire, the first section will deal with the presence of the vampire in literature and popular culture, including as well a brief explanation of the origins of the creature and the connection it has with the development of civilization together with its popularity in contemporary culture. Here I will also provide a distinctive view of the figure of the female vampire, and its relevance in literature as a character and as a symbol. In the second chapter, I will first contextualize Le Fanu's *Carmilla* to finally deal with the main point of the essay: lesbianism and the uncanny in *Carmilla,* and particularly how both elements are entwined in Le Fanu's *novella*.

1. The vampire in literature and popular culture

Historically, the vampire has been present in the folklore of multiple cultures. These creatures are still popular nowadays precisely thanks to their transcultural and transnational nature, so that they have been reinvented from time to time, probably because the interactions between cultures have brought about a mixture of myths and legends, thus giving rise to new conceptions and representations of vampire figures. There are stories about creatures that can be considered as the vampires' predecessors in ancient Mesopotamia and, in fact, all around the world, like the "Jiang Shi" or zombie vampires in China, or "Sejmet" in Egypt. But the term "vampire" and the figure that most resembles contemporary representations of it appeared in the eighteenth century, and is connected to three main meanings: it is a flying creature, it sucks or drinks, and is connected to wolves. This is, for example, Dracula's case, who controls a pack of wolves and can take their shape. The vampire has always been connected to blood and also to the maternal milk, like the "Jararaca" in Brazil. This connection may be related to the fact that these are fluids that represent life and the vampire is a living dead who needs to feed on life (Leatherdale, 18).

In the Western cultural tradition, one of the most interesting proto-vampiric figures is the so-called "lamia", which appears in the legends of ancient Greece and Rome and was influential on the Romantic appropriation of the vampire motif and on the development of female vampirism. The lamia can be seen as a precursor of the female vampire and can be defined as a serpentine spectre that divests the living, especially young males, of their vitality.

Around the fifteenth century, the Church saw in the vampire a figure that could be used to represent taboos, such as suicide or incest, and forbidden – mainly sexual – behaviour and tendencies, like promiscuity, homosexuality, etc. Indeed, the Church had a great impact on the meanings embodied by the vampire. It was, for instance, the Church's influence that crucifixes and holy water were believed to have the power of stopping these demons since these objects

represented the Christian God. What can be clearly established as common characteristic in both folklore vampires and the modified creatures that appeared in literary works is that they are founded upon two precepts: "belief in life after death and the power of blood" (Leatherdale, 13).

As mentioned earlier, the figure of the vampire has experienced a development that is strongly connected with the progression of our civilization. The most usual representation of the vampire has been that of the monster that feasts on the blood of its victims. This would be the image which is closer to the original creatures described by folklore, according to Leatherdale: creatures commonly associated with poor communities whose sickening appearance and vile behaviour reflect their social origins (30). Part of these grisly fiends' properties still remained in the much more glamorous, refined and aristocratic vampires of the romantic and late nineteenth-century, since ultimately the vampire is used as the principal object of fear and hate, the principal antagonist of the hero or heroine.

Although there exist different types of vampires, the one that popular culture tags as the classic vampire is the monster depicted by the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This figure first appeared in poetry, as in "Der Vampyr" (1748), a German poem by Heinrich August Ossenfelder, or in Lord Byron's epic poem *The Giaour* (1813). Other relevant poetic examples are Samuel Taylor Coleridge's and John Keats's narrative poems *Christabel* (1816) and *The Lamia* (1820) respectively. As can be seen, the major English Romantic poets made use of the vampire figure, though, according to Twitchell, they avoided the merely lurid and sensationalist to investigate the psychological implications of the myth, the trade in energy and the interaction that vampirism implies. In this sense, they frequently used vampirism and the vampire dynamics as metaphor to express social, emotional and erotic processes and purposes (4).

