

Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

VICTORIAN FEMININITY IN *CARMILLA*, BY SHERIDAN LE FANU

Author

CHANTEL M. STEWART CANALES

Supervisor

Constanza Del Río

FACULTY OF ARTS
2017/2018

Abstract: “Victorian Femininity in *Carmilla*, by Sheridan Le Fanu”

In the Victorian period, women were relegated to the private sphere of the home and were frequently no more than house caretakers, since their main function was to take care of the house, husband and children. Furthermore, female sexuality was always unavoidably connected to reproduction. In this dissertation, my intention has been to delineate the profound changes in gender roles and the consideration of female sexuality that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in the last three decades, a period known as *le fin de siècle*. These changes were brought about fundamentally by the rebellious attitude of middle- and upper-class women, who began to ask for the vote and for similar opportunities than men in the labour market. This type of independent and activist woman, who wanted to control her own life, came to be known as the New Woman, and was the object of praise as well as of hatred and scorn. Misogyny against the New Woman was often displaced onto the terrain of the supernatural, leading to the apparition of monstrously female artistic figures: Gorgons, Medusas, Harpies, witches, specters and vampires. It is within this context that this dissertation interprets Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, a text deeply informed by the gender and sexual discourses of Victorianism and of *le fin de siècle*.

Keywords: female sexuality, New Woman, Angel, Vampire.

Resumen: “La feminidad Victoriana en *Carmilla*, de Sheridan Le Fanu”

En la era Victoriana, a las mujeres se las relegó socialmente a la esfera privada del hogar, en la que fundamentalmente cumplían la función de cuidadoras: del marido, los hijos y la casa. Además, la sexualidad femenina únicamente se concebía si estaba unida a la reproducción. En este Trabajo de Fin de Grado, he querido delinear los cambios tan profundos en roles de género y en la consideración de la sexualidad femenina que tuvieron lugar en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX, particularmente en las tres últimas décadas, un periodo conocido como *le fin de siècle*. Mujeres de las clases medias y altas encabezaron las protestas contra el patriarcado, exigiendo el derecho a votar e igualdad de oportunidades en el mercado de trabajo y la esfera pública. A estas mujeres rebeldes, independientes y activistas se las conoció por el apelativo la “Nueva Mujer”, un nuevo tipo de mujer que quería controlar su propia vida sin someterse a nadie. La Nueva Mujer fue objeto de admiración pero también de burla y odio, de una actitud misógina que a menudo se expresó por medio de lo sobrenatural, en múltiples representaciones artísticas en la que la mujer nueva se encarna en figuras monstruosas: Gorgonas, Medusas, Sirenas,

Arpías, brujas y vampiras. Historias como *Carmilla* una *novella* escrita por Sheridan le Fanu, que es la inspiración para este trabajo, describen esta situación a través de los personajes de “Carmilla” quien interpreta el papel de la nueva mujer y es presentada como una vampira, y Laura, la cual interpreta el papel de la mujer tradicional a la cual se le llama el “Ángel de la casa”. El propósito de este análisis es estudiar lo similares y diferentes que pueden llegar a ser ambos prototipos, y los motivos que puedan tentar al tradicional ángel a convertirse en una mujer nueva.

Palabras clave: sexualidad femenina, Nueva Mujer, Ángel, Vampira.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	6
1.1.CONTEXT: VICTORIAN SOCIETY AND WOMEN	7-9
1.2. THE FIN THE SIECLE	9-11
2. THE ANGEL	12-15
3. THE MONSTER	16-22
4. METAMORPHOSIS	23-26
5. CONCLUSION	27-27
6. WORKS CITED	28-29

1- INTRODUCTION

The fiction that has inspired me to write this dissertation is the *novella Carmilla*, written by the Irish writer Sheridan Le Fanu and published in his collection of supernatural tales *In a Glass Darkly* (1872). *Carmilla* is a vampire tale which has frequently been undervalued by readers and critics in comparison to the later *Dracula* (Bram Stoker 1897), considered a “real vampire story”: that is, a story that presumably shows the authentic features of the monster-driven narrative that the readers expect, mainly a sinister and scaring male protagonist. In *Carmilla*, nevertheless, what the reader finds is a beautiful nineteen-year old girl who goes against socio-cultural preconceptions about gender roles. The point is that Le Fanu has always been conceptualized as a sensationalist writer who frequently uses melodramatic and gothic conventions as a means to ensure the readers’ attention, since we, human beings, seem to have an innate curiosity for the mysterious and the unknown (Costello-Sullivan xvii). With time, *Carmilla* has gradually gained the readers’ and critics’ attention and respect, not only as an entertaining and well-crafted vampire tale, but also as a narrative that presents a complex view of female sexuality and gender roles in the Victorian period:

