

Sexual Identity, Foreignness, and the Gothic Vampire;
The Racialization of Homosexuality in *Carmilla*

In *Carmilla*, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu reveals 19th century British anxieties on race and sexuality, especially in relation to one another. The positionality of Carmilla, Le Fanu's primary antagonist, as a racialized "other" within the narrative, is indicative of British concerns regarding the possible corruption of English women, whose purity, chasteness, and moral aptitude were considered to be threatened by the influence of highly sexualized foreign figures. In *Carmilla*, this is seen through the lens of homosexuality, discourse around which has been historically racialized. Le Fanu employs heavy description of naturalistic imagery, and makes repeated reference to Carmilla's association with mystical, animalistic, and sexual elements in an Orientalized conflation of her alterity and sexual desires. In this way, *Carmilla* represents 19th century British society's fears of sexual corruption and discrimination of non-Western civilization and social codes.

Set in the forests of Styria, present-day Austria, the story depicts British protagonists within a Central European background. The cultural landscape of the Styrian geography bears significant resemblance to the Eastern part of the European continent. This is emphasized through associations such as "You have heard, no doubt, of the appalling superstition that prevails in Upper and Lower Styria, in Moravia, Silesia, in Turkish Servia, in Poland, even in Russia; the superstition, so we must call it, of the vampire" (Le Fanu, 144). Within the narrative, Carmilla takes on the role of protagonist Laura's character foil, contrasting Laura's bright, active, and chaste disposition with her mystery, languidness, and sexual deviancy. Described as "a beautiful young lady, with golden hair and large blue eyes" (Le Fanu, 101), Laura fits perfectly into the Victorian mold of the *angel in the house*. Though residing in Styria, she is undoubtedly English in her upbringing, which can be seen through passages such as, "My father is English, and I bear an English name..." (Le Fanu,

87), which connect her to her British heritage, and “My mother, A Styrian lady, died in my infancy” (Le Fanu, 89), which separates her from her Styrian one. A highly domesticized figure, Laura spends much of her time in the comfort of her father’s estate and displays little interest in leaving the confines of her comfortable and peaceful abode. She describes Styria as a “lonely and primitive place, where everything is so marvellously cheap”, and by doing so both echoes traditional colonial discourse regarding the Eastern hemisphere and differentiates herself from the region’s native population.

The narrative places emphasis on the natural surroundings of the region, with lengthy descriptions such as “We sat down on a rude bench, under a group of magnificent lime trees. The sun was setting with all its melancholy splendor behind the sylvan horizon, and the stream that flows beside our home, and passes under the steep old bridge I have mentioned, wound through many a group of noble trees, almost at our feet, reflecting in its current the fading crimson of the sky” (Le Fanu, 92) and “Over the sward and low grounds, a thin film of mist was stealing, like smoke, marking the distances with a transparent veil; and here and there we could see the river faintly flashing in the moonlight” (Le Fanu, 93), thereby recreating the natural magnificence of the Styrian landscape. However, in the same vein as colonial discourse, there is little appreciation for the inhabitants of the region, who are depicted as being unintelligent, highly superstitious, and largely primitive, as is seen through statements such as “These poor people infect one another with their superstitions, and so repeat in imagination the images of terror that have infested their neighbours” (Le Fanu, 109).

In addition to naturalistic imagery the narrative is also riddled with elements of mysticism, an ideology which was given little value in 19th century British discourse. Laura senses this appreciation for the mystical in her governess, describing, “Mademoiselle De Lafontaine – in right

of her father, who was a German, assumed to be psychological, metaphysical, and something of a mystic – now declared that when the moon shone with a light so intense it was well known that it indicated a special spiritual activity” (Le Fanu, 94), and continuing, “‘The moon, this night,’ she said, ‘is full of odyllic and magnetic influence – and see, when you look behind you at the front of the schloss, how all its windows flash and twinkle with that silvery splendor, as if unseen hands had lighted up the rooms to receive fairy guests” (Le Fanu, 94). This theme of mysticism continues in reference to the figure of the vampire, which is antithetical to Laura’s Christian roots. In fact, religion is another way in which Laura and Carmilla are differentiated, and of Carmilla, Laura states, “If it had not been that it had casually come out in one of our careless talks that she had been baptized, I should have doubted her being a Christian. Religion was a subject on which I had never heard her speak a word” (Le Fanu, 115), thereby furthering Carmilla’s alterity within the household of her generous new hosts, a sphere of blissful domesticity and peace spoiled by Carmilla’s foreign presence. Therefore, in this way, both nature and mysticism are heavily associated with foreignness through the course of the novel.