The first prose text concerned with vampires was also related to the Romantic poet Byron but not written by him. It was authored by John Polidori and was entitled "The Vampyre" (1819). It is in fact Polidori's text that establishes the vampire as we know it today by

reimagining the feral, gaunt, scabby and mud-caked creatures of south-eastern European folklore and legend as glamorous and cosmopolitan aristocrats. Several decades after, Sheridan Le Fanu published his novella *Carmilla*. As mentioned previously, readers of the time would have been completely surprised, even shocked, by this sensual story of a dark young lady that falls in love with the fair lady of the castle, and feeds on her so as to transform her into a vampire in order to outlive death together and love each other for eternity.

Carmilla can be seen as a parenthesis in the development of the demon creature, because its representation of the vampire differs from previous and following embodiments of these monstrous creatures. Following the description of John Polidori's vampire, Le Fanu portrayed an aristocratic creature that has nothing to do with the fierce monster of folklore, and at the same time he gifted Carmilla with feelings that make the reader empathize with the creature. In this respect Gelder affirms that, although the story presents Carmilla as a threat, it also "elicits sympathy for Carmilla in a number of ways. The Victorian view of lesbianism conventionally saw it as 'unnatural', against Nature […]. Carmilla, however, refuses that position" (61). For her, everything – vampirism together with lesbianism – proceeds from Nature, and that is her true religion (Le Fanu, 36).

Finally, in 1897, the novel that best conveys the popular definition of a vampire was published: *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker. This is the story that has been modified and changed over and over to create films, novels, short stories, comics and graphic novels; it is the main reference when the matter of vampirism is discussed

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the figure of the vampire migrates to the new artistic medium of the cinema in films such as *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau, 1922) or Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), but probably the most famous film in this respect is the Universal production *Dracula* (Todd Browning, 1931), with Béla Lugosi as the Count. What can be seen in these films is a certain, even if subtle, taming of the vampires' pure animal instincts, in the sense

that they are more humanized and show the capacity to feel, at least sexual desire and erotic impulses. These vampires also drink blood and murder innocent victims, yet, they also show primitive feelings, like hatred, and try to tempt different characters.

The last vampire figures that have emerged lately in literature and visual media (films and tv series) are totally humanized vampires. Most of them even refuse to drink blood and try to avoid their hunger by feeding on replacements of human blood, like the blood of animals or chemical compounds. Perhaps one of the first examples of this new breed and also the most popular work in this respect is Anne Rice's series of thirteen novels so far, *The Vampire Chronicles* (1976-2014). Rice's vampires are frequently decadent aristocrats, extremely emotional, sensitive and sensual lovers of beauty. The saga is interesting as well for making vampires into bisexual creatures and highlighting their homoeroticism. The principal idea that can be extracted is that the vampire as antagonist has experienced a softening process in which the monster has slowly become a cooperative character and finally even the protagonist of their own story. The vampire has come to be, little by little, much more similar to the human. This approach to the human figure has probably been caused because the creature has conventionally been used as a tool of representation. What this means is that vampires in general have been used to represent the "other", people who do not fit into the traditional standards that society imposes. Nevertheless, it is also true that contemporary society shows a greater degree of acceptance of alterity, particularly as regards the homosexual and queer community. This may partly explain the humanizing process of the vampire, diminishing, though not abolishing, the differences between the "other" and "the same".

Vampires have been frequently seen as a representation of the concept of the unconscious defined by Freud. The unconscious mind, according to Freud, comprises mental processes that are inaccessible to consciousness but that influence judgements, feelings, or behaviour, and for him it is the primary source of human behaviour. In general terms, psychoanalytic concepts, particularly concerning sexual instincts and impulses, have proved fruitful as explanations for the significance

of the vampires. For instance, according to Twitchell, the vampire personifies a set of meanings directly connected to Freud’s work – maternal attraction, repulsion, incest, oppressive paternalism, sexual repression, homosexual attraction (5) – mainly pointing towards repressed sexuality. In this sense, for Richard Dyer these are “monsters that represent the hideous and terrifying form that sexual energies take when they return from the repressed” (54). This links vampires with the dark side of the human species. In fact, the first names coined for these monsters have connections with the word “shadow”. More specifically, what vampires tend to portray is attached to the Freudian idea of the “uncanny”, the feeling described by Freud as that “class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (335). In this sense, and in general terms, it can be said that the vampire is a very familiar figure because of its influence in so many cultures. Also, most of the time, the vampire adopts a shape that is humanoid, sometimes even indistinguishable from another human being. However, despite its familiarity, the vampire is a source of horror and fear due to the fact that it feeds on blood and the life of humans.

