

The Victorian Gothic and the Sanctity of the White Woman:
As Seen Through *Carmilla* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Victorian Gothic texts such as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Carmilla* by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu are reflective of social anxieties concerning homosexuality and the rise of the 'New Woman'. Both works indicate how Victorian attitudes around gender contribute to differences in the treatment of homosexuality among men and homosexuality among women. Depictions of British femininity, as seen through discourse around Laura, Sybil, and Hetty, in both novels illustrate Victorian society's resistance in acknowledging (homo)sexual desire within British women. Whereas discourse around male homosexuality was relatively normalized during this time, there was widespread rejection of the sexual liberation of English women, especially those of higher status, leading to deep anxiety over the social phenomenon of the 'New Woman' and racialized notions of female sexuality. In both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Carmilla*, neither male homosexuality nor the 'New Woman' are spared from criticism or critique and consequently neither Dorian nor Carmilla are afforded any relief in their characterizations, yet, the sexual purity of the White woman is preserved and sanctified within both works, therefore indicating how both novels promote infantilized depictions of British women, erasing their sexual agency and capacity for desire.

According to Carol Margaret Davison in her text "The Victorian Gothic and Gender", "The Victorian era witnessed unprecedented socio-political changes that radically affected and destabilised the traditional gender roles and relations undergirding marriage and motherhood" (Davison, 125). These changes can be observed through increased unease relating to homosexuality and to the idea of the 'New Woman'. Davison writes, "Jointly, New Women and homosexuals/Decadents were considered dreaded subversives who raised the spectre of eugenic

dangers and social degeneration (Dowling, 1979: 445, 447)” and therefore “The word ‘invert’, which means ‘to turn upside down’, was employed in relation to both. (Davison 136). The ‘New Woman’ was not only differentiated by her dress, her opinions, and her mannerisms, she was also most often depicted as a deeply racialized figure and a threat which “beckoned a “new ‘race’ of sexually voracious, power-hungry and intellectual ‘New Women’ who insisted on a new sexual contract, and ‘the purportedly foreign “abomination” of same-sex desire”” (Davison, 135-136).

The racialization of homosexuality is established in “Female Masculinity” when Jack Halberstam describes the 19th century Scottish court case, *Woods and Piries v. Cumming 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. 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.

The symbolism of the New Woman can be attributed to *Carmilla* as Le Fanu’s eponymous antagonist seems embody this role. Representing protagonist Laura’s character foil, Carmilla

contrasts 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. Within the narrative, Laura, on account of her Englishness and her status as a lady, is victimized in her relationship with Carmilla and is depicted as 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. Laura's propriety is protected to the utmost extent, differentiating her from Carmilla in almost every regard.

Davison emphasizes, "One can only imagine the impact that 'Carmilla' (1872), J. Sheridan Le Fanu's vampire tale of female same-sex desire, had on its audience given its unmentionable – and, for some, inconceivable – subject matter and its explosion of such accepted theories as physician William Acton's that 'the majority of women . . . are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind' (quoted in Adams, 1999: 126)" (Davison, 136). This indicates how *Carmilla* is a glimpse into 19th century British anxiety on the sexual corruption of English women. 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. Carmilla's role as a 'New Woman' is indicative of British concerns regarding the possible corruption of English ladies, whose purity, chasteness, and moral aptitude were considered to be threatened by the influence of highly sexualized foreign figures, and by New Women such as *Carmilla* who "were considered a serious threat to the status quo" (Davison, 138).

Whereas in *Carmilla*, homosexuality is racialized, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* it is seen through a gendered perspective. The novel's themes of homoeroticism illustrate Victorian society's alarm regarding male homosexuality, which society found morally unacceptable yet, unlike female homosexuality, was spoken about and therefore recognized. Published in the years following Great Britain's 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, which outlawed "gross indecency"

between men, the novel centers around the relationships between three members of British society, the painter Basil Hallward, the eponymous Dorian Gray, and Lord Henry Wotton. The narrative, as a result of the time period in which it was written as well as associations of its author Oscar Wilde, is often tied to issues of legality and criminality. Thomas writes, “nineteenth-century British laws – particularly by the fin de siècle – became obsessed with sodomy (the Labouchère Amendment), male cross-dressing (the infamous court case against Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park) and cross-class homosexual liaisons (The Cleveland Street Affair)” (Thomas, 142).