The story’s potential as a political and/or cultural metaphor, its psychological resonances, its representation of gender and sexuality, and its unusual aesthetic and narrative characteristics, [...] repeatedly invite literary criticism, forcing scholars to return to this short, complex work again and again. (Costello-Sullivan xviii)

In this dissertation, I will analyse the representation of women in *Carmilla*. The focus of this work will be to analyse the separate roles of women in the *novella* by considering the two different female stereotypes that we can find in the story and by connecting them to the context of the Victorian period. The purpose of this study is to

give the reasons why extreme polarities in the representation of women became popular and wide-spread in the last decades of the nineteenth century. For that aim, I have structured my dissertation in the following way: first of all I will write an introductory section to make the reader familiar with the context, that is, the Victorian period and the concept of the ideal woman at that time. I will give particular attention to the period known as the *fin de siècle* (the last three decades of the nineteenth century, more or less), which is the period when, with the apparition of the type of the New Woman, it becomes evident that gender roles are changing. After the introduction, there come three sections: the first one develops the Victorian stereotype of “The Angel in the House”, embodied by Laura in Le Fanu’s narrative; the second is devoted to the figure of the female monster or *femme fatale*, a misogynous supernatural construction that exacerbates the sexualized and predatory nature of women, in *Carmilla* represented by the eponymous female vampire; and the third section, entitled “Metamorphosis”, attempts to show the instability of the angel stereotype by considering the transformation (infection) Laura undergoes once she gets into contact with Carmilla.

.

1.1. CONTEXT: VICTORIAN SOCIETY AND WOMEN

With regards to the period in which the *novella* was written, in England the nineteenth century is defined by the increasing power of a monetary and mercantile economy and it is also marked by the evolution of an increasingly powerful and influential middle class.¹ Nevertheless, it is erroneous to classify the Victorian middle class as a unique and monolithic organism, since the middle class was also divided into different social groups that had different economic status. The critical issue, in any case, was the emergence and existence of a new collective called the middle class despite the diverse subgroups included within. In many aspects, the domestic belief system, together with the establishment of fixed gender roles, was the focus of this class's value system.

According to the official sexual regime, sexuality was always dependent on (biological) gender (Nead 5), since gender was, at that time, the crucial category to be considered in relation to sexuality. Male desire was supposed to be active, apart from being determined and instinctive. On the other hand, women's sexuality was marked by passivity, weakness and susceptibility. This vision was manifested in an article published in *The Westminster Review* in 1850:

“In men, in general, the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous, and belongs to the condition of puberty. In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if not non-existent, till excited; always till excited by intercourse... If passions of women were ready, strong and spontaneous, in a degree even approaching the form they assume in the coarser sex, there can be little doubt that sexual irregularities would reach a height, of which, at present, we have happily no conception. (Prochaska qtd. in Nead 6)

As a whole, female sexual identity was circumscribed within the dichotomies lily/rose, virgin/whore, or angel/monster. This means that the conception of women was

¹ Although Le Fanu was Irish, it is accepted that he actually wrote for a British audience, particularly for middle-class women who delighted in tales of wonder and fear.

determined by how they were contemplated; that is, as virtuous or vicious depending on the degree of sexual continence or incontinence they showed. Accordingly, women could be considered 'respectable' or 'fallen'. This classification, was a nineteenth-century procedure to mark standard values (6).

Women's roles and functions in the Victorian period were confined to the private sphere of the home, where they oversaw the domestic and upbringing arrangements. (24). Motherhood and marriage were seen as the social standards. Furthermore, the earlier the woman had children, the healthier she was considered. Hence, motherhood was the main constituent of a woman's mission, and, of course, Christian doctrine was the basis for these rules (26). In relation to power and dependency, the notion of decency was demarcated by a woman's dependence on men, her softness, fragility and, most importantly, her submission to men. Therefore, it was impossible to imagine the existence of independent women since this was something unnatural. Women's subordination to men was acknowledged as a charming quality of virtuous femininity which lived upon male protection (29).

This patriarchal perception of women came to be embodied in "The Angel in The House", a poem written by Coventry Patmore (1854-56) in celebration of his wife Emily, whom he considered to be the ideal female prototype:

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself. ...
[...]
And whilst his love has any life,
Or any eye to see her charms,
At any time, she's still his wife,
Dearly devoted to his arms;
She loves with love that cannot tire;
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
Through passionate duty love springs higher,
As grass grows taller round a stone. (Patmore)

The poem puts the ideal wife on a pedestal, stressing her godliness and putting forward a traditional view of romantic involvement and alliance. The meaning of the title, and especially the word “Angel”, emphasizes the link with religion. This figure personified sexual purity and, particularly, a severe spirit of Christian virtue and self-sacrifice, qualities that positioned women as forever subjected to men. Women were placed in the domestic sphere and men were supposed to be the rulers of the economic, political, social and cultural worlds (Hogan and Bradstock 1).