1.1 Female vampires

As the title of this work suggests, the gender of the vampire is important in terms of the characterization of the creature. Dyer, for example, suggests that vampires, unlike other monsters, are less savage and more sexual, and that their gender matters for their behaviour. As regards their sexual behaviour, Dyer states that male vampires tend to be more passive while their female counterparts are the active figures. Female vampires have always been related to freedom and sin. In the nineteenth century, they were used as an example not to be followed by any decent woman because they opposed the values of Victorianism and of other traditional Western societies that were dominated by patriarchy. Female vampires were used to exemplify one of the two extreme positions through which women were represented in culture: "the virgin and the whore" or "the saint and the vampire" (Dijkstra, 334). A woman's attitude towards sexuality was in most cases the factor that decided on which side of the polarity she was located. Both these extremes flourished at a historical period – the last decades of the nineteenth century – in a society which was experiencing great changes. In Smith's words, "the *fin de siècle* was dominated by a series of debates about gender prompted by the emergence of a range of women's pressure groups which militated for social change" (1). The end of the nineteenth century brought changes to the social situation of women, and these changes also affected men, who, being afraid or uncertain about their, so far, privileged masculine position, created these two extremes that transformed women into symbolic representations, thus blurring the reality of the moment. As Dijkstra shows, a recurrent fantasy embodying male anxieties in the period was that of woman as vampire (333-51). *Carmilla* is probably the earliest popular example of such literary representations, exclusively featuring female vampires. It is true that there are also female vampires in Stoker's *Dracula*, but, contrary to *Carmilla*, it is the male vampire, Count Dracula, that completely dominates them since they appear as nothing but his minions: they may be stronger than humans but they kneel down in

front of Dracula. That is an important difference between the two Irish writers' stories: the role of the female vampire.

Carmilla does not impose her will on Laura and she is not imperative on her, she only suggests and puts thoughts in her mind, unlike Dracula, who kidnaps and murders to achieve his goals. The victims of the female vampire are not seen as real victims on some occasions, but as "docile and willing co-conspirators" (Twitchell, 39), which brings to mind the extent to which they are ready to participate in an unholy relationship. The female vampire seduces humans, and, without the use of violence, she attaches them to her will, converting her victims into puppets. When the targets of the vampire are men, the creature tends to make them slaves of her will, forcing them psychologically and sometimes physically. Yet, her relations with some women are presented in a very different way: Carmilla sees in Laura her eternal lover, an everlasting passion. It is an equal love, clashing with the patriarchal ideas of love that existed in the nineteenth century. By turning her into another vampire, Carmilla only wants to give her the gift of immortality in order to preserve their love forever. Thus, the interaction between women can be seen as something purer and more romantic than the sexual relationships that female vampires tend to establish with men. Yet female bonding and lesbianism are extremely threatening from a patriarchal point of view, since the end-result would be the futility of men's existence. In this sense, Paulina Palmer has stated that "the lesbian is regarded as an eccentric disruptive subject who transgresses sexual and social convention […]" (6), and thus the embodiment of lesbianism in monstrous figures has been customary.

