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The Foremother of Vampires

Carmilla and its palimpsestic shadows



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*"The proof of evolution lies in those adaptations
that arise from improbable foundations."*

(Stephen Jay Gould)

Foreword

As suggested by Dennis Cutchins in *Pedagogy of Adaptation*,¹ one of the greatest benefits of teaching a piece of literature along with its adaptation is the movement of having, at least, two texts in mind concomitantly. For instance, the novella *Carmilla* (1817),² and its adaptation, the homonymous webseries (2014),³ are two distinct and independent media configurations since one survives without the other. One can perfectly enjoy the YouTube content without realizing that it was inspired by a literary object written almost 200 years before. However, the comparative practice, especially under the light of Intermedial Studies, is very likely to enhance one's cognitive capacity. Beyond breaking the infamous fidelity fallacy, the investigation of the same narrative told in different media contributes to a deeper comprehension of literary elements. Meanwhile, the understanding of how different media have different affordances leads to a wider perception of what was lost, or gained, in a semiotic system translation. By offering new perspectives to the same narrative, the dialogism between the source and target media allows the adaptation to add value to its source of inspiration, and vice-versa, hence providing a wider understanding of both.

¹ CUTCHINS; RAW; WELSH, *The pedagogy of adaptation*, 2010.

² LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007.

³ KINDATV, *Carmilla | Season 1*, 2014.

One of the premises of my post-doctoral research project,⁴ which aimed at disseminating Intermedial Studies at the undergraduate level, was delineated during Maria Viana Pinto Coelho's advisory. The resulting monograph, submitted for the obtainment a bachelor's degree, received an outstanding review by the designated committee and was evaluated with a straight A (100 marks). Even dedicating my research to the studies of intermediality for almost two decades, I did learn a lot throughout her advisory process, not only about the lineage of female vampires, but also about the possibilities of taking full advantage of my research in my teaching practice, and vice-versa. As a young adult in the early 1990s, I myself would enjoy the adventures of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but I would never consider doing such investigation on my own. Thus, while Coelho was formally initiated in academic research, I was introduced to a whole new universe full of empowered female creatures transiting in a wide variety of media. As a result, what started as (simply) a highly rewarding two-way route advisory, became a collaborative process culminating in this volume that we are both more than pleased to share the results with you.

Miriam de Paiva Vieira

⁴ The Project entitled "Pesquisa e(m) ensino sobre intermedialidade" was held in 2017/2018 and had support from CNPq, Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico - Brazil (process number: 168942/2017-8).

8 . The Foremother of Vampires

Introduction

Carmilla – the seminal novella by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu⁵ – might be described as Vampire Fiction’s long-lost Foremother: her name might not often figure in the subgenre’s scholarly birth certificates, but her genes are there all the same. These genes carry in them a particular approach to several themes which have long intersected with the figure of the vampire in significant ways: gender; youth; love; and sexuality. Such notions have been particularly powerful in works of the last few decades, as perceptions of the character began to move from *villain of horror to tragic hero of romance*. The past 20 years have seen the vampire thrust into the spotlight of pop-culture and public consciousness with such pervasiveness that the trend will, presumably, have perceptible effects not only on future fictional works but also – and perhaps more importantly – on the audiences that experienced it. *Carmilla*’s role in all this is not to be underestimated, and her virtual anonymity should not be confused with unimportance: she is, as this book will hopefully argue, situated at the dawn of a tradition in Vampire Fiction which can be observed to this day.

The following text will delve into three objects of study, offering a close reading of each and using an intermedial perspective in order to connect them to a larger trend in Vampire Fiction. Hopefully, this

⁵ Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu was born in 1814 in the city of Dublin. He was among the first to write Horror during the Victorian era’s Gothic movement, playing an important part in the advancement of supernatural tales at the time. Other than *Carmilla*, he is most well-known for works such as *Uncle Silas* and *The House by the Churchyard*.

volume can add some small measure of insight into the implications of these objects within Vampire Studies, and also into the ways Intermediality and Adaptation Studies might be used as a tool for better understanding the cultural implications of a given narrative. Firstly, I'd like to delineate the structure of the coming text, offering some context and laying out some central points to be kept in mind throughout the text.

The opening chapter will explore the proposed notions of Foremother and Forefather in the context of Vampire Fiction, as informed by Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871)⁶ and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897)⁷. This first part of the text should provide valuable insight into the Foremother's implications within the subsequent investigated works. In turn, the second chapter will delve into a detailed analysis of our first and central object: Le Fanu's novella. The aim here will be to identify and examine the aspects that make up *Carmilla's* essence of subversive femaleness – the four cardinal elements that lie at the crux of its story: (1) a thwarted expectation of victimhood; (2) a *Bildungsroman* plot; (3) a vampire/human romance; and (4) the presence of queer sexuality. By understanding the ways in which these points manifest in the Foremother's plot, we can then begin to chart their progression through the subsequent works. Thereupon, we reach our third chapter and second object of study: Joss Whedon's acclaimed television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997).⁸ Granted, this might seem like a strange jump. *Buffy* is, nevertheless, extremely fertile ground for academic discussion – as proven by the perhaps surprisingly prolific line of research known as Buffy Studies, an entire field largely devoted to the study of gender, queerness and other issues within the series. Whedon's show was highly influential in the late 90's and early 00's, and the effects it produced can be easily observed in contemporary pieces of Vampire Fiction. After exploring the ways in which *Buffy* exists – which it unescapably does – under *Carmilla's* palimpsestic influence

⁶ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007.

⁷ STOKER, *Dracula*, 1987.

⁸ BUFFY the Vampire Slayer, Joss Whedon, 2000.

10 . The Foremother of Vampires

while still casting its own shadow, we then arrive at the book's last chapter, and object of discussion: the webseries *Carmilla* (2014).⁹ This acknowledged adaptation of our Foremother captures her essence by changing nearly everything about her, save what really matters. The examination of how essence and cardinal elements manifest here as well – like in the two predecessors – will give us a glimpse into how they have been altered as a result of the compounding influences of the other analyzed works and, moreover, of a new cultural environment.

⁹ KINDATV, *Carmilla* | Season 1, 2014.

Of Foremothers and Forefathers: Subversion and Conservatism in Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

With the help of The Oxford Dictionary's definition of "Foremother" – "a female ancestor or precursor of something"¹⁰ – we might divide that term, which I do not use incidentally, into three separate and equally important parts: femaleness; biological ancestry; and precursory position in a larger trend. It is with these three points in mind that I will analyze *Carmilla's* impact on Vampire Fiction, attempting to answer two central questions: How have the premise and the cardinal elements of Le Fanu's work been adapted by significant successors – particularly from the last 20 years? And what kind of messages and ideas might be interpreted through their symbolic value?

It is important, first, to note that when I speak of Vampire Fiction as a subgenre I am referring specifically to the fictional narratives which share the figure of the vampire as a character – excluding, then, partly due to the limited length and scope of this present work, the folkloric tales which originated them. These written, fictional narratives, which first gained momentum during the 19th century's Gothic movement and still hold great power over the public's imagination to this day, have circulated through different medias – such as literature, cinema and television – and intersected with other genres – such as Horror, Fantasy and Romance. *Carmilla* emerges at the onset of the subgenre and holds great importance to its development due to a number of reasons: its context of

¹⁰ FOREMOTHER. In: OXFORD English Dictionary, 2019.

production; its take on gender and other issues; and its connection to other influential works.

First published in 1871 as a serial in the London based literary magazine *The Dark Blue*, with its final installment published in 1872, *Carmilla* was reprinted later that same year in Le Fanu's collection of short stories *In a Glass Darkly*. Characterized by most as a novella due to its comparatively smaller size of 88 pages, the book is a clear example of Gothic literature, with its opulent castle and sinister mood. In its use of the vampire as a fictional character, the book is, in many ways, a pioneer. Notably, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) – arguably the subgenre's most well-known story – would only come a full 26 years later. With the latter, *Carmilla* shares a meaningful intramedial¹¹ relationship that could, in some parts, be explained by the borrowing from corresponding folkloric sources – as with all early Vampire Fiction – while also being indicative, in other parts, of a larger connection and a more purposeful rapport.

The first group of similarities to be explored is somewhat less telling, but still worth noting since it lies in Le Fanu's and Stoker's versions of the vampire as a fictional creature. In these early days of the subgenre, the canon surrounding the vampire and its defining features was – obviously – still being constructed. This meant that authors had a wider range of possibilities when creating their characters so that they tended to vary significantly from one work to the next. *Carmilla* and *Dracula*'s similar take on the creature was partly responsible for establishing and furthering many of the vampire's now classical characteristics. Firstly, the vampires they created share that similar set of now basic supernatural traits: both are capable of superhuman strength; they do not age or die unless subjected to staking and beheading; their canine teeth are sharpened; the capacity to place victims under a kind of supernatural thrall is also present. *Dracula*'s abilities parallel *Carmilla*'s in other, more specific ways as well: both are capable of appearing at will; walking through seemingly

¹¹ Rajewsky uses the notions of intramedial reference and relationships to offer, in the context of Intermediality and Adaptation Studies, a broader conception for the idea of intertextuality. (RAJEWSKY. *Intermediality, intertextuality, and remediation: A literary perspective on intermediality*, 2005).

sealed passages; enduring sunlight; and transforming into animals. But the relationship – in many ways instrumental to demonstrating the novella’s position as a Foremother – goes far beyond that. *Dracula* borrows themes, plot points and characters from its predecessor and employs them to attain very contrasting outcomes.