From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, progressive industrialization had led to the apparition of urban working women, but the New Woman was something new: a new autonomous middle-class woman who did not need nor sought male protection. Initially, the threats to Victorian gender norms came from the urban educated middle- and professional classes, which started to ask for the same privileges and civic rights that men had in the public sphere. It is for this reason – they were challenging traditional male privileges – that they were considered defiant figures who prompted the destruction and degradation of the institution of family. It is also true that the middle class as a whole was profoundly contradictory towards this new female figure: progressive sectors considered them strong and vigorous, but, on the other hand, from more conservative positions they were perceived as the enemies of society: that is, as threatening human beings (Hogan and Bradstock 31). It is this latter stance that led to an extremely misogynous view of women, whereby the most dangerous features for patriarchy of the New Woman – her independence and sexual desire – were displaced onto the terrain of the supernatural.

1.2. THE FIN DE SIÈCLE

It is not by chance that the *fin de siècle*, the moment when the first women's movements took place, was categorized as a moment of crisis. Given the fact that the ruling population was male this can be taken as fear of social change, that is, fear of losing

traditional life styles as a consequence of the changes brought about by the Second Industrial Revolution, among other factors the more decisive and controversial of these transformations being the apparition of the New Woman in the 1890s. As Sally Ledger says: “The recurrent theme of the cultural politics of the *fin de siècle* was instability, and gender was arguably the most destabilizing category” (23). The redefinition of femininity implied the redefinition of masculinity, so that the anxiety covered both genres. John Tosh in *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and Middle-Class Domesticity in Victorian England* (1999) says:

For the first time the legal carte blanche of the paterfamilias was subjected to significant inroads, by parliamentary legislation as well as judicial pronouncement. Male sexuality was the subject of unprecedented critique. The writers of advice books demanded higher standards of behaviour from husbands and tended to blame them when marriages came unstuck. The role and capacities of fathers were widely disparaged, and children of both sexes were less inclined to accept paternal authority (qtd. in Smith 3)

Hence, the point is that this ‘crisis’ was also a masculine crisis, and, a considerable amount of debates on the origins of this crisis originated within the, mostly male, intellectuals and writers of the period. Men have always had the right to write and express themselves, and their ideas have been usually considered acceptable. Consequently, just when women started to demand more rights and space in the public sphere, male dominance began to see this situation as critical for them (Smith 4). *Carmilla*, as will be seen, is a text that centres on the crisis of femininity and masculinity at the *fin de siècle*.

Faced with these changes, Victorian society reacted in contradictory ways: the most progressive sectors of society welcomed the new possibilities offered for women, while the more conservative groups denigrated the novelties and, during the *fin de siècle*,

displaced their fears and anxieties in relation to gender and sexuality, provoked by the New Woman, onto monstrous feminine figures: sirens, Medusas, witches, Gorgons, and, of course, vampires.² The character Carmilla is one of these creations.

² See Dijkstra (1988).

2 - THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE

In Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* we can observe the two different types of women which correspond to the different extremes of female stereotypes belonging to the Victorian era. One of them is "The Angel in the House", interpreted by Laura, and the other embodies a displaced New Woman as the vampire Carmilla. First, as regards the woman who represents the prototype of the angel in the house it is vital to remark that her key role is to be a symbol of a victim. In contemporary fiction (melodrama, sensational and gothic novels, etc.), it was usual to represent women as victims of monstrous creatures, such as in *Carmilla*. This element resembles the ideas in Victorian society, a context where women were constructed as helpless to decide their destiny because of the multiple social limitations that they experienced. Consequently, this narrative can be conceptualized as a judgment on the way most nineteenth-century women were asked to live their lives. The function of middle-class women within the public sphere was almost non-existent: they were not expected to work so that they were forced to rely on men to support them, therefore exhibiting parasitic tendencies (Schram 9). The relationship between Carmilla and Laura, her victim, shows how powerless women were in the 19th century.