Despite the fact that the female version of the monster sometimes tries to create a relationship, this one is condemned to fail from the beginning. By definition, the vampire is a sterile creature, it is a living dead that feeds on and occasionally infects human beings, turning them into vampires, but this cannot be considered as an act of giving birth since nothing new is created. The point is that the female vampire can be seen as a figure of repressed sexuality taking into

account the wilderness of her passions, but at the same time sex is meaningless to her in terms of reproduction. Thus, for her sex is both a tool and a form of enjoyment; first of all, it is a tool because through it female vampires are able to trap humans of both genres, although they tend to be mostly males. And, secondly, although they cannot reproduce the species, they still practice sex in a recreational, satisfying way. According to Paulina Palmer, connecting vampires to sterility is one of the many ways that has been used to attack not only homosexuality but all the relationships that diverge from the traditional heterosexual marriage (100). Vampirism has been used to typecast lesbians as morally corrupt and decadent and has thus functioned as a tool of stigmatization.

In spite of all this, and with the passing of time, the female vampire has gained popularity and this character has turned into something else than a literary or mythological creature, trespassing the merely artistic to become a social and political symbol of freedom, female empowerment and feminist values for a lot of women.

2. Lesbianism and the uncanny in *Carmilla*

The rest of this work is going to be focused on Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and why we can interpret it as a text where the lesbian relationship between Laura and Carmilla can be understood as an example of the Freudian uncanny. But first I would like to provide a brief literary and cultural context for Le Fanu and his work.

2.1. Contextualisation

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu was a prolific Irish writer that wrote works of very different types of genres, such as historical and sensational novels, but he is best known for his supernatural and gothic stories. He was born in 1814 in Dublin and died at the age of 58 in 1873, also in Dublin. He came from a literary family of Huguenot, Irish and English descent, his father being a Church of Ireland clergyman. He educated himself by using his father's library and studied law and journalism, though he opted for a literary career and started writing in 1838 for the *Dublin University Magazine*. As an Irishman, and particularly in the late 1830s, 1840s and 1850s, he was very much aware and frequently critical of Irish problems at the time. He always lived in Ireland and started setting his fiction in an Irish context, but the practically non-existent publishing industry in Ireland forced him to look for a London publisher, Richard Bentley, who, for marketing reasons decreed that Le Fanu's fictions should have an English subject and be set in contemporary times so that they could better satisfy an English readership. Le Fanu followed Bentley's dictates but readers and critics were soon to perceive an Irish subtext in novels such as the Gothic mystery *Uncle Silas* (1864) or the *novella Carmilla*. In Victor Sage's words, "there is no difficulty seeing [Le Fanu's] gothic, along with that of Charles Maturin and Bram Stoker, and even Elizabeth

Bowen, as articulating the attenuated, hyphenated existence of a dying Protestant Ascendancy" (1). More specifically, and according to Killeen, "the vocabulary used to describe Carmilla (…) is resonant of that used to portray victims of the Great Famine. She spends nights prowling the countryside looking for sustenance" (105). Carmilla's contempt for the religious practices of Laura's household, as well as the landscape or the cultural references of the setting also work in this direction.

Carmilla is one of the five supernatural stories embedded in *In a Glass Darkly* (1872) and can be seen as one of the pioneer stories in the vampire genre, as well as one of the most influential works for the literature based on the creature, since it directly influenced the best known vampire fiction: Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The narrative, like its companion pieces in *In a Glass Darkly*, begins as a case included in Dr Hesselius' notebook. Dr Martin Hesselius is a practitioner of metaphysical medicine, some kind of detective of the occult specialising in supernatural phenomena. *In a Glass Darkly* is presented as a posthumous selection – carried out by Hesselius's secretary – of the Dr's most famous cases. Thus, when we read the story, Hesselius is already dead. Not only that; we also learn that Laura herself has died. Death, then, frames the narrative at its beginning and at its end, since *Carmilla* ends with Laura's words.