The connection between *Carmilla* and *Dracula* is clear to the eyes of an attentive reader, as parallels are abundant. Both stories are structured as the first-person accounts of their narrators’ encounters with a vampire. As such, both are fictional tales “as if”¹² they were the true written records of someone’s recollections – an intra and intermedial narrative strategy which works, in this particular case, to give the stories a greater sense of reality and plausibility, as well as to ground them even further in the historical context from whence they came. This aforementioned format is used to construct the same basic plot: Le Fanu and Stoker tell tales of young English women being targeted by vampiric foreigners, and the hunt that thus ensues. Furthermore, both books share settings in their isolated Eastern European castles, as well as characters in the figures of the aristocratic vampire (Countess/Count), the doctor of the occult (Hesselius/Van Helsing), and the studious and steadfast vampire hunter (Vordenburg/Van Helsing). As the plot unfolds, the vampire’s success in taking the life of a first victim (Mlle Rheinfeldt/Lucy) is followed by the same attempt on a second one (Laura/Mina) – and both sets of victims share friendly ties. The turning process they experience takes the shape of a strange, mysterious illness which acts primarily during sleep and often manifests in the form of cryptic dreams of startling verisimilitude. The technique used for the vampire’s destruction is also unchanged: while the creature sleeps, a stake is driven through the heart and the head is severed from the body. Stoker, like Le Fanu before him, included in his story mentions of sleepwalking; old chapels as resting places; and near confrontations foiled by escape. Thematically and symbolically, both deal with the vampire as an intrinsically sexual being: its penetrating bite is made to represent a reproductive, sexual encounter and its death

¹² RAJEWSKY. Intermediality, intertextuality, and remediation: A literary perspective on intermediality, 2005, p. 54.

(the one it brings as well as the one it suffers) takes on a noticeably orgasmic quality. Finally – but not lastly, since this list of parallels is by no means exhaustive – gender relations play a central part in both narratives.

It is through this latter resemblance that we can find that elemental difference which colors all of *Carmilla* and *Dracula's* points of convergence in opposite hues: whereas one focuses on women and constructs itself as a fundamentally female narrative, the other stands in opposition by focusing on men and constructing itself as a fundamentally male narrative. This aspect – femaleness – is the first of the three parts which, together, construct the term Foremother. While this femaleness of *Carmilla's* is a crucial part of the novella's subversive premise and thus can certainly be perceived on its own, the intramedial exercise of comparing her with *Dracula* is valuable as far as it helps us to highlight by way of contrast. This essential disparity among such superficial likeness might assist us in pinpointing how that femaleness manifests and to what connotative purpose.

Perhaps the most important aspect working to establish this contrast lies in books' opposing focal points. Although their basic plots are largely corresponding, the perspectives given are quite distant: while *Carmilla* focuses solely on Laura and her relationship with the female vampire – treating its band of male vampire hunters as a decidedly peripheral concern – *Dracula* shifts the center of the action to the group of men Christopher Craft¹³ baptized as the Crew of Light. Laura's unreliable narration of events – composed solely of her correspondence with another woman – is anchored mostly on the inner feelings and emotions that mark her ambiguous, personal experience, and Le Fanu's novella is more akin to a character study or an exploration of a female relationship than anything else. In this sense, it is a story grounded on the private sphere both in terms of the psychological tone of its female narration and in the physical domain it – like its protagonist – is confined to: the household. Stoker, meanwhile, seems to have constructed his version of the same baseline

¹³ CRAFT, "Kiss Me with those Red Lips": Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, 1984.

plot around the kind of rationality and objectivity stereotypically associated with a male perspective of the world, adding to his book documents, ship logs, legal requests and medical annotations that were, in the Victorian era, a man's purview. Here, narrative focus – and, arguably, sympathy – is moved from a female character to a male hero and the story of a vampire targeting a young woman becomes a far-reaching adventure which freely perambulates through the public sphere that is man's domain: streets, ships, offices. *Dracula* appears to be *Carmilla* turned male in so many ways: tone, writing style, point of view, setting, and even title.

This is the first and most glaring opposition to be observed between the books: the different genders of their titles and thus, of their titular characters. As Le Fanu's novella is reversed into Stoker's novel, vampiress becomes vampire and Countess becomes Count: Carmilla was a female vampire at a time when the subgenre was almost exclusively populated by male ones – *Dracula*, on the other hand, is the "Vampire King",¹⁴ portrayed throughout the novel as a paternal figure to all vampires thereafter. Stoker's Count – like his book as a whole – seems to work as a sort of response to Le Fanu's Countess of Karnstein. The range of their vampiric abilities, as discussed, is for the most part equivalent, as are the turning processes they set forth and the possible means of their destruction. Differences, however, serve to reinforce the opposition between their assigned genders. For example: Carmilla has the preternatural capability of turning herself into a large cat – sometimes described as a panther – while *Dracula* holds a similar power with the substitution of the cat for a large wolf or dog; Carmilla disguises her powers and acts mainly within the confines of the household while *Dracula* boasts about his conquests in war and aims to leave the private sphere he has been anchored to by moving to the city of London. Stoker includes in his narrative female vampires whose appearance closely matches Le Fanu's description of Carmilla: they are young women of unearthly beauty and rich complexion. Here,

¹⁴ STOKER, *Dracula*, 1897, p. 531.

however, they are mere underlings to their King/husband/father, in a shift which delivers powerful women back to the authority of a male figure. In *Carmilla*, oppositely, it is a woman – namely Carmilla’s vampiric Mother – who has a band of male lackeys at her disposal.

Said relationship between novella and novel – which can and has proven sufficient for entire academic explorations based solely on it¹⁵ – is therefore characterized by something beyond an arguably gendered opposition of form and narrative focus. Both books place, in different ways, power and sexual agency in the hands of women thus reflecting growing concerns about the destabilization of gender norms in the late 19th century, as brought on by the emergence of the New Woman – who Stoker cites, derisively, in his novel’s eighth chapter.¹⁶ That destabilization is then followed by the male attempt to restore social order and female submission. It is in the degree of success and sympathy given to those attempts that the books establish themselves as either subversive or conservative.

As many critics – Craft¹⁷ and Senf¹⁸ among them – have argued, *Dracula* is a tale centered around the reinstatement of female sexuality to the hands of men. The unauthorized nightly visits – accompanied by penetration – Lucy receives from the Count prompt the Crew of Light to mount a vigil around her as she threatens to become like the voluptuous, sexual women seen in Dracula’s castle. They ultimately succeed by performing their own Christian, dutiful penetration: the violent pounding of the stake – a blatant phallic symbol – into Lucy by her fiancé causes her to writhe, scream and ultimately relax into a joyous contentment, as the group of men manages to subdue her into the passive, voiceless corpse Victorian society expects her to be. Mina’s purification at the novel’s end is the final proof of their success, as they manage to contain the dark forces threatening to corrupt the women that are their lawful possessions – in what is presented as the

¹⁵ For more on this, see: SIGNOROTTI, *Repossessing the Body: Transgressive Desire in "Carmilla" and "Dracula"*, 1996.

¹⁶ For more on this, see: SENF, "Dracula": Stoker's Response to the New Woman, 1982.

¹⁷ CRAFT, "Kiss Me with those Red Lips": Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, 1984.

¹⁸ SENF, "Dracula": Stoker's Response to the New Woman, 1982.

categorical victory of good against evil.

Carmilla, on the other hand, is far more ambiguous. Scholars like Marilyn Brock¹⁹ and Agnieszka Łowczanin²⁰ maintain that *Carmilla* is akin to *Dracula* because it demonizes sexual, powerful women, and that may be true. However, it might also be argued that the Victorian context of the 1872 book coupled with its ambiguous take on female gender and sexuality creates a subversion of its own. *Carmilla's* entire take on these issues is indeed based on a thwarting of the power structures which governed them at the time as even Laura acts freely throughout the novel without the interference of men – especially where it pertains to the exercise of her sexuality. While it could be suggested that the men's ultimate success in killing Carmilla represents that same reinstatement of social norms, the fact remains that Laura is not purified: as we come to learn, every woman targeted by Carmilla throughout the book will eventually become a vampire – and thus, a symbol of female power – themselves. Constrained as it was by the Victorian expectations placed upon it, *Carmilla* still manages to end its narrative with the failure of men to resubmit women to their patriarchal control. And yet, this is not presented as a defeat against good morals: readers are driven to Laura's own ambivalent feelings on the subject as Carmilla remains on the narrator's mind as an object of affection. Ultimately, Le Fanu employs this ambiguity – which will be more carefully analyzed in the next chapter – as a strategy of subversion in his story. It seems as if he could be posing his Victorian audience with a question: "look at this world of female sexuality, of queerness, of emancipation. Is it really that scary?". *Dracula*, then, is Bram Stoker's conservative, morally rigid answer to that question. As Elizabeth Signorotti so concisely puts it in the very beginning of her article on the subject:

Le Fanu allows Laura and Carmilla to usurp male authority and to bestow themselves on whom they please, completely excluding male participation in the exchange of women [...]. Stoker later responded to Le Fanu's narrative of

¹⁹ BROCK, The Vamp and The Good English Mother: Female Roles in Le Fanu's *Camilla* and Stoker's *Dracula*, 2009.