As said in the introduction, *Carmilla* was published in 1872 in the collection *In a Glass Darkly*, where the different supernatural and gothic tales are meant to be Dr Hesselius's case studies. Before the story of Carmilla starts, the reader finds a short "Prologue" written by a fictional editor and learns that the lady responsible for the story is dead. So, Laura's narrative is some kind of revenant, so to say: a voice coming back from death, though a voice, as the Editor remarks, with "a conscientious particularity" (Le Fanu 3). Laura is the narrator of the story, so that everything we know comes filtered from her point of view, which, because of Laura's emotional involvement in the story,

cannot always be considered a reliable one. As will be seen, Laura is completely unable to read the Carmilla character properly, although Laura seems to be a good observer and her narration is extremely detailed and accurate in other respects. She is also a self-conscious narrator, or rather author, for she repeatedly refers to the activity of being writing this story of past events after ten years since their occurrence: “I am now going to tell you something so strange that it will require all your faith in my veracity to believe my story” (10). The reader also learns that, following Victorian habits, Laura is explicitly addressing women since they were the most likely readers for such a fiction: “In some respects, [Carmilla’s] habits were odd. Perhaps not so singular in the opinion of a town lady like you, as they appeared to us rustic people” (30-31).

With regard to Laura’s portrayal, she appears to be the traditional Victorian good and decent girl and thus a perfect mother-to-be. She has long blond hair and beautiful blue eyes, and she functions mainly as a symbol of innocence being tempted by mysterious and dark forces, in this case an appealing vampire. Her innocence is emphasized so much that the reader may even start to suspect her reliability. It is partly due to her innocence that she cannot see Carmilla as fully evil, not even once Carmilla’s vampiric nature has been discovered. From a different point of view, it could be said that it is the men around Laura that diagnose Carmilla as evil, but Laura does not seem to feel the same: for her Carmilla is not evil and that is why she feels attracted towards her. Carmilla brings novelty and excitement to Laura’s life.

Together with her innocence there is another element in Laura’s life that recurs: her loneliness. She lives in a “solitary castle”, in a “lonely and primitive place”, the nearest village is “about seven of your English miles to the left” and the nearest inhabited schloss “is twenty miles away to the right” (4, 5). From the beginning, she seems to be a withdrawn girl, as if there was something missing in her life: “These were our regular

social resources; but of course, there were chance visits from ‘neighbours’ of only five or six leagues distance. My life was, notwithstanding, rather a solitary one, I can assure you” (6). She lives with her retired father, her mother having died when she was a child, cared for and educated by two governesses. The rest of men that appear in the story – General Spielsdorf, Doctor Spielsberg, the vicar, and Baron Vonderburg – are also quite old and ineffectual to be considered Laura’s possible suitors. This can be seen as a way of alluding to the crisis of masculinity mentioned in the introduction. Yet Laura is nineteen years old, and she needs to be awakened to the mysteries of sensuality and desire. Carmilla will play that role.

Laura introduces herself as a girl belonging to the middle class and she highlights her English nationality: “My father is English and I bear an English name, although I never saw England” (4). At home, she speaks English with her father for patriotic motives, they read Shakespeare and try to preserve English traditions, such as the tea ceremony. Her mother, on the other hand, came from Styria, so that Laura also has Styrian blood, like Carmilla. They are connected through their mothers’ ancestors, the Karsteins. Laura’s and Carmilla’s union represents an extremely serious threat to the status quo, since Carmilla wants to build an exclusive matrilineal society where men are not needed.

In relation to the connection between the two girls, it has to be said that it is very strong, since apart from being blood-related, there also seems to exist some psychic link between them, for they had already met in a fantasy dream when they were six years old before meeting in reality. This is the way Laura relates the dream, exactly the same dream that Carmilla had:

I saw a solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed. It was that of a young lady who was kneeling, with her hands under the coverlet.... 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 (7).

This vision or dream anticipates future events and Carmilla will exploit this uncanny connection to seduce Laura, since that event marked Laura deeply: “I forget all my life preceding that event, and for some time after it is all obscure also, but the scenes I have just described stand out vivid as the isolated pictures of the phantasmagoria surrounded by darkness” (9). It also forms part of a mirror strategy in the novella: Laura’s dream mirrors Carmilla’s and the reverse; General Spielsdorf’s story replicates the events in Laura’s life; and, finally, the letters in the names Carmilla, Millarca and Mircalla, the three of them containing the threat of the vampire but offering distracting permutations. (Hernandez 71). As will be seen in the section entitled “Metamorphosis”, Laura and Carmilla will not keep a stark opposition until the end. Rather, there will be a gradual approach, with Laura increasingly looking and acting more like Carmilla.

3 – THE MONSTER

Having described the role of the Angel in the House, I will now analyse the female character who defies all Victorian norms as regards gender roles and female sexuality.