In “Female Masculinity”, Jack Halberstam describes the 19th century Scottish court case, *Woods and Piries v. Cuming Gordon*, in which Jane Cumming, a student at the school accuses Marianne Woods and Jane Pirie of sexual indecency. Halberstam writes, “The peculiarities of this court case are immensely complicated because the accusing girl was Anglo-Indian, and in both the court transcripts and Lillian Falderman’s recreation of them, the girl is repeatedly Orientalized and depicted as suspiciously sexually knowledgeable” (Halberstam, 62-63). This can be seen especially when “Lord Meadowbank comments that Jane Cumming must have obtained such information from her ‘Hindoo female domestics’” (Halberstam, 64), and by doing so perpetuates the conflation of sexual and racial identities. Meadowbank and others, through such discourse,

were not only questioning Cummings' supposed sexual awareness, but also making a statement on the perceived asexuality of English women, who they considered to be too chaste and too pure to be capable of the kinds of sexual acts Cummings was accusing them of. Halberstam writes, "Throughout the case, judges and prosecutors accuse Jane Cumming of importing sexual knowledge from India and tainting pure British women with her accusations. British women, the insist, practice asexual romantic friendships and know nothing of dildos or enlarged clitorides" (Halberstam, 64). In this way, whereas women of color are subjected to intense sexualization, White English women are stripped of their sexuality, leaving no room for any kind of middle ground on the sexual spectrum. Through this treatment, "the judges feel secure in the innocence of British womanhood by displacing all perverse sexual activity onto foreign imaginations" (Halberstam, 65), thereby following in the same vein as generalized xenophobic behavior, which targets foreigners as scapegoats for any and all social maladies.

Carmilla's Orientalization is most evident in descriptions of her exaggerated sexuality, her animalization, and her association with elements of nature and mysticism. Upon arriving at the schloss she is given a room containing a tapestry of Cleopatra, a powerful female figure who has historically faced immense sexualization. Laura describes, "Our visitor lay in one of the handsomest rooms in the schloss...There was a somber piece of tapestry opposite the foot of the bed, representing Cleopatra with the asps to her bosom" (Le Fanu, 100). The symbolism of such an association, linking Carmilla to Cleopatra, furthers the precision of her sexualized and racialized portrayal. The narrative resolves that Carmilla's attractive feminine appearance is deceptive of her true character, she is not "normal", not British, and not morally correct. Laura's representations of her describe her physical beauty, "Her complexion was rich and brilliant; her features were small and beautifully formed; her eyes large, dark, and lustrous; her hair was quote wonderful, I never

saw hair so magnificently thick and long when it was down about her shoulders... It was exquisitely fine and soft, and in colour a rich very dark brown” (Le Fanu, 103). Such depictions of Carmilla indicate the ways in which she is exoticized in the narrative, her dark hair and eyes contrasting to Laura’s light ones. This continues on in other instances, “She sighed, and her fine dark eyes gazed passionately on me” (Le Fanu, 101), furthering Carmilla’s foreignized portrayal.