²⁰ ŁOWCZANIN, Damsels and Demons: Transgressive Females from Clarissa to Carmilla, 2013.

female empowerment by reinstating male control in the exchange of women. In effect, *Dracula* seeks to repossess the female body for the purposes of male pleasure and exchange, and to correct the reckless unleashing of female desire in Le Fanu's *Carmilla*.²¹

This question/response dynamic is further confirmed by *Dracula's Guest* (1914), a short story by Bram Stoker widely believed to be the deleted first chapter of his 1897 novel, edited for posterior publication. In it, an unnamed Englishman – presumably some earlier version of Johnathan Harker – travels to Dracula's castle by way of Styria, Austria – Le Fanu's chosen setting and Carmilla's homeland. There, he recklessly decides to visit an old, local village, long deserted after a string of deaths and rumors of vampiric activity – a place in direct parallel with the ruined village of Karnstein, where Carmilla's grave stood in the novella's thirteenth chapter. Stoker's narrator then stumbles upon a tomb whose engraved carvings indicate that therein lies the dead body of a Countess. As the Englishman catches a glimpse of the vampiress within, he – under her perverse seduction – attempts to enter her domain only to be stopped and saved by a large wolf. The story's ending leads us to presume that said wolf was, indeed, the Count himself, protecting this version of Harker from the woman's subversive influence and ensuring his participation in a narrative which is ultimately one of traditional moral and Christian triumph. It could be argued that *Dracula* is Stoker's own, similar attempt to save his English readers from the amoral, unholy clutches of *Carmilla*.

It is in this context that we might refer to *Carmilla* and *Dracula* as the starting points of two separate traditions in Vampire Fiction's take on gender. Linda Hutcheon argues that "by revealing lineages of descent, not similarities of form alone, we can understand how a specific narrative changes over time".²² Le Fanu launched a lineage centered around subversiveness and female empowerment that is still upheld by many today, and the cardinal elements which inform this premise and constitute the novella's essence – a foiled expectation of

²¹ SIGNOROTTI, *Repossessing the Body: Transgressive Desire in "Carmilla" and "Dracula"*, 1996, p. 607.

²² HUTCHEON; BORTOLOTTI, *On the origin of adaptations: rethinking fidelity discourse and "success"—biologically*, p. 445, 2007.

victimhood; a *Bildungsroman* plot; a vampire/human romance; and a queer sexuality – echo throughout these descendants in new, adapted forms which nevertheless serve the same purpose and tradition. It is as if these four elements create a sort of baseline narrative upon which descendants can expand – reflecting the changes of their times but still aiming at the same contextualized subversiveness of their ancestor. This lineage of descent, to which *Carmilla* serves as a Foremother, is the focal point of my discussions throughout this book. And through the very notion of a lineage of descent we then arrive at the second point which composes the term Foremother: biological ancestry. It is Linda Hutcheon herself who most comprehensively explores the symbolic ties between the process of cultural, intermedial adaptation found in fiction and the process of genetic, biological adaptation found in nature. As she affirms in her text:

both adaptations are understandable as processes of replication. Stories, in a manner parallel to genes, replicate; the adaptations of both evolve with changing environments.²³

That is to say that, much like organisms, stories also mutate to reflect the changes in their environment in an effort to survive. Here, a different environment might mean a new medium – a book adapted into a film, for example, must undergo alterations to reflect the distinct languages of literature and cinema, and expecting the story to remain unchanged is illogical. With this, we approach one of the most important notions of Intermedial Studies: fidelity in adaptation is – as Thomas Leitch²⁴ would put it – a fallacy.

Even more significantly for these analyses, perhaps, is the idea of a different environment as a new historical, cultural context of reception. Different times will breed new audiences with new sets of expectations and beliefs, and old stories will slowly but surely begin to fade in public consciousness. The goal of adaptation, then, is to take

²³ HUTCHEON; BORTOLOTTI, On the origin of adaptations: rethinking fidelity discourse and “success”—biologically, p. 444, 2007.

²⁴ LEITCH, Twelve fallacies in contemporary adaptation theory, 2003.

the molecular essence of a story – its DNA, if you will – and replicate it while also mutating around it so that those cardinal elements may live on – a notion which harkens back to the idea of remediation as a healing process, a change which ensures survival. Here too we can see how the necessity of fidelity is a myth: a subsequent work will remediate its predecessor, but it will not supplant it – just as a child does not supplant their parent. The existence of one does not erase the existence of the other – much to the contrary. In reality, the birth of a child – however different they may be from their parents – will guarantee the perpetuation of a family’s genes and facilitate the continuance of certain traditions through time. Similarly, a successful adaptation will not only strengthen a story’s legacy and guarantee the perpetuation of its essential characteristics, but also introduce new audiences to that ancestor,²⁵ giving the work new life and facilitating its continued relevance. It is based on these ideas – put forward by Hutcheon²⁶ – that I might speak of Foremothers and Forefathers, of ancestors and decedents and even, perhaps, of daughters and sons. Hinging on her theories, I have chosen to apply such biological terms to the discussion of Vampire Fiction, since it is due to this cultural adaptation, analogous to the biological one, that many future works followed in *Carmilla*’s footsteps and continued her genetic tradition.

Through the combination of all notions explored up to this point – the relationship between Le Fanu’s novella and Stoker’s novel; the femaleness of one and the maleness of another; and the role of biological discourse and ancestry in adaptation studies – we then arrive at a significant conclusion and a summarizing metaphor. For all the ways in which *Dracula* borrows from *Carmilla*, he does not function as one of the descendants on her lineage. These two similar and yet opposing works operate as partners and rivals; mirror images birthing, together, Vampire Fiction as we know it today. A mirror image is identical in almost every way – but it is reversed so that it faces an opposite

²⁵ Hutcheon herself suggests that Intermedial Studies should substitute its use of the term “source” for the term “ancestor” (HUTCHEON; BORTOLOTTI, On the origin of adaptations, 2007, p. 446).

²⁶ HUTCHEON; BORTOLOTTI, On the origin of adaptations: rethinking fidelity discourse and “success”—biologically, 2007.

direction. In this sense, they are the Foremother and Forefather; the Eve and Adam – in that order – of Vampire Fiction and its take on gender. As in the Bible, the second isn't a descendent of the first, but a complement, a mirror, a response. Here, our Eve comes first while our Adam is the product of her reconstructed fragments: *Dracula* is built around *Carmilla's* rib bone; being nevertheless something altogether new and different. Opposing similes, they are assembled around the same structural, narrative skeleton in a foil relationship so that their similarities work mostly to highlight the very different end results. This analogy is not necessarily to say that they are the first of their kind: there are indeed predecessors in John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819),²⁷ James Malcolm Rymer and Thomas Peckett Prest's *Varney the Vampyre* (1847-1849),²⁸ and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Christabel" (1816),²⁹ for example. In fact, the mere idea of something being the first in fiction is utterly pointless: one of the main concepts proven over and over again by Intermedial Studies is that nothing is created, all is remediated from something prior – if you only look hard enough. *Carmilla* and *Dracula* may not be the first vampires ever written, but they are indeed the two linchpins which launch Vampire Fiction as we know it.

Which brings us to the last of the three points constituting the term Foremother: precursory position in a larger trend. If *Carmilla* sets up a tradition of subversiveness in Vampire Fiction's approach to gender and works as a foundational ancestor to the subgenre, then her status as a precursor might seem clear. However, the process through which other works might exist under her influence may not always be apparent – even to the authors of those works themselves. How, then, to understand the relationship they share? When thinking of the inter and intramedial relationships³⁰ found in works of a same subgenre, or tackling a same subject, we might find that a particular text cannot fit into the definition of a sustained, acknowledged engagement with

²⁷ POLIDORI, *The Vampyre: a Tale*, 1819.

²⁸ RYMER; PREST. *Varney the Vampyre: Or, The Feast of Blood*, 1847.

²⁹ COLERIDGE. *Christabel*, 1997.

³⁰ While an intermedial relationship takes place between works of different media – a novel and a film, for example an intramedial one takes place between works of a same one – two novels, for example. (RAJEWSKY, *Intermediality, intertextuality, and remediation: A literary perspective on intermediality*, 2005).

a previous one³¹ while still existing under its shadow. In these instances, concepts such “transposition” – as proposed by Irina Rajewsky³² – “appropriation” and even “adaptation” – as proposed by Julie Sanders³³ – might fall short. This is why the notion of the palimpsest, as theorized by Gerard Genette in 1982,³⁴ has an important part to play in Intermedial Studies. When thinking about the process of adaptation, it is not always useful to restrict our objects simply to direct derivations of a previous work. As Intermediality proves, stories travel through time influencing each other in larger and smaller ways – or, perhaps, more and less visible ways. Timothy Corrigan recently redefined the palimpsest as follows:

Originating in the ancient practices of writing over one manuscript with another, a palimpsest suggests a form of adaptation in which an original work may exist only as a trace or as an unseen foundation [...].³⁵

Just as a manuscript written on a page leaves physical marks on its surface even after it is scraped or washed off, so do stories leave their marks on a theme, a movement or even in all of fiction long after their first appearances. For example: writers such as Homer and William Shakespeare scratched writings of such deep consequence upon the paper of human fiction that the inerasable marks they left influence writers today whether they mean to borrow from them or not. Those marks – deeper or more superficial depending on the impact they produce – function as a type of shadow under which subsequent works will exist: visible, but immaterial – and not always traceable. The Vampire Fiction subgenre is one of those pages in the book of human creation, and every author endeavoring to write upon it will do so under the palimpsestic shadows of those who have written there before. A page such as this – newer, less scrawled on by others – allows for an easier charting of these lines. Marks will be more legible,

³¹ HUTCHEON, *A theory of adaptation*, 2006, p. 10.