First of all, in relation to Carmilla's arrival, Le Fanu uses a topical treatment such as the carriage accident, together with a mysterious environment illuminated by a full moon, both of them gothic elements. This way of interrupting the story, together with Carmilla's mother's mysterious physical appearance and especially her, quite odd, request to Laura's father, are details which anticipate important and sinister events: "it seemed to be the travelling carriage of a person of rank; and we were all immediately absorbed in watching that very unusual spectacle" (15). This spectacular way of introducing Carmilla is one of the several strategies Le Fanu uses in order to convey that the vampire's arrival or, rather, her return, is going to overturn gender roles since she is going to be the one who will rescue Laura from loneliness, while, considering the historical context and Laura's age, the rescuer would more likely have been a man. From this moment onwards, the continuous struggle and paradoxical relationship between the two girls will take place: one embodying the stereotype of the New Woman as Monster, and the other representing The Angel in the House, who will simultaneously feel attracted to and repulsed by her counterpart (Hernandez 72). This ambivalence is also anticipated from the very beginning: "We all advanced in curiosity and horror, my father in silence, the rest with various ejaculations of terror". Here Laura conveys that although there is something that frightens her, there is also something that calls her attention as regards her desire for excitement in her monotonous life.

Immediately after Carmilla's irruption in Laura's life, they recognize each other as the figures appearing in their respective dreams. It can be said that it is in this supernatural encounter that Laura starts to admire Carmilla: "There was something in this

lady's air and appearance so distinguished, and even imposing, and in her manner so engaging, as to impress one, quite apart from the dignity of her equipage, with a conviction that she was a person of consequence" (17). Thanks to this description, we learn that Carmilla shares some of the main attributes of the New Woman, such as the imposing personality, self-assured and distinguished, a woman who could perfectly ask for her rights and for changes in society.

Regarding the vampire's first impression, Carmilla is described by Laura as taller than average, languid, with a melancholy gaze and extremely beautiful. Her eyes are large and dark, and her hair "fine and soft, and in colour a rich very dark brown, with something of gold" (27). Carmilla is dark (her eyes, her hair) and the people travelling with her are racially marked: there is the "hideous black woman with a sort of coloured turban on her head", and the servants are an "ill-looking pack", their faces "strangely lean, and dark, and sullen" (21). Marilyn Brock has interpreted these racial signs in the sense that Carmilla represents "a fear of the Other's more vital sexuality overtaking the English colonies" (120): that is, she embodies a "conflation of the female and the racial other" (131). Consequently, Carmilla, the rebel against tradition and prototype of the most misogynous version of the New Woman, is also portrayed as having a different ethnic background which creates a shocking image and a combination of bizarre features, mixing two controversial issues through a person, which are femininity and a different race. This combination of racism and sexism come from the first half of the 19th when the movement against slavery was conformed mainly by women. In fact, the first steps towards women rights come from these attempts of abolitionist women, since men were not happy with the idea of such a great number of women participating in the movement against slavery. Hence, Carmilla is a portrayal of the real root of women's rebellion.

Before describing the role of Carmilla in the *novella*, I will briefly explain the reasons why, at the *fin de siècle*, this new type of woman became associated with monstrosity.

As regards the motivation for the abundance of cultural images of female vampires, particularly in the last decades of the nineteenth century, there are some experts who claim that vampire transformation was based on certain women's refusal to comply with male orders and dictates. Robinson, on the other hand, (qtd in Dijkstra 334) published a scientific study which linked the vampire's hunger for blood with anaemia, an illness suffered particularly by women, due to women's monthly loss of blood during the period and at childbirth. This anaemia issue appears in the story through Carmilla's feeling of weakness during the day: "She was delicate in health, and nervous but not subject to any kind of seizure – she volunteered that – not to any illusion; being, in fact, perfectly sane" (22-23) or: "She used to come down very late, generally not till one o'clock, she would then take a cup of chocolate, but eat nothing" (31). These comments suggest weakness and disease, together with a more appealing languid disposition commonly shown by women at that time, since anaemia was considered mainly a female illness. On the other hand, the reader will realize throughout the *novella* that Carmilla is not actually weak but rather the opposite. She is going to be a rebellious character, such as the New Woman (Dijkstra 4).

Differently to other types of monsters, vampires have been frequently portrayed as sophisticated and skilful creatures. Therefore, Carmilla is portrayed as a highly manipulative seductress. In this sense, Carol Senf indicates in her book *The Vampire in 19th Century English Literature* (1988) that women developed manipulative skills to counteract the tyranny and persecution they suffered. These manipulative techniques were weapons to resist gender oppression and try to pursue their ambitions in a subtle

way. According to Senf, “Le Fanu reveals that women – though considered weak and frail – may have more real power than men.” If we apply this idea to the *novella*, we can see that Carmilla can only be defeated in the story by all the male characters’ joining forces and using brute force, supposed to be one of the most valuable and differentiating masculine attributes (qtd. in Schram 10).