The narrative also depicts other racialized figures, such as the woman in the carriage and the servants, all bearing association to Carmilla. Le Fanu writes, “Then she described a hideous black woman, with a sort of coloured turban on her head, who was gazing all the time from the carriage window, nodding and grinning derisively towards the ladies, with gleaming eyes and large white eye-balls, and her teeth set as if in fury” (Carmilla, 98-99), presenting a racially charged portrayal of a character who never returns to the narrative, and whose only purpose is to bear association to Carmilla. There exists also a sense of animalization within this scene, especially in terms of the Carmilla’s servants. Laura states, “‘Did you remark what all ill-looking pack of men the servants were?’ asked Madame” “‘Yes,’ said my father, who had just come in, ‘ugly, hang-dog looking fellows, as I ever beheld in my life’” (Le Fanu, 99). Such use of characters within the narrative continues on throughout the story and can be seen later when the hunchback is introduced, another figure whose only purpose seems to be in their interactions with Carmilla. Le Fanu describes, “It was the figure of a hunchback, with the sharp lean features that generally accompany deformity. He wore a pointed black beard, and he was smiling from ear to ear, showing his white fangs” (Le Fanu, 107). Such descriptions of all aforementioned characters are significant because of their usage of diction and imagery in associating human figures with animalistic features. Finally, animalization can be seen in Carmilla’s transformation into a dark vampiric creature, “a sooty-black animal that resembled a monstrous cat” (Le Fanu, 115), which shows the

narrative's transitioning from metaphoric animalism to portraying the literal transformation of a human into an animal. Therefore, Carmilla's associations with sexual, mystical, and animalistic imagery furthers her Orientalized image within the narrative and purports ideas of her sexual deviancy as being a cause of her foreign background.

Laura, on the other hand, on account of her Englishness and her status as a lady, is represented to be a complete victim in the situation, having little control over her response to Carmilla's advances. Le Fanu portrays Laura's absence of sexuality through her lack of initiation within her relationship with Carmilla. Laura describes, "Now the truth is, I felt rather unaccountably towards the beautiful stranger. I did feel, as she said, 'drawn towards her,' but there was also something of repulsion" (Le Fanu, 101), indicating that her feelings for Carmilla seem not to be sexualized, but rather, a kind of platonic desire for intimacy combined with a sort of repugnance at thought of said intimacy evolving into anything further, which can be seen in "'Are we related,' I used to ask; 'what can you mean by all this? I remind you perhaps of someone whom you love; but you do must know, I hate it; I don't know you – I don't know myself when you look so and talk so'" (Le Fanu, 105). Laura is also victimized in her lack of agency and seeming inability to resist Carmilla's influence. She states, "From these foolish embraces, which were not of very frequent occurrence, I must allow, I used to wish to extricate myself; but my energies seemed to fail me. Her murmured words sounded like a lullaby in my ear, and soothed my resistance into a trance, from which I only seemed to recover myself when she withdrew her arms" (Le Fanu, 104). This is imperative because it gives Laura a complete lack of control over the situation, therefore absolving her of any perceived sin. Finally, Laura is maintained to be as proper and as appropriate as any English woman was expected to be. Even in scenes such as, "'Now you can satisfy yourself,' said the doctor. 'You won't mind you papa's lowing your dress a very little. It is necessary, to

detect a symptom of the complaint under which you have been suffering” and “I acquiesced. It was only an inch or two below the edge of my collar” (Le Fanu, 124), Laura’s propriety is protected to the utmost extent, differentiating her from Carmilla in almost every regard.

In conclusion, *Carmilla* is a glimpse into 19th century British anxiety about foreign corruption of English morality. The relationship between Carmilla and Laura is undoubtedly homoerotic, depicting the intimacy present within the relationship shared by the two women, especially as seen through Carmilla’s use of language towards Laura, who she refers to as hers within different parts of the story and initiates close physical contact within the narrative. *Carmilla* depicts the intimate link between sexual and racial identity that was purported during this time, and indicates the extreme sexualization of women of color, in comparison to the asexualization of white women. Therefore, maintaining the need for intersectionality when examining the impacts of homosexual identification through history. By absolving white women of any sense of wrongdoing through negating their ability to engage in acts deemed sexually deviant, they gain a sense of privilege through society’s unwillingness to admit their ability to seek and pursue sexual gratification. On the other hand, women of color, and racialized figures such as Carmilla, bear the brunt of society’s resistance to sexual liberation, forcing them into intense sexualization, and consequently punishing them for any sexual response. In the end, *Carmilla* depicts inconsistencies in regarding sexuality in accordance with racial differences and posits itself at the intersection of racial and sexual identity in 19th century British imagination.

Works Cited:

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Halberstam, Judith. "Female Masculinity." 1988, doi:10.1215/9780822378112.