³² RAJEWSKY, *Intermediality, intertextuality, and remediation: A literary perspective on intermediality*, 2005, p. 51.

³³ SANDERS, *Adaptation and appropriation*, 2015, p. 35-67.

³⁴ GENETTE, *Palimpsests: literature in the second degree*, 1997.

³⁵ CORRIGAN, *Defining Adaptation*, 2017, p. 26.

shadows will be more visible, and, arguably, the impact they can leave on subsequent works will be harder to escape.

With this in mind, it is possible to condense the concept of the palimpsest, as it is applied in this text, into two principal ideas: first, that a consequential piece of fiction will affect subsequent works regardless of an author's awareness of this process; second, that as time passes and a certain theme, trend or genre produces more stories, the influence they exert on their successors will compound – the shadows they cast will overlap. A contemporary work on a specific subject will be informed not only by its most influential or most recent predecessor, but by all who have already taken that subject on. These ideas allow us to better illustrate that common notion that complete originality does not exist: perhaps, the truth is that all art starts out, to a certain extent, as a palimpsestic result of previous arts.

Carmilla is a precursor because she left marks on Vampire Fiction which deeply informed the subgenre's take on gender and sexuality – and those who thereafter used the creature to tackle those themes left their own marks as well. This means that a contemporary piece of Vampire Fiction following *Carmilla's* lineage will exist under the shadow not only of its Foremother but also of others who have already followed in her footsteps. But if the palimpsestic shadows of consequential works do indeed overlap, then it must be true that all of *Carmilla's* descendants exist under *Dracula's* shadow as well – he is, after all, the Forefather of his own lineage in Vampire Fiction; he too used the figure of the vampire to tackle the issues of gender and sexuality.

If we say that *Dracula's* sons are those works which – marked by a maleness in their approach to gender – continue his tradition of conservatism while *Carmilla's* daughters are those works which – marked, oppositely, by a femaleness – continue her tradition of subversion, then we must also note that all of their offspring will still carry inside it some fragment of both DNAs, whatever tradition they may follow – much like humanity, according the Bible, is all descendent from both Eve and Adam. While Vampire Fiction's descendants can give new meanings to old elements and arrange them into whatever

interpretation they might be aiming at, they will still hold the genetic influence of Foremother and Forefather – existing under the palimpsestic shadows of both *Carmilla* and *Dracula* and bearing their marks.

So why should the remainder of this book place its focus on *Carmilla* and its influence, only to leave *Dracula* mostly to the side? The fact is that Stoker's novel has already been thoroughly analyzed and reanalyzed by scholars of all theoretical backgrounds. There are not many new thoughts I could add to the conversation in a study of this scope. *Carmilla*, on the other hand, has been left mostly unexplored both in general discussion and in academic discourse. It is my firm belief that a deeper understanding of *Carmilla*'s symbolic possibilities and their repercussions throughout her subgenre would be invaluable to Vampire Studies. This book is, hopefully, my humble and heartfelt contribution in that direction. By chronicling and analyzing some of the changes underwent by this palimpsestic lineage we may also, through this intermedial effort, reflect upon the changes underwent by society. This ultimate goal is the reason behind my interest in narratives from the last 20 years: not only are these stories more likely to currently exert direct influence over audiences' views of gender and sexuality, they also allow us to observe how the compounding shadows of previous works have changed Vampire Fiction as a whole.

At last, one final note: upon reaching the end of this opening chapter, a reader might wonder at my choice to ground these investigations primarily in Intermedial Studies and not in Gender Studies. It is certainly true that much of this discussion concerns itself with issues of gender, sexuality, queerness and Otherness – as informed by their symbolic associations intrinsic to the marginalized, dehumanized human that is the vampire. Nonetheless, whereas gender might often be my subject, Intermediality is my instrument and method. The adaptation of narratives mirrors the adaptation of audiences, and to chart the evolution of a story through time means, as a result, to chart the evolution of an idea through time. An intermedial perspective allows us to examine shifting social views about any narrative, and thus, any issue. By doing away with the imaginary hierarchy academia

often seems to place between different stories, media and art forms we can begin to realize that ultimately, they are not different at all: the ideas they contain see no such boundaries, and whatever those ideas might be, adaptation is – thankfully – the only certainty in life.

“Ambiguous Alternations”: Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* and the subversive value of doubt

“How romantic you are, Carmilla”, I said.

“Whenever you tell me your story, it will be made up chiefly of some one great romance”

Laura – (Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu)

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* holds, at its very premise, the subversion of an expectation: that a young woman in a dangerous situation must, presumably, be a victim. It is this subversion that drives the narrative’s intended mystery forward and shapes its thematic focus on female power. When that same premise is added to the novella’s status as a *bildungsroman* and its central themes of romance and queer sexuality, the fundamental essence lying at the heart of *Carmilla* takes shape. These four elements are the genes passed on from Foremother to offspring; the deepest palimpsestic marks and largest shadows the novella casts on the works that follow her lineage. By exploring the ways in which they manifest in the ancestor, we can better understand her genetic legacy and the subversion it contains, so that we may then chart the Foremother’s influence as all four points manifest in her descendants as well.

The novella’s story is told in a series of letters written eight years after the narrated events. This already discussed narrative structure has two principal consequences: focus is placed on women, their inner lives and the private sphere that is their domain; and, as a result, the reader accompanies the first-person, retrospective viewpoint of Laura, as the protagonist breaks the fourth wall and addresses her audience directly in a strategy which might be designed to inspire sympathy and identification with her personal impressions. Living in an isolated, Gothic castle with her father and two gouvernantes – Madame Perrodon and Mademoiselle De Lafontaine – as her only sources of

company, Laura finds her lonely existence alleviated by the sudden, mysterious arrival of Carmilla. Due to a supposedly unforeseen accident with her carriage,³⁶ the stranger is invited to stay as a guest for three months. The plot is centered around the bizarre events that follow her appearance. Before this visit from her vampiric companion, Laura's loneliness is repeatedly mentioned – as is her desire for female company. Though we are told of "lady friends"³⁷ who visit her sparsely, no mention is made of any suitors or other men in her life besides her father – a character of great relevance when one seeks to understand *Carmilla's* essence of subversive femaleness.

Laura's father is unquestionably the most prominent male character of the book, as well as the most sympathetic, and yet he lacks even a name – a trend that does not stop with him. As Amy Leal³⁸ points out, the large majority of novella's men are similarly nameless. It seems that they are treated not as people but as titles, positions: "my father",³⁹ "the baron",⁴⁰ "the clergyman",⁴¹ "the general",⁴² "the doctor"⁴³ – and when a name is given, it is generally by someone other than Laura. This choice indicates the degree to which these characters are inserted in a patriarchal power structure while simultaneously establishing that in this particular tale it is the women who hold true importance. Still on the subject of names, Leal also points a very significant fact: while Laura's paternal surname is omitted from the story, the narrative's most important plot points unfold around the surname of her deceased mother's ancestry: Karnstein. As she argues, in Victorian society women were passed from father to husband like property, carrying each time the surname of

³⁶ LE FANU, A Guest. In: LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 10-16.

³⁷ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 06.

³⁸ LEAL, Unnameable Desires in Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, 2007.

³⁹ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 6.

⁴⁰ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 80.

⁴¹ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 28.

⁴² LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 55.

⁴³ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 20.

their owner as a mark of their erased identity; but here, Le Fanu subverts this dynamic by giving women the power of maintaining one's name and individuality.⁴⁴

Laura's nameless father is also relevant due to his personality and to the role he plays in the story. His daughter describes him as "the kindest man on earth"⁴⁵ and characterizes him in a mostly likable manner, but he has little power throughout the entire narrative. Although he often adopts an arrogant tone, he has no agency to interfere with the events surrounding him – that is, when he even notices them. He is easily manipulated by the women in his life, yet quick to dismiss them: "I wish all mysteries were as easily and innocently explained as yours, Carmilla"⁴⁶ he says, laughing, after the girl successfully convinces him that her lie was actually his own idea. One might even be forgiven for saying he comes across as obtuse. When a picture cleaner brings old paintings – now restored – back to their family home, an awestruck Laura takes note of the portrait depicting her ancient, maternal ancestor – Mircalla, Countess Karnstein and Carmilla's secret self – and provides us with the following ekphrasis:⁴⁷

It was quite beautiful; it was startling; it seemed to live. It was the effigy of Carmilla! "Carmilla, dear, here is an absolute miracle. Here you are, living, smiling, ready to speak, in this picture. [...] And see, even the little mole on her throat."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ LEAL, *Unnameable Desires in Le Fanu's Carmilla*, 2007, p. 38.

⁴⁵ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 6.

⁴⁶ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 50-51.

⁴⁷ A verbal description of a visual representation, as defined by James Heffernan (1993), which W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) metaphorically connects to the female Other. (HEFFERNAN. *Museum of Words: the Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*; MITCHELL. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*).

⁴⁸ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 35.



FIGURE 1: Illustration by Finn Campbell-Notmal, from the Folio Society's edition of *In a Glass Darkly* (2011). Fonte: LE FANU, Joseph Sheridan. *In a Glass Darkly*. London: Folio Society, 2011, p. 132.