Several factors, such as her strong sexual desire, autonomous way of acting and great intelligence reflect the fact that she is an independent self-sufficient woman who does not need men in her life. In Victorian society this behaviour was not deemed proper, especially from a male point of view, and new women were observed to have functioned like bacteria, infecting their “victims” in a process similar to vampirism (Costello-Sullivan 113). In Le Fanu’s *novella*, Carmilla’s main purpose is to create more women like her, infecting them by transmitting her blood to her victims, thus creating more supernatural beings who will not need men in their lives either. The prospect of a society where men are absolutely dispensable is a frightening one, especially for men. At the end of the *novella*, all the male characters kill Carmilla in a very cruel way and they even celebrate their action as a great achievement, since she was responsible for their crisis.

The problem is that they have been too ignorant to realize what was happening around them until the end of the story. In relation to the recent peasant deaths in the nearby village, the victims all young females, Laura’s father states: “All this, said my father, is strictly referable to natural causes. These poor people infect one another with their superstitions and so repeat in imagination the images of terror that have infested their neighbours’ (36). This quote represents how inefficient these men are, so much so that they cannot even realize what is going on in their community. Yet when they discover the perpetrator they kill the girl without any doubt. This can be related to the situation of

the New Woman regarding the fact that when any woman tried to depart from the expected protocol, her voice would be silenced.

The way Le Fanu portrays sexuality through the figure of Carmilla is one of the most effective ways of transmitting the fear existing towards the New Woman. That is, Carmilla is described as a very beautiful person and, according to Laura's ambiguous comments, she has a beauty that even frightens. We can see that in Carmilla even beauty, usually a feminine quality, is ambivalent. With regards to Carmilla's physical appearance, and as pointed before, several factors, like her height and ruggedness, convey masculine attributes, while her exceeding beauty would, conventionally, point towards the feminine, yet this is not the case here. In fact, in the text Carmilla performs a stereotypical masculine role in a female to female relationship: that of "seductress". Her adoption of both masculine and feminine roles transforms her into a dangerous weapon against men's patriarchy (Costello-Sullivan 113). The introduction of a change in gender roles is explained by Barbara Belford in the following quotation: "Vampire wives/ daughters usurp the male prerogative of initiating sex" (Belford qtd. in Brock 125). It could be said that Le Fanu seems to be making an effort to give Victorian women hope and, especially, through Carmilla's words, he is giving a voice to women, together with the image of a brave and free female which may help other women to become free from their oppression and the dictatorship imposed by men in that traditional environment (Schram 9).

Carmilla seems to select her "companions" from the upper- and middle-classes, while she just feeds and kills peasant girls. While watching a funeral procession for a peasant girl, Carmilla says: "She? I don't trouble my head about peasants. I don't know who she is" (31). Actually, Carmilla knows that peasant girl perfectly since she has been her victim, but, since the girl belongs to the lower classes, Carmilla is not interested in

vamping her. She prefers Laura, closer to Carmilla's social status and to the middle-classes, the social stratum from which most new women came.

Even if they were not literally portrayed as monsters, it was usual to find aggressive and violent women in Victorian fiction. The issue is that in these novels even women's most violent crimes were always committed for a reason (Morris 1). The core motives of these situations were these women's physical abuse at the hands of their husbands and, particularly, women's economic dependence, frequently leading to extreme psychological pressure. The fact is that, although the authors of these stories always tried to justify women's violence, they were still Victorians so that they had to please the society they belonged to. Hence, in order to charm their patriarchal audience, in these stories women could never evade the legal consequences of their homicides, and they finally always ended up punished in several ways, normally quite violent, and regularly at male hands (Morris 5). What can also be seen in the text is that Carmilla shows a vicious nature and is prone to rage attacks, as seen in her reaction to the peddler's remark about her "sharpest tooth" (35). This drives Carmilla to great agitation: "How dare that mountebank insult us so? Where is your father? I shall demand redress from him. My father would have had the wretch tied up to the pump, and flogged with a cart-whip, and burnt to the bones with the castle brand!" (35). These comments suggest that women associate violence with masculinity and it somehow tries to justify where Carmilla's cruelty comes from.

Summing up, the vampire Carmilla can be seen as a hyperbole of the New Woman, an alluring monster whose main aim is to trap absolute angels, fresh maidens in their youth, normally at the perfect age to get married. She exclusively uses her powers of seduction on upper-class and upper-middle-class girls, while she directly kills the peasant girls in the nearby village. Her objective is to infect them with her blood in order

to produce more supernatural creatures like her, that is, in order to take them to her side and create more new women. Yet, in terms of human reproduction, contact with her leads to infertility, a situation that threatens Western patriarchy. Carmilla's power seems to outrun male control over their women and emphasizes male ineffectiveness in comparison to her. The reason why these men are afraid of her is that they risk losing their authority if Carmilla succeeds in contaminating the girls meant to be future mothers. This fear, apart from the threat of female sexuality, also reflects male anxieties at gender inversion, particularly the menace to reproduction and, consequently, the possible extinction of the British patriarchal gender system.