The story can be defined as both gothic and romantic. The gothic theme is quite obvious because of multiple elements present in the narration, such as the setting, Styria (Austria), where the father of the protagonist, an English widower retired from military service in the Austrian Empire, has bought a solitary castle in the middle of a forest. Both the castle and the forest are isolated and afford few occasions for contact with other members of their social standard (the rural gentility); even the nearest village is quite far. Despite living in Austria, the father and his daughter, the protagonist and internal narrator, Laura, keep speaking English in the castle and perform English rituals, like drinking tea. These peculiarities reinforce the Irish connection, mirroring the progressive encroachment of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy throughout the nineteenth century. In

Killeen's words: "Laura's girlhood in Styria closely resembles the enclosed and isolated childhood of an Anglo-Irish girl." (102) Apart from the loneliness of the place, the protagonist also feels secluded because she is the only girl in the castle and there is no one her age. She has the company of the servants, her two governesses and her father, but she misses the presence of other young girls. The use of suspense and horror in the tale also strengthen the Gothic theme; Laura, the servants, her father, the physician and the rest of male characters who should have protected the young girl are unaware of Carmilla's real nature and have no knowledge of her designs, which helps bring about feelings of anxiety and of impotence in the reader. In fact, it takes them quite long to realise and know the threat posed by the vampire. In order to do so, the vampire has to be diagnosed, both by the text's contemporary readers and the patriarchal (old) male characters in the story. Following Gelder's ideas,

> ["Carmilla" and Dracula] spend more time diagnosing the vampire than showing it at first hand, introducing a number of 'paternal figures' – often doctors – into the story exactly for that purpose. [...] The men in fact form a kind of bureaucracy which signifies Carmilla as a vampire precisely in order to manage the threat – and, eventually, to destroy it. (49)

The presence of a supernatural figure such as the vampire underlines the Gothic atmosphere, while it also establishes more links with Ireland, since "for a nineteenth century British reader, vampirism and Ireland were related and analogous sites of infection and terror" (Killeen, 100). The lack of a mother, a feminine model for the young protagonist to identify with in order to grow up and mature, is another recurrent motif when talking about the Gothic, as is the abrupt re-emergence of a barbaric past in the present, which breaks the

linearity between past and present. That is the role of the vampire Carmilla in this story, an immortal figure who travels from the ancient roots of a family lineage she shares with Laura to visit its present members, thus disrupting the life of the youngest heir of the legacy, Laura (Hubpages). Appearing as an injured girl in need of assistance, soon Carmilla will discover Laura's sensitive nature and romantic leanings, will awake Laura's sexuality and place her in some situations in which contradictory feelings will flourish.

2.2 Lesbianism and the Uncanny in *Carmilla*

Carmilla is an avant-garde novella that did put in the scope two of the themes that were mostly seen as taboo, vampirism and lesbianism, in the same mixture. As said before, when the novel was published England was under the values of the Victorian era, which means that there existed a strong set of morality rules which were patriarchal. Thus, apart from the religious and legal banning of homosexuality in England there was the established idea that heterosexuality was the only right and moral sexual tendency. Le Fanu wrote his story in those ages and, although the setting is the more exotic Styria, everything in the narrative reflects Victorian English values.

In this story, lesbianism, the gothic and romanticism are closely related due to the nature of the narrative; all the themes are reunited in the principal characters, Laura and Carmilla. They are both young adolescent girls but, in terms of representation, that is the only thing they initially have in common, since they appear to embody the polarity virgin/whore. Laura is the retrospective narrator of the story, the main character; she is the daughter of an English widower retired from his service to the Austrian Empire. She is presented as the fair and virginal lady, blonde and delicate, who initially seems to be innocent and pure. She loves his father and lives happily by his side in the castle he has rented in Styria. Since she is a genteel girl, she has been educated and is well-mannered. Although she is happy with her life in the castle she cannot help feeling a bit isolated,