This intermedial reference to another media – a portrait painting – is very meaningful. The goal of a portrait is to capture a sitter's essence, to reproduce – to best of its artistic specificities – not only someone's appearance but also their true inner self.⁴⁹ Laura's fascination at the image before her elicits from her father the following response:

My father laughed, and said "Certainly it is a wonderful likeness", but he looked away, and to my surprise seemed but little struck by it, and went on talking to the picture cleaner, [...], and discoursed with intelligence about the portraits or other works.⁵⁰

His disregard for the picture represents his disregard for its counterpart, his blindness to Carmilla's essence. Laura's wonderment,

⁴⁹ NOWAK. *Mother's little nightmare: Photographic and monstrous genealogies in David Lynch's The Elephant Man*, 2010, p. 69.

⁵⁰ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 35.

in turn, represents her fascination with the woman herself. The irony present in the way the two men “discourse with intelligence” amongst themselves while remaining ignorant to the absurd, crucial and glaring fact before them highlights Laura’s own quiet and often ignored intelligence. She frequently shows signs of being far more observant than the men around her: “I was filled with wonder that my father did not seem to perceive the change”.⁵¹ However, Laura – along with all other women in the book – is presumed by men to be a powerless victim, incapable of contribution. Their blindness to the intricacy of women’s inner lives is what gives Laura and Carmilla the space they need to, as mentioned, “usurp male authority and to bestow themselves on whom they please”.⁵² In a dynamic that repeats itself throughout the whole novella, the first of our four cardinal points – foiled expectation of victimhood – is established: the women in *Carmilla* use the disregard placed upon them by patriarchal logic to exert their power and agency.

The most prominent holder of female power in Le Fanu’s book is – obviously – Carmilla herself, and the range of her preternatural abilities has already been explored in the previous chapter. Interestingly, however, the ways she opts to use – and not to use – her power are even more telling about her character and the society which surrounds her than the abilities themselves. Instead of using her physical and metaphysical superiority to get what she wants, Carmilla most often plays to the preconceptions of Victorian society, easily leading those around her to persist in their belief that she is indeed the fragile, frail, helpless girl they presume her to be:

People say I am languid; I am incapable of exertion; I can scarcely walk as far as a child of three years old: and every now and then the little strength I have falters, and I become as you have just seen me. But after all I am very easily set up again; in a moment I am perfectly myself. See how I have recovered.⁵³

Once again that cardinal point of subverted expectation manifests itself. This novella functions under the premise that Victorian

⁵¹ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 16.

⁵² SIGNOROTTI. Repossessing the Body: Transgressive Desire in “Carmilla” and “Dracula”, 1996, p. 607.

⁵³ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 37.

characters and readers alike would never imagine that the languid, seemingly weak young girl before them is capable of posing or facing any risk. Interestingly, Carmilla the character understands this truth about her society as much as the *Carmilla* the book does – they both play with those preconceptions. While Bram Stoker’s Count Dracula makes frequent and obvious use of his supernatural abilities, Carmilla opts to disguise herself as Coventry Patmore’s *Angel in The House* (1862) to divert suspicion. We see Carmilla use her considerable physical strength only once throughout the novella, a fact which adds significance to what was already a particularly telling passage. It is not to attack, but to defend herself against General Spielsdorf’s hatchet that she finally resorts to her violent power:

he struck at her with all his force, but she dived under his blow, and unscathed, caught him in her tiny grasp by the wrist. He struggled for a moment to release his arm, but his hand opened, the axe fell to the ground, and the girl was gone.⁵⁴

This is the second of two direct confrontations between Carmilla and the General. The first is similarly telling and symbolic: here, he wields not a hatchet, but a sword – a more obvious phallic symbol. In this passage – a flashback of sorts which is narrated by Spielsdorf and recounted to us by Laura – the General attacks, but the phallic symbol proves to be ineffective against Carmilla:

Speculating I know not what, I struck at her instantly with my sword; but I saw her standing near the door, unscathed. Horrified, I pursued, and struck again. She was gone; and my sword flew to shivers against the door.⁵⁵

Another extremely powerful character in the book is Carmilla’s mysterious, vampiric Mother – referred to only as “Mamma”.⁵⁶ In the two short scenes the older woman is a part of, she is described as

⁵⁴ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 78.

⁵⁵ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 77.

⁵⁶ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 17.

“imposing”,⁵⁷ “commanding”,⁵⁸ “distinguished”,⁵⁹ “stately”⁶⁰ and other similar adjectives which work to quickly establish her as a figure of authority. In both situations – the carriage wreck in chapter 2 and the masquerade ball in chapters 11 and 12 – she uses Victorian society’s preconceived notions of womanhood to convince Laura’s father and the General to act against their own self-interest in the name of chivalry. Here, once more, the expectation of victimhood is subverted as both men are effectively “made the dupe”⁶¹ in their efforts to save the women around them. Le Fanu’s female characters are not damsels in distress – instead, they use that very archetype to their advantage in order to exert their female power. Accordingly, the idea of chivalry – regarded by most in Victorian society as one of those indispensable, valuable and virtuous qualities a man ought to have – becomes equated with “conceited incredulity”⁶² and “despicable affectation of superiority”.⁶³

In addition, there is the greatest power in any book: the narrator’s. In *Carmilla*, it belongs to Laura, who is markedly unreliable in her first-person account. The unreliability of the first person is an extremely significant aspect of this book, and Laura herself brings it to light in the very first page of the first chapter: “I have said that this is a very lonely place. Judge whether I say truth.”⁶⁴ The narrator’s power lies in the ability not only to tell their own story, but also to frame it in whatever way they choose, and Laura is unreliable because she takes full advantage of that power. It seems that she – much like Carmilla and her vampiric Mamma – plays to Victorian expectations of female victimhood by leading her audience to believe she is clueless and helpless while also being the most perceptive character in the book – the only one to notice Carmilla’s “sly, dark glance”,⁶⁵ her “coldness

⁵⁷ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 15.

⁵⁸ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 14-15.

⁵⁹ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 15.

⁶⁰ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 24 and p. 61.

⁶¹ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 58.

⁶² LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 11.

⁶³ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 11.

⁶⁴ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 5.

⁶⁵ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 49.

[...] beyond her years"⁶⁶ and the "not quite so affectionate"⁶⁷ glance the vampire receives from her elusive Mamma.

The power of narration – which, as discussed, takes place eight years after the novella's events – is additionally important since it is the end result of Laura's book-long coming of age. I have previously suggested that *Carmilla* might work less as a horror story and more as a character study or an exploration of a relationship. The first part of that proposition – relating to the idea of the novella as a character study – is largely owed to the book's standing as Laura's *bildungsroman*,⁶⁸ considering that it symbolically chronicles the turbulent, empowering journey that ultimately leads her into adulthood. This second of our four cardinal points is closely connected to the first, since it is through her *bildungsroman* that Laura gains the agency and the perspective necessary to go from victim to narrator, effectively taking charge of her own story.

For Laura, this movement takes on a metaphorical dimension as a new, supernatural and dangerous world – representing adulthood – and a familiar, secure world representing childhood begin to blend together. *Carmilla* takes readers through three distinct moments in Laura's life: childhood, in chapter 1; teenagehood, throughout the novella; and adulthood, at the time of narration. When the innocence of youth – "I was not frightened, for I was one of those happy children who are studiously kept in ignorance of ghost stories, of fairy tales, and of all such lore"⁶⁹ – is shattered by the "Early Fright"⁷⁰ of a stranger's vampiric face in the night, the helplessness of girlhood is reinforced and Laura is left "in a state of terror".⁷¹ As the following chapters unfold, however, terror is replaced by far more ambiguous feelings as the same unknown

⁶⁶ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 25.

⁶⁷ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 16.

⁶⁸ Coined by German scholar Karl Morgenstern in 1803 (MAAS. O romance de formação (Bildungsroman) no Brasil), the *bildungsroman* is a critical literary term meaning "novel of formation", used to designate a story which deals with a character's transformations as they move from childhood to adulthood. (LYNCH. Glossary of Literary and Rhetorical Terms, 1999).

⁶⁹ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 7.

⁷⁰ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 5.2007,

⁷¹ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 8.

forces mark her transition from teenager to woman. Here, “the focus on orphaned protagonists in the Gothic novel and *bildungsroman* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries”⁷² is once more manifested, as the absence of Laura’s deceased mother and the overall inaction of her father plays a crucial part in this process.

My gouvernantes had just so much control over me as you might conjecture such sage persons would have in the case of a rather spoiled girl, whose only parent allowed her pretty nearly her own way in everything.⁷³

Laura’s effectively parentless existence thrusts her into the position of woman of her household. Nevertheless, the teenager is still not entirely master of her fate. While Laura does ultimately claim control of her story, her agency during the events themselves is undermined by men’s unwillingness to divulge information and allow her into their decision-making process. This interference, however, does not extend to the sexual awakening that is central to this – and many – *bildungsroman*, and the highly significant homoerotic relationship Carmilla and Laura engage in is not subject to parental – or male – supervision. Here, blood plays an incredibly significant role. The spilling of female blood that generally symbolizes both a woman’s physical readiness for procreation as well as the end of her virginity through the first heterosexual intercourse is subverted as men are excluded from the maturation process in favor of a different exchange.