The novel is centered on the relationship between Dorian and Lord Henry Wotton, whose hedonistic ideology has irreversible impact upon the youth. Frankel, in his introduction to the novel writes, “The very name *Dorian* is a veiled reference to “Dorian” or “Greek” love-to the Ancient Greek tradition...of an older male “lover” taking a younger male under his charge” (Frankel, 09). Although Dorian is of a person of status in his community, Lord Henry is much older, and therefore considerably more established and more privileged than him; therefore, Lord Henry has a certain corruptive influence which even Dorian himself is aware of. This is seen through, “He would not resist temptation. He would not see Lord Henry any more, would not, at any rate, listen to those subtle poisonous theories that in Basil Hallward’s garden had first stirred within him the passion for impossible things” (Wilde, 122). Unlike Laura, who resists Carmilla’s influence and who is represented as a victim to Carmilla’s advances, Dorian does not do much to resist Lord Henry’s ideological corruption. In fact, shortly following the scene where he resolves to distance himself from Lord Henry, the man convinces Dorian “But don’t waste your tears over Sybil Vane. She was less real than they are” (Wilde, 133), thereby assuaging Dorian of his guilt and giving him resolve to pursue “Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins” (Wilde, 135), all to his heart’s content. Unlike Carmilla, who was awarded supernatural

powers of persuasion, Lord Henry's only strengths are human ones. He is able to transform Dorian from a man of "a simple and a beautiful nature" (Wilde, 70) to a beautiful monster, employing only his philosophy propensity and rhetorical skills to do so.

Furthermore, there is significance difference in how the novel treats its male and female characters. Considering Laura's characterization in *Carmilla*, Wilde's portrayal of Englishwomen is likewise reflective of a particular discourse. Whereas Dorian is described to have had many undesirable relationships with other young men; all of which seem to end badly, as is seen through Basil's remarks "Why is it that every young man you take up seems to come to grief, to go to the bad at once?", his mindset is noticeably different when it comes to his relationship with Hetty. Dorian's descriptions of Hetty, "She was simply a girl in a village. But I really loved her" (Wilde, 208), are a brief respite from his moral wretchedness; his resolution in leaving her, "I won't ruin this girl. I won't bring her to shame" and "I determined to leave her as fowerlike as I had found her" indicate a different attitude towards women. Hetty is depicted similarly to Sybil Vane as Dorian considers both women too pure for him and describes not wishing to corrupt either of them. This indicates how the novel treats English womanhood.

Wilde's women seem to be merely ornamental, added furnishings for the narrative, their value is aestheticized, and they are tragically beautiful but not much more. Even Lord Henry, who has little regard for women as intellectual creatures, misses his wife after she leaves him, "I was very fond of her. The house is rather lonely without her" (Wilde, 210). Hetty as the simple village girl, Sybil as the simple actress, both women are so pure, so incorruptible, that Dorian is unable and unwilling to tarnish them. Compared to the many men who Dorian has been friends with and who have been ruined through association with him, to Basil who Dorian murders without care or regret, and to Alan Cummings who he blackmails presumably based on knowledge of a secret of

some sexual nature, the women of the novel remain untouchable. Like Laura, their reputations are spared, they are victimized but remain pristine. They are indicative of how Victorian Gothic narratives ensures that British femininity become unchallengeable and British women sanctified.

In conclusion, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Carmilla* illustrate the gendered and racialized aspects of discourse around homosexuality. Both are indicative of how homosexuality and the idea of the 'New Woman' were considered to unsettle longstanding conceptions of heteronormativity and patriarchy in society. The differences in treatment of male versus female homosexuality illustrate the rigidity of identity imposed upon British women, indicating their incorruptible and immaculate natures. The British women is iconized as the moral fiber of society and therefore her role becomes settled in a way which is not easily undone. Unlike the feminist fiction which is written to liberate such women from their socially imposed constraints, in the two novels observed, there is no effort made to do such. In this way, characters such as Laura, Hetty, and Sybil indicate how society mandates British femininity to be preserved above all else.

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