4 - METAMORPHOSIS

Having developed an analysis of the opposing stereotypes of Victorian women separately it is necessary now to consider the relationship they share and how this relationship is built in *Carmilla* from the moment Laura and the vampire meet.

First, as pointed out above, Laura feels very lonely at the beginning of the story. The fact that she does not mention any man around her apart from her father, whom she describes as “the kindest man on Earth” (89), suggests that her conception of men is just the one transmitted by her father since he is the only male referent that she has. This is the reason why, although she is nineteen years old, a moment in life for the awakening of sexuality and sensuality, she does not allude to any sentimental interest in men (Cotter 2).

Although Carmilla has natural charming characteristics, such as her beauty and self-confidence, one of her principal seductive skills lies in her intellectual alertness, one of the main features of the New Woman as well. Carmilla uses any opportunity to transmit her beliefs to Laura, chiefly Carmilla’s adherence to a religion based on nature, as can be seen through comments such as the following: “all things proceed from nature – don’t they? All things in the heaven, in the earth, and under the earth. Act and live as nature ordains? I think so” (36). From this moment onwards, Carmilla engages in a persuasive conversation with Laura, discussing the meaning of death through a comparison in which she alludes to the French naturalist Buffon’s views on nature. The scientist’s point of view is used in order to establish an analogy with their relationship, since Carmilla is transforming Laura into a more powerful creature: Laura is morphing from innocent young lady into knowledgeable New Woman. The purpose of the analogy is to transmit to Laura the fact that she should not be afraid of death. Carmilla tells her: “But to die, as lovers may – to die together, so that they may live together. Girls are caterpillars while

they live in the world, to be finally butterflies when the summer comes, but in the meantime, there are grubs and larvae, don't you see" (37). What Carmilla is representing with these words is no more than a metaphor which means she is vamping Laura and is creating a free woman, a New Woman. But this meaning is ambiguous since the process of transformation will not make Laura completely free: she will become gradually more attached to the vampire and will adopt her costumes and habits, and even acquire some of Carmilla's physical attributes, such as the latter's languid attitude. Moreover, this link between the girls seem to go beyond the vamping. There are several comments which convey that the girls are joined by blood, coming from Laura's mother. "I am descended from the Karnsteins; that is, mamma was" Ah! Said the lady, languidly, "so am I, I think, a very long descent, very ancient. Are there any Karnsteins living now?" (40).

Regarding the *fin de siècle's* misogynist portrayal of the New Woman in literature as perverse and aberrant, Carmilla tries to base her arguments on a Darwinian view about biological determinism, in an attempt to justify her behaviour as a New Woman and transmit her opinions while trying to make Laura forget her prejudices. "I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness" (29), affirms Carmilla. Even though at first Laura seems not to pay attention to Carmilla's words, which she describes as "Carmilla's crazy talk and looks" (42) we see throughout the narrative that she shows an interest towards the vampire life and stories and begins to be little by little more linked to her, especially from the moment Carmilla begins to vamp her, which means that Laura is morphing into a vivid image of Carmilla. (Harman and Meyer 85).

As pointed out before, Laura feels from the very beginning an ambiguous feeling of attraction towards Carmilla, which will gradually become more intense as the story progresses: "I did feel, as she said, 'drawn towards her' but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely

prevailed. She interested and won me; she was so beautiful and so indescribably engaging” (25). Even though Carmilla is the woman who is vamping her, Laura is going to develop this ambiguity throughout the *novella*, a process that culminates in Laura’s blindness and obsession, for example, when she finds a picture of Mircalla Karnstein and wants to hang it in her room because of Mircalla’s similarity to Carmilla: “will you let me hang this picture in my room, papa?” (39). Therefore, she wants Carmilla in her room even though the latter is dangerous. A girl who is the vivid example of the traditional Victorian woman, that is an ingenuous girl, is being transformed into a mirror image of Carmilla: “And you asked for the picture you think like me, to hang in your room” she murmured with a sigh, as she drew her arm closer about my waist, and let her pretty head sink upon my shoulder” (41). As reflected in this passage, Laura is gradually becoming more and more attached to Carmilla, which means that the vampire is achieving her purpose and is getting ready to attack. And then, the vamping process begins, perceived by Laura as “a very strange agony” (46). At this moment, Laura begins to suffer Carmilla’s nocturnal attacks.