Sometimes there came a sensation as if a hand was drawn softly along my cheek and neck. Sometimes it was as if warm lips kissed me, and longer and longer and more lovingly as they reached my throat, but there the caress fixed itself. My heart beat faster, my breathing rose and fell rapidly and full drawn; asobbing, that rose into a sense of strangulation, supervened, and turned into a dreadful convulsion, in which my senses left me and I became unconscious.⁷⁴

⁷² HOWELL, *Coming of Age, with Vampires*, 2017, p. 2.

⁷³ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 7.

⁷⁴ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 45.

This relationship has been exceedingly influential on Vampire Fiction. Carmilla and Laura are the prototype for what came to be the vampire/human romantic relationship – our third cardinal point characterizing the novella’s molecular essence and palimpsestic influence. This element can be seen all throughout the subgenre, albeit with exceedingly different connotations – and amounts of cheesiness, I might add – depending on the particular story. You might recognize the tale of the gloomy, tortured vampire who begins a passionate, forbidden affair with the wide-eyed, plucky heroine in what has, perhaps, become the novella’s most visibly adapted aspect in contemporary works of Vampire Fiction – regardless lineage or tradition.

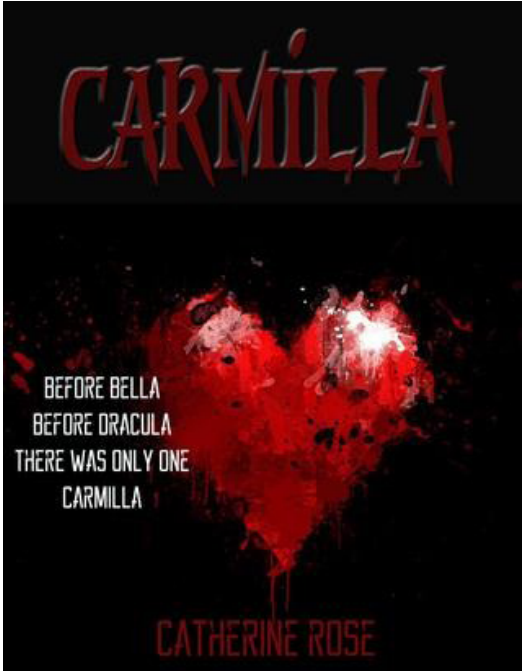


FIGURE 2: Cover of *Carmilla, a love story*, adapted from Sheridan Le Fanu by Catherine Rose (2014). Fonte: LE FANU, Joseph Sheridan; ROSE, Catherine. *Carmilla, a love story*. Dark Horse Publishing, 2011.

The vampire/human romantic dynamic appears to be the most enduring single gene of our Foremother's, although the formal replication of Carmilla and Laura's archetype certainly – and I would say unfortunately – does not always translate to a replication of their subversive essence. They are a homosexual couple in Victorian literature, which is a transgression in and of itself. Keeping in mind the conservative historical context in which *Carmilla* was produced, it is the physical aspect of their relationship that first seems to draw attention:

Sometimes after an hour of apathy, my strange and beautiful companion would take my hand and hold it with a fond pressure, renewed again and again; blushing softly, gazing in my face with languid and burning eyes, and breathing so fast that her dress rose and fell with the tumultuous respiration. It was like the ardor of a lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet over-powering; and with gloating eyes she drew me to her, and her hot lips traveled along my cheek in kisses; and she would whisper, almost in sobs, "You are mine, you *shall* be mine, you and I are one for ever." Then she had thrown herself back in her chair, with her small hands over her eyes, leaving me trembling.⁷⁵

But despite the undeniable importance of this physical aspect to Laura's *bildungsroman* and to the novella's subversive tone, the relationship seems to transcend the purely sexual vampire/human connection most seen in contemporaneous works such as *Dracula* and *The Vampyre*. Here is where the second part of that aforementioned proposition from the opening chapter and from a few pages ago lies: besides being a character study, the novella also works as the exploration of a relationship, centering its narrative and its most compelling dialogue around the couple's interactions. As briefly discussed, Le Fanu takes a rather ambiguous approach to several controversial themes, which seem to elicit vastly different interpretations – among them, the idea of *Carmilla* as a love story. The passionate infatuation often found in vampire/human romantic relationships here manifests through quotes such as "I live in you; and you would die for me, I love you so";⁷⁶ "But

⁷⁵ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 26.

⁷⁶ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 36.

to die as lovers may – to die together, so that they may live together”⁷⁷ and “I have been in love with no one, and never shall, [...] unless it should be with you”.⁷⁸ These insistent proclamations of love, along with Carmilla’s apparent intention to “turn” Laura so that they could be together, seem to suggest that real emotion is at play, bringing the vampire closer to a more fully-rounded, humanized characterization that later became common in the 20th and 21st centuries. Laura herself seems to corroborate this theory with an exceptionally noteworthy quote about Carmilla’s caresses and proclamations: “I could not refer them to affectation or trick. It was unmistakably the momentary breaking out of suppressed instinct and emotion”.⁷⁹ This quote is especially significant when taking into consideration that the narration is given retrospectively, which means Laura – the most observant character of the book and the one with the most knowledge of Carmilla’s motivations and personality – still believes this after eight years of reflection. The possible framing of their encounter as a love story – even by the narrator herself – adds a new layer of subversiveness to what was already a particularly transgressive version of the vampire/human romance, given its intrinsically female and queer nature.

The metaphorical connection between vampires and sexuality has been thoroughly explored in literary criticism by several authors – as Melissa Ames synthesizes, “Vampirism and sexuality have been bedfellows since the first vampire narratives began to dominate print literature in the 18th century”.⁸⁰ *Carmilla* and *Dracula* were among those early vampire narratives which helped to establish this association. The vampire’s bite, its death and enthralling powers all have clear sexual connotations, as we’ve already explored. But vampirism is not connected simply to sexuality in general – it is mostly associated with forms of queer, transgressive sexualities, a metaphorical simile grounded in the sense of Otherness that the two share. In literature, the monster is above all a metaphor for the Other; the marginalized part of society which arouses the fears and

⁷⁷ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 32.

⁷⁸ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 36.

⁷⁹ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 28.

⁸⁰ AMES, *Vamping up Sex: Audience, Age, & Portrayals of Sexuality in Vampire Narratives*, 2010, p. 83.

curiosities of the mainstream. This relationship can be seen from *Frankenstein* (1818) to *I am Legend* (1954) and it holds absolutely true for vampires: they are, after all, dehumanized humans. Since vampires retain their human appearance, their Otherness – which is intrinsically and metaphorically sexual in nature – is not necessarily visible at first glance, but, instead, an internal difference that has been imposed on them, and that they can choose to conceal.

Depending on a particular universe's version of the vampire, this queer connection can be used for different purposes. In older works, it typically serves to portray non-heterosexual expressions as dangerous, evil and capable of spreading as the vampire/homosexual looks to "turn" their victims. In more recent incarnations, such as seen in the television series *True Blood* (2008) – where vampires "come out of the coffin" by revealing themselves to the general public in a loose, allegorical take on the struggle for LGBT rights in America – it has been used to establish the vampire/homosexual as misunderstood and persecuted by the society around them. Taking into consideration just how intrinsically queer Le Fanu's vampire really is, we might say that his portrayal of the vampire is, by metaphorical association, his portrayal of female queerness – the crucial and final cardinal element explored in his novella.

Ambiguously, we are given two different possible interpretations. From Carmilla herself we get the following indictment on her vampirism: she is not evil nor cruel; she is at ease with the ambivalent forces behind her true nature – "think me not cruel because I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness".⁸¹ We get to see her expand on this notion when Laura's father calls to God in face of the "illness" which has enveloped the area:

"Creator! *Nature!*" said the young lady in answer to my gentle father. "And this disease that invades the country is natural. Nature. 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."⁸²

For Victorian times, this is a rather bold statement. Carmilla is

⁸¹ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 25.

⁸² LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 32. (Author's emphasis).

defending the idea that vampirism – and, by metaphorical extension, queer sexuality and female power – is natural. It is not some demonical manifestation or devastating illness to be contained and eradicated by the Christian Creator Laura’s father speaks of – it is a part of the natural order of the world. This interpretation can be aligned with the previously discussed view of Laura and Carmilla’s relationship as a love story, which our narrator seems to espouse when she synthesizes Carmilla the character – and, by association, *Carmilla* the book – in the following way: “‘How romantic you are, Carmilla’, I said. ‘Whenever you tell me your story, it will be made up chiefly of some one great romance’”.⁸³ Together, these two ideas would constitute a portrayal of queerness so contrasting with Victorian times that its subversive value scarcely needs mentioning.

Perhaps, that is part of the reason we also get a second, alternative interpretation. In the eyes of the General and in the description of Baron Vordenburg – Le Fanu’s vampire hunter – Carmilla is a “fiend”,⁸⁴ an “enemy”,⁸⁵ a “monster”.⁸⁶ It is a view further expanded by Vordenburg’s account of what he claims to be the habits of the vampire, which he has supposedly observed in his studies. The vampire hunter appears in the novella’s final eight pages and never directly addresses our protagonist. Through his conversation with Laura’s father, we hear of Vordenburg’s explanation for Carmilla’s proclamations of love:

The vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons. In pursuit of these it will exercise inexhaustible patience and stratagem, for access to a particular object may be obstructed in a hundred ways. It will never desist until it has satiated its passion, and drained the very life of its coveted victim. But it will, in these cases, husband and protract its murderous enjoyment with the refinement of an epicure, and heighten it by the gradual approaches of an artful courtship.⁸⁷

Baron Vordenburg’s arrival in chapter 15 brings about Carmilla’s

⁸³ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 36.