since there are no people her age and the only company she enjoys is her father's and governesses'. Her longings are revealed when she is told that the niece of his father's friend and neighbour, General Spielsdorf, is going to visit them, and Laura is very surprised and delighted with this idea. Yet, sadly, this young lady dies mysteriously before her arrival. As just mentioned, Laura seems to be innocent at first sight but as the story progresses the reader can perceive, not a development of the character, but rather a discovery of her true nature. Laura is presented as naïve but at one point in which she feels attracted to Carmilla she wishes her to be a boy in disguise so that she could have a heterosexual relationship with Carmilla, and thus be able to channel her awakening sexuality as patriarchy determines. The important thing is that lesbianism in this story is visible in part because there is no heterosexual figure to oppose Carmilla's seduction. There is no attractive male figure in *Carmilla,* human or vampire, since the male characters shown in the story are all old as love suitors and are not even regarded as possible marriage candidates. Paradoxically, the setting is completely patriarchal due to the fact that men are the ones that hold the power, but, despite this, males in the tale are completely blind to what is happening till it is too late. As expressed by Costello-Sullivan, "Le Fanu's text empowers women by depicting a society where men increasingly become relegated to powerless positions while women assume aggressive roles" (xx).

Now, the opposite of Laura is Carmilla: while Laura is the fair lady, Carmilla is the obscure maiden, the rose, the whore. Laura's past is known from the beginning since she herself introduces her life to the reader, but very little is known about Carmilla. She suddenly appears when the carriage in which her mother and she are travelling has an accident in which Carmilla is hurt, or that is what is supposed to happen. She is taken to the castle and her mother continues her journey promising that she will return in three months to gather Carmilla, and that is all the information Laura and her father will get about her. In terms of representation, Carmilla embodies the figure of the sexual and experienced woman. Both maidens seem to be in their late teens but only Laura

matches appearances, because Carmilla is in reality an old creature that has existed for more than a century. Despite the fact that she acts and behaves as if she were eighteen, the reality is that Carmilla has much more experience in life than Laura. This means that the love each one develops cannot be equal: Carmilla has been seducing girls for many years and now she seems to have found her true love, but for Laura it is the first time. Thus, Carmilla seems to be the opposite of Laura at the beginning of the story; while Laura is blonde and vivacious, Carmilla is dark and recovering from a supposed illness. But there are more characteristics between these two girls that are opposed so that, in Dijkstra's words, "It becomes clear that Carmilla, even if she is real, is a mirror image, the photographic negative of Laura, the fashionably invalid young narrator. She is Laura's erotic primal nature made flesh" (341).

Yet there is a progression between both girls that leads Laura to slowly take on Carmilla's appearance. As the story moves forward Carmilla feeds on Laura, who loses blood and gradually adopts Carmilla's pale complexion and sickly looks, while Carmilla gains strength and becomes more alive. As the narrator Laura says: "For some nights I slept profoundly; but still every morning I felt the same lassitude, and a languor weighed upon me all day. I felt myself a changed girl. A strange melancholy was stealing over me, a melancholy that I would not have interrupted" (50). Lassitude, languor and melancholy have been Carmilla's traits so far, but now belong to Laura as well. According to Freud, the phenomenon of the "double" represents one of the clearest manifestations of the uncanny and it can be marked "by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self" (356). What can be perceived is that although initially starting from a well-established polarity in patriarchal culture – the virgin/the whore – Le Fanu's narrative moves to complicate female identity by mingling both terms, or rather, by approximating the virgin to the whore, a strategy which is fatal for the patriarchal gender system.

Basing himself on Otto Rank's ideas, Freud also identifies the 'double' as originally "an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an energetic denial of the power of death" (356). Connected to the idea of the double as originally "a preservation against extinction" (Freud, 356), there is little doubt that Carmilla's desire is to make Laura immortal by converting her into a vampire. Yet the question of origins and the double is also associated in the text with the maternal, together with lesbianism. As Freud said, frequently men feel the mother's genitals and her body, "the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning" (368), as something uncanny. In this respect, although we are familiar with the image of the vampire biting their victim's neck, in *Carmilla* Laura feels that she is pricked in her breast, as she herself recalls when narrating her infantile dream/fantasy/hallucination: "I was wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment, and I cried loudly" (7). Later on, when Carmilla is already visiting and feeding on Laura nightly, in a dream Laura hears a voice, sweet and tender though also terrible, different from the one she usually heard, which says: "'Your mother warns you to beware of the assassin'" (52). Laura's narration continues: "At the same time a light unexpectedly sprang up, and I saw Carmilla, standing, near the foot of my bed, in her night-dress, bathed, from her chin to her feet, in one great stain of blood" (52). Here the figure of Carmilla is unmistakably associated to that of Laura's mother.