Laura’s lack of awareness as for Carmilla’s real nature can also be observed in a passage where Carmilla appears in Laura’s dreams covered with blood. Laura recalls: “At the same time a light unexpectedly sprang up, and I saw Carmilla, standing near the foot of my bed, in her white night-dress, bathed, from her chin to her feet, in one great stain of blood. I wakened with a shriek, possessed with the one idea that Carmilla was being murdered” (52-53). There is a different way of looking at Laura’s incapability of seeing Carmilla as a threat, and, maybe, that is the fact that Carmilla poses no danger to her. Rather, she offers unknown potentialities, freedom and pleasure. It is the male characters in the story that actually see and diagnose Carmilla as treacherous and are compelled to

destroy her. Vampirism may also be seen as some kind of liberation from the gender and sexual constraints of women during the Victorian period.

In addition, according to Haefele–Thomas, a very intriguing fact is that Laura’s reaction to Carmilla’s death is completely different to the satisfaction experienced by the men in the story (qtd. in Kranen 11). Even after death, Carmilla achieves her purpose of winning Laura to her side, as is shown at the end of the story when Laura still remembers her and seems to long for her. Laura narrates:

The following spring my father took me a tour through Italy. We remained away for more than a year. 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)

Carmilla’s allure still persists in Laura’s mind.

CONCLUSION

In this degree dissertation, I have started by describing the socio-cultural context in the Victorian period and the *fin de siècle*, particularly as regards female sexuality and gender roles. After talking about the period, I have discussed women's gender roles and the opposing female stereotypes by comparing them to the characters of the *novella* and concluded by establishing that what initially appear to be contradictory and hierarchical representations of women end up being not so different after all. Therefore, with regards to the description of the two female stereotypes belonging to that time, who were the traditional and socially accepted Angel in The House, and its opposite, the New Woman, which emerged at the *fin de siècle*, both stereotypes are present in *Carmilla*, embodied in the two contrasting female protagonists. The context helps to understand the repression suffered by the New Woman, a repression that accelerated even more women's determination to achieve their rights.

In *Carmilla*, contemporary fears and anxieties about the threat posed by the New Woman are transposed to a Gothic fantasy, a vampire narrative which emphasizes the weak spots of patriarchy and the impending failure to preserve a patriarchal view of procreation and, more specifically, the traditional and treasured conception of women as delicate human beings subordinated to male control and whose main virtue was supposed to be their fertility. This *novella* transmits rejection towards the transformation of gender roles, thereby culminating in Carmilla's spectacular and cruel murder at the hands of the male characters in the narrative. On the other hand, there is also some ambivalence as for the potentially lasting influence of what the vampire Carmilla represents.

In fact, it could be said that socio-cultural changes and transformations in the consideration of women throughout the twentieth century finally proved Carmilla right.

Works Cited

- Brock, Marilyn. *From Wollstonecraft to Stoker*. Jefferson (N.C.): McFarland, 2009.
- Costello-Sullivan, Kathleen. "Introduction". *Sheridan Le Fanu, Carmilla: A Critical Edition*. Ed. Kathleen Costello-Sullivan. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2013. xvii-xxvi.
- Dijkstra, Bram. *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Harman, Barbara Leah, and Susan Meyer. *The New Nineteenth Century*. 1st ed. New York: Garland, 1996.
- Hernández, Ana María. "Ambigüedad y dualidad en *Carmilla* de J. S. Le Fanu". *Göteborgs universitets publikationer*. 2008: 67-82. Accessed 3 Jan. 2018 <<https://core.ac.uk/display/16315417>>
- Hogan, Anne, and Andrew Bradstock. *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture*. New York, N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1998.
- Kranen, Laura. "The Evolution of the Female Role in Nineteenth-Century Vampire Literature." Bachelor's Thesis. Utrecht University, 2017.
- Ledger, Sally. "The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism". *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*. Eds. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 22-45.
- Le Fanu, Sheridan. *Carmilla: A Critical Edition* (1872). Ed. Kathleen Costello-Sullivan. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2013.
- Morris, Virginia B. *Double Jeopardy: Women Who Kill in Victorian Fiction*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990.
- Nead, Lynda. *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990.

Patmore, Coventry. "The Angel in the House". *The Nineteenth Century English Novel*.

2011. Department of English, Brooklyn College. Accessed 15 March 2018.

<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/index.html>

Schram, Gunnhildur. "The Progressing Female: The Development of the Female through

Vampire Fiction". Bachelor's Degree. Háskóli Íslands, 2014.

Smith, Andrew. *Victorian Demons*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004.