⁸⁴ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 11.

⁸⁵ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 81.

⁸⁶ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 11.

⁸⁷ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 85.

death and the Baron's first-person account of the circumstances that led him to discover her grave, and of his knowledge about vampires. Within three paragraphs of his arrival, we are presented with yet another clear phallic symbol. In a noteworthy scene, the General and the Baron use sticks to poke ivy out of Carmilla's grave, using them to intrude upon what is Carmilla's second womb, her place of rebirth.⁸⁸ The Baron and the General are, arguably, the book's representations of patriarchy itself – Le Fanu's very own Crew of Light. Their success in killing Carmilla – a symbol of female empowerment – and the Baron's subsequent report describing Carmilla's fiendish nature have been previously interpreted – with reason – as said patriarchy's final triumph in a book constrained by the time period in which it came to exist.

However, this interpretation fails to consider two extremely significant points. The first is about unreliability. Although the novella is entirely relayed to readers by Laura via her letters, we still get access to four different points of view: the General's flashback in chapters 11 through 13; the Baron's account in chapter 16; Laura's tale in the remaining chapters; and an unidentified man's introduction to the story in its half-page long prologue. It has been previously established in this paper that Laura is the quintessential unreliable narrator: she more than once recognizes the possibility that she might be lying and that her reader might not believe her. In turn, General Spielsdorf's tale of the masquerade ball he attended is preceded by a description of his altered state of anxiety and anger. The text seems to intentionally cast doubt on the General's reliability: "I saw my father, at this point, glance at the General, with, as I thought, a marked suspicion of his sanity".⁸⁹ Even the man from the prologue does not appear to be reliable, despite the fact that he only exists for half a page. According to him, the story which follows was taken from the correspondence between Laura and Doctor Hesselius. However, in the only time Laura identifies her interlocutor in any way, she says: "Perhaps not so singular in the opinion of a *town*

⁸⁸ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 81.

⁸⁹ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 58.

lady like you".⁹⁰ Evidence seems to purposefully suggest there is no such thing as a reliable first person in this book, and this is a story in which every character of significance is seen lying at some point: Laura, her father, the gouvernantes, Carmilla. Vordenburg is described as a "stranger";⁹¹ as "grotesque".⁹² His complete distance from the protagonist does not aid in inspiring confidence. If Le Fanu goes out of his way to establish each of his narrators as unreliable, why should readers interpret the Baron's own brief narration as anything but that? It bears reminding that Laura herself seems to call this interpretation into question in that already mentioned quote, when she denies the presence of "affectation or trick" in Carmilla's actions, attributing them to the "unmistakable [...] breaking out of suppressed instinct and emotion".⁹³

The second point pertains to the patriarchy's supposed final victory over Carmilla's transgressive femaleness. About the process that turns victims into vampires, the Baron himself implies that every person targeted by the vampire eventually becomes one, regardless of the time of their death.⁹⁴ This would then mean that all the girls Carmilla targeted throughout the book – including Laura herself – eventually became symbols of female empowerment as well. If we are indeed to believe the Baron's account and his description of the turning process, it becomes clear that the patriarchy might have killed Carmilla, but it did not succeed in stopping her from spreading her Otherness.

Laura's own vision of vampiric Otherness seems to stand somewhere between these disparate perspectives, and the ambiguity with which Le Fanu tackles controversial themes is not only a necessity brought on by the society in which he is inserted, it could also arguably work as a sort of rhetorical device. While he does start from the proposition that transgressive sexualities and emancipated women are dangerous, *Carmilla* also presents readers with alternate viewpoints

⁹⁰ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 27. (Emphasis mine).

⁹¹ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 80.

⁹² LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 85.

⁹³ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 28.

⁹⁴ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 86.

all throughout the novella – carefully painting in grey what was thought to be a rather black and white moral issue. The novella does not stand in barefaced opposition to Victorian social norms. Instead – much like Laura and Carmilla – it presents itself as the very thing people expect it to be, all the while still exerting subversive value. In a sense, Carmilla’s manipulation of the characters around her is very much akin to *Carmilla*’s manipulation of its reader’s expectations, and the disparity between different understandings of the novella parallels the different versions of vampirism itself, as provided by Carmilla and Vordenburg. This interesting dynamic is very easily observed through the exceedingly different covers in Figure 3, in a reflection of the ambiguity that is applied throughout the text and a direct parallel to Laura’s own doubts regarding Carmilla. Narrator, readers, critics and marketers alike all seem to grapple with opposing views of the character and the vampiric Other – sometimes the quiet, assertive girl challengingly staring us down from a loving embrace; sometimes the threatening, repulsive specter of evil insinuating herself from her sexually charged Otherness.

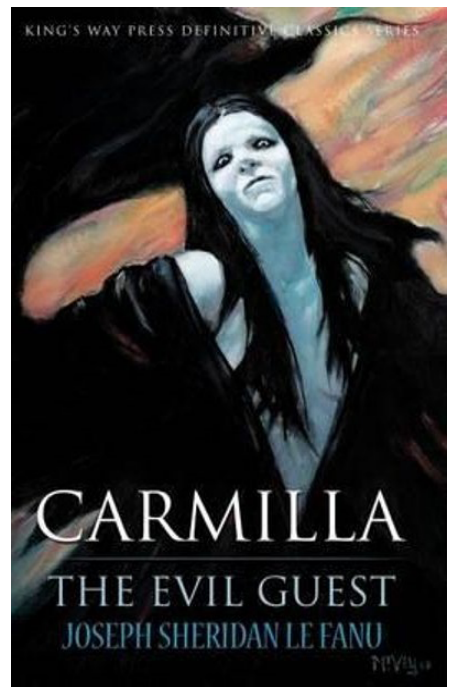
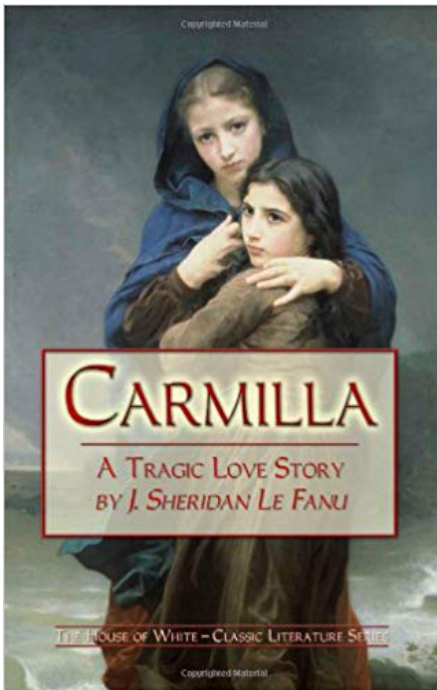


FIGURE 3: Comparison between covers for *Carmilla*, The House of White Library edition (2008) and King's Way Press edition (2016).

Fonte: LE FANU, Joseph Sheridan. *Carmilla: A Tragic Love Story* by J. Sheridan Le Fanu. California: The House of White, 2009; LE FANU, Joseph Sheridan. *Carmilla: The Evil Guest*. Georgia: King's Way Press, 2016.

It is significant that we ever get access to Carmilla's own conceptions of herself – just as it is significant that while she is, effectively, the story's antagonist, the Vampire still seems to exert the same kind of ambiguous attraction in readers as she does in Laura. Despite being absolutely transgressive in the face of Victorian social norms and Christian moral standards, Carmilla is not presented in an unfavorable light by our narrator – in fact, her confused fascination towards her companion seems to last a lifetime. Since we see Carmilla through Laura's eyes, we are also caught between these two versions of her: the monster and the lover; the fiend and the friend:

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.⁹⁵

As we accompany Laura through her unreliable version of events, she gets to exert control not only over her own experience, but also over her readers' own visions and interpretations. This is what is meant by the previously stated implication that the novella's narrative structure might be an attempt to inspire sympathy and identification with her personal impressions. While Laura might have been a target, her homoerotic relationship with the vampire makes her an accomplice to her subversiveness – not a victim of it. By leading readers to empathize with Laura's emotive narration of her own confused Otherness, *Carmilla* makes us accomplices ourselves.

In face of all this, any reader that – choosing to believe the Baron – interprets *Carmilla* as nothing more than a tale of patriarchal punishment is missing the fact that the mere existence of doubt is already extremely significant. The fact that audiences are able to pick up a book from 1871 and wonder if they are meant to believe in a male, upper-class Baron or in a lesbian, teenaged vampire is already revolutionary. While male characters found in our Foremother hold the traditional means of gaining knowledge and authority – they are doctors, barons, fathers – it is undeniably the women who hold the real power, be it physical, intellectual, sexual or narrative. And through the palimpsestic process, this subversion casts its shadow – so that “the light step of *Carmilla*” is still heard by us also, echoing throughout Vampire Fiction to this hour.

⁹⁵ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 87.

"She Saved The World, a Lot": Metaphorical activism in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

"Power. I have it, they don't. This bothers them."