As mentioned earlier, Laura, Carmilla and the General's niece are related by blood, the three of them descending from Countess Mircalla Karnstein through the maternal line. Countess Mircalla appears to be the original mother of an exclusively female vampire line intent on establishing a vampire matriarchy where men would be dispensable. Carmilla feeds on her victims, with the particularity that they are all female although there is no indication that Carmilla refuses male blood. Yet for Carmilla not all her preys are equal. Probably because Laura is the only girl that Carmilla recognizes as her own uncanny double, Carmilla feeds on and then kills other girls. However, she loves Laura passionately:

> She used to place her pretty arms about my neck, draw me to her, and laying her cheek to mine, murmur with her lips near my ear, "Dearest, your little heart is wounded; think me not cruel because I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness; if your dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours. In the rapture of my enormous humiliation I live in your warm life, and you shall die–die, sweetly die–into mine" (29).

In the above passage, we can see how Carmilla frees her passions as vampire in a mixture of love, cruelty and violence. In Botting's words, "Carmilla's passions are articulated in terms of blood, sacrifice and fatal possession" (144). At the same time, and despite Carmilla's wildness, she is willing to remain eternally faithful to Laura, thus going against the common belief of promiscuity among vampires (homosexuals in general), by presenting a love story meant to overcome death.

In Freud's terms, the uncanny represents the "return of the repressed":

> [A]mong instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which *recurs*. This class of frightening things would then constitute the uncanny […] [T]his uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression (363-64).

Trying to answer the question of what exactly is the repressed content that produces male anxiety and the uncanny effect in *Carmilla*, the reply could be multiple: the real existence of powerful and sexualised women, lesbianism, or the vulnerability of men's roles and positions in society. Drawing

also from the quotation above, Le Fanu's text also evinces examples of the recognition of something familiar which is nevertheless unfamiliar or unknown. Perhaps the most significant example in this respect occurs in relation to Laura's infantile dream/fantasy/visitation. She narrates the bizarre experience that she had when she was only six years old and one day she awoke in the nursery to find herself alone. Then she saw "a solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed" (7), the face of a young lady who "caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling" (7). This female presence soothes Laura, she falls asleep and is awakened "by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment" (7), a sensation that now truly frightens her. When both girls first meet in Carmilla's bedroom, they simultaneously experience a feeling of mutual recognition although they have not previously seen each other. This is due to the fact that Carmilla apparently had the same vision in her childhood and the young lady's face she saw was Laura's, while in Laura's vision, the face belonged to Carmilla. This instance of the familiar combined with the unfamiliar in the girls' encounters, points towards their nature as uncanny gothic doubles.

Freud admits that the repetition of the same thing can also become a source of uncanny feelings under certain conditions and circumstances:

> If we take another class of things, it is easy to see that there, too, it is only this factor of involuntary repetition which surrounds what would otherwise be innocent enough with an uncanny atmosphere, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable when otherwise we should have spoken only of "chance" (359-60).

In *Carmilla*, the area where Laura and her father live has been repeatedly ravaged by vampires, and the story of Laura's and Carmilla's encounter stops being a question of chance when the reader and

the characters in the narrative learn about General Spielsdorf's story in his own words. For four consecutive chapters, the General narrates in detail the events that led to his niece's death, events that mirror/double/repeat, with little variation, Laura's and Carmilla's story. In Spieldorf's case, the beautiful young lady hosted in the castle was called Millarca, a name that together with Mircalla, the name of the seventeenth-century Countess that inaugurated the female vampire line, and that of Carmilla, the contemporary female vampire, indicate repetition as permutation, link the three women and, thus, also represent the disruption of the present by the past.

Almost at the end of Le Fanu's *novella*, the beautiful Carmilla is killed thrice: a stake is driven through her heart, then she is beheaded and finally burnt (92). The procedure is witnessed by an array of men, all of them representing patriarchal authority: Laura's father, the General, two physicians, Baron Vordenburg and a woodman as member of the folk. Carmilla's death is undoubtedly welcome news for patriarchy. The threat of unruly female sexual desire and behaviour, together with the anxieties provoked by the potential superfluous existence of men, disappear with the disappearance of the lesbian vampire. She will not be able to infect any other girl with her pervert conduct. However, and here lies one of the most interesting aspects of this narrative, things are different for Laura. Even though throughout the story Laura has confronted Carmilla's sexual advances with a mixture of repulsion and attraction, as she admits, "[i]n this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed" (25). The narrative closes without fully demonising Carmilla, still keeping Laura's ambivalent feelings about her and suggesting her melancholy and sense of loss because of Carmilla's absence:

> It was long before the terror of recent events subsided; and to this hour the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations–sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw in the ruined church; and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door (96).

Conclusion

Vampires have always been the antagonists of and a source of fear for the human race from the moment they appeared in the folklore, mythologies and legends of different cultures across the world. On the one hand, their proliferation has made them familiar to humans, while they have also preserved an air of strangeness due to their supernatural monstrous nature, thus transforming them into figures that can easily represent the uncanny as defined by Freud. Christianity established a relation between these creatures and the devil, depicting vampires as the rivals of the church. They were the examples to avoid by both men and women. Male vampires were seen as demonic beasts that slew like possessed animals, and female vampires were regarded as sinful whores whose libertine sexuality was devilish. Thus, the gender of the creature gained importance in terms of behaviour: both creatures were presented as very sexual, but the male vampire imposed his dominance over his victims through raw force or hypnosis, while the female vampire seduced them in order to gain their trust and feast on their blood. Vampires were also related to sterility; because of this, direct connections were established between homosexuality and these creatures.

In fact, *Carmilla* can be considered as one of the key texts when talking about lesbianism and the uncanny, as well as an early example of lesbian literature. In the story, both protagonist girls, the vampire Carmilla and Laura, form a couple that live their passion in a patriarchal world in which such relationship is not even contemplated as possible. But *Carmilla* is more than just a lesbian romantic story. Carmilla is an ancient creature who, before her actual encounter with Laura, has had connections with Laura in many ways: she is related to Laura by maternal blood, and she haunted Laura when she was very young (or maybe Laura haunted Carmilla, since in their mirroring

visions or hallucinations both young ladies assert that they were visited by a beautiful woman with the other's face). This mixture of familiarity and the notion of the double stalking her prey bring about a disturbing sensation on the reader which corresponds to the uncanny. Doubles, involuntary repetitions, the return of the repressed, all these sources of the uncanny as defined by Freud, can be perceived in the text, as my previous analysis has tried to show.

In Victorian England, when Le Fanu's *novella Carmilla* was published, society and culture were undergoing tremendous changes and transformations, some of them related to gender roles and female sexuality. Male anxieties connected with these issues resulted in misogynous representations of women following the polarity virgin/whore. The female vampire Carmilla can be seen as a figure of freedom and independence for women, since the powerful creatures were not attached to any male master, as women in the nineteenth century were, creating a feeling of anxiety in men, who saw how women's rights and aims were gradually achieved. The figure of the female vampire came to embody the "whore" part of the polarity, and in the case of *Carmilla*, joining passionate female sexuality with vampirism, lesbianism and the effect of the uncanny.

The vampire Carmilla remains ambivalent. She can be regarded as the woman who frees Laura from the cultural oppression of Victorian society, as the monster that threatens patriarchal gender roles and sexual mores, or as the creature that ends with her life; the creature that comes from the past to haunt Laura, or the double that unites with her in death.

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