Buffy Summers – (Joss Whedon)

Carmilla's echo in Vampire Fiction is audible not only in the several adaptations of the novella – ranging from films to an opera version – but also in the influence it exerted on productions that might not derive directly from Le Fanu work, but still bear its palimpsestic marks. As we continue in our exploration of *Carmilla* as a lineage of narrative descent, I take now the liberty of spending this chapter on what I would call an "estranged daughter": Joss Whedon's 1997 television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.⁹⁶ The relationship might be unacknowledged, but genetics are there entrenched nonetheless. Aired by the WB Network in its first five seasons and by the United Paramount Network (UPN) in its final two, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – hereafter referred to as *Buffy* or *BtVS* – was a success with audiences, critics and academia alike. Thematically focused primarily on female agency and power, it explored womanhood and female sexuality – including queer sexuality – at a time when these topics still generated a considerable amount of controversy. Given the academic consequence of *Buffy*, any undertaking of subversiveness and gender within the greater arc of Vampire Fiction that did not take *Buffy* into account would be somewhat incomplete. Considering that *Carmilla* has influenced her subgenre beyond the bounds of direct derivations, it might be helpful to look into the ways her four cardinal elements manifest in significant works that do not bear her name.

Through its seven seasons, *BtVS* depicts the story of the most

⁹⁶ *BUFFY the Vampire Slayer*. Joss Whedon, 2000.

recent Vampire Slayer to be called to her duty as the generation's Chosen One: Buffy Summers. The series mixes elements of humor, horror and romance to metaphorically explore the process of growing up, effectively upping the stakes on the tribulations of teenagehood and early adulthood – when the inexperience of youth turns every crisis into the end of the world. Informed by the extensive lore of Whedon's mythological universe, *BtVS* is also, at its core, the journey of a markedly female hero. As a small prologue-like narration tells the audience at the start of episodes during the first season, "In every generation there is a Chosen One. *She* alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness. *She* is the Slayer."⁹⁷ In this sense, *BtVS* works also – and perhaps above all – as a metaphor for female empowerment by focusing on a mythical hero that must necessarily be a woman. The Slayer's supernatural abilities are physical in nature, and thus centered on traits ordinarily attributed to men – such as strength, reflex and coordination. With these powers, Buffy must combat the vampire plague – with the average vampire being, nearly always, a threatening male figure in the night. In this sense, it could be argued that *Buffy* uses Stoker's vision of the male vampire as a threat to female integrity to oppose his lineage of conservatism by reinstating power back to the hands of women – descending, then, from our Foremother and her tradition of subversiveness.

Carmilla's dichotomy between a patriarchal power structure and a natural female power also manifests in Whedon's show: the Slayer is traditionally supervised by a male member of the Watcher's Council – an ancient institution built around the need to oversee these young, powerful girls. Over the course of the series, the members of the Council – mostly male authority figures with titles to match – make repeated attempts to regulate Buffy's actions with very little success. Like Laura before her, Buffy moves through the world without much concern for male, adult supervision. In the series, this dichotomy is further developed as the power dynamics

⁹⁷ BUFFY the Vampire Slayer. Joss Whedon, 2000, s. 1. (Emphasis mine).

are effectively shifted and Buffy becomes the highest authority for her band of allies – the Scooby Gang, as the series calls them. Out of the large cast of characters, three hold particular importance to the story: Willow Rosenberg, the computer genius/witch; Xander Harris, the well-meaning buffoon; and Rupert Giles, the Watcher/librarian. Two other relevant characters join them later on: Angel and Spike, vampires whom with the protagonist eventually becomes romantically involved.

Buffy's relationship to gender and sexuality has been thoroughly analyzed and reanalyzed by scholars all over the world⁹⁸ in what came to be known as *Buffy Studies*, a line of research entirely based on the analysis of the series through different theoretical scopes, from feminist theory to queer theory to literary theory and media studies. This is part of what makes *Buffy* such an important object for this paper: of all of *Carmilla's* daughters, *Buffy* is the one who managed to simultaneously achieve heights of critical relevance and cult status in pop culture; academic importance alongside real impact on the general public, as proven by its commercial success. *Buffy* remediates the Foremother's four cardinal elements and advances them further, not only adapting their subversiveness into a new context, but also giving them a level of notoriety never quite achieved by Le Fanu's novella, be it in academia or general consciousness.

Like *Carmilla*, *Buffy* holds at its core the same dichotomy between female victimhood and female power in a patriarchal society – using the process of a woman's coming of age to explore themes of romance and sexuality. Effectively, they are both female *bildungsroman* thematically focused on the exact same aspects of womanhood: danger, love, and the intersection between the two as negotiated by the power that a woman does or does not hold. While *Carmilla* seems to work mostly as that unseen palimpsestic foundation Timothy Corrigan spoke of, there are indeed a few possible

⁹⁸ For more on this, see *Slayage: The Journal of Whedon Studies*, a biannual academic publication founded in 2001 and focused primarily on the Buffyverse.

allusions to Le Fanu's Countess within Whedon's series. Season 2's unusually named Drusilla – a dark-haired, female vampire of exceedingly languid disposition – is a notable example of a possible intermedial reference that retains continued relevance throughout the series and beyond, crossing over the intermedial borders into *Buffy's* televised spin-off and the comic book series that followed the show's ending. Drusilla was also born in Victorian England, and her costume is designed to make that connection visible. But even beyond similarities of name and physical appearance – which alone seem to suggest a connection – Drusilla also tends to employ her perceived fragility to gain advantage over targets and adversaries. Most importantly, she is a character deeply marked by ambiguity. Unlike most vampires in the show, she is capable of equal measures of violence and affection, evil and love. In *Innocence*, from the show's second season, Drusilla is deemed "too human" in the eyes of the Judge – an evil, demonic arbiter of morality she herself had brought forth.⁹⁹ It also bears briefly mentioning some other symbolic passages from the novella that found their way into the series, such as the grave/womb analogy¹⁰⁰ – which echoes page 88 of Le Fanu's novella – and the sword as an ineffective phallic symbol – echoing Carmilla's encounter with the General.

Buffy's seven season arc works, one might say, as a metaphorical manifesto of female empowerment backed by the very same cardinal element and premise already discussed as the center of Le Fanu's *Carmilla*: the subversion of the expectation that a young woman in a dangerous situation is a victim. The negation of victimhood is the starting point both for Buffy the character – setting up the beginning of her story in season 1 – and for *Buffy* the series – which began to be developed from this very notion. Joss Whedon has stated the following:

⁹⁹ BUFFY the Vampire Slayer. Joss Whedon, 2000, s. 02, ep. 13.

¹⁰⁰ BUFFY the Vampire Slayer. Joss Whedon, 2000, s. 06, ep. 01.

The first thing I ever thought of when I thought of *Buffy* [...] was the little blonde girl who goes into a dark alley and gets killed in every horror movie. The idea of *Buffy* was to subvert that idea, that image, and create someone who was a hero where she had always been a victim.¹⁰¹

Buffy the Vampire Slayer begins its argument with that very scene described by its creator in the quote above: a strange man follows Buffy into a dark alleyway only to be swiftly knocked down by the small-framed, feminine looking young woman.¹⁰² As Debra L. Jackson states, “rather than becoming a victim, Buffy is the hero. She is not only capable of effective self-defense, but [...] seeks out danger in an attempt to eradicate threats of violence towards others”.¹⁰³ For example: in the first three seasons of the show, vampire threats often manifested as older men leading teenaged girls out of bars and into dark alleys – it’s Buffy’s duty, as the female Chosen One, to correct that imbalance of power. As Jackson argues,¹⁰⁴ this choice of a markedly female heroine patrolling the city’s streets at night – not a victim to strange men, but a defender to others – seems to tie Buffy’s heroic endeavor to movements such as the Take Back the Night marches¹⁰⁵ started in the 1970’s. The idea behind Take Back the Night is that women too should be allowed to safely walk the domains of urban nighttime – the very domain the Slayer works seven seasons to reclaim through a power that is – as discussed – intrinsically female.

Here, we can see how the process of adaptation can further an idea by mutating it to better fit a new environment. *BtVS* alters the plot surrounding *Carmilla*’s cardinal element of foiled expectation and, in the process, reproduces its essence of subversiveness

¹⁰¹ *BUFFY the Vampire Slayer*. Joss Whedon, 2000.

¹⁰² *BUFFY the Vampire Slayer*, Joss Whedon, 2000, s. 01, ep. 01.

¹⁰³ JACKSON, *Throwing Like a Slayer: A Phenomenology of Gender Hybridity and Female Resilience in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 2016, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ JACKSON, *Throwing Like a Slayer: A Phenomenology of Gender Hybridity and Female Resilience in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 2016.

¹⁰⁵ Take Back the Night marches started spontaneously in the 1970’s as groups of feminists organized late-night gatherings on the streets – often with candle-light vigils – to protest violence against women and honor victims of sexual assault. The marches are centered around the notion that women must be able to circulate through public spaces – particularly urban ones – without fear of violence. Still today, Take Back the Night events happen annually in many American colleges.

– what was new in 1872 must mutate to remain new in 1997. Le Fanu’s Carmilla and Laura might not have been helpless victims, but they were not heroes either. Buffy, on the other hand, is a hero by definition: her story follows, point by point, the structure of the hero’s journey – or the monomyth – detailed by Joseph Campbell.¹⁰⁶ Standing between the known and the unknown, Buffy receives – and attempts to refuse – the Call to Adventure when she discovers her status as the Chosen One of her fictional universe, beginning thus Campbell’s phase of Departure. She is given supernatural aid in the form of Helpers – Willow, Xander, and many others – as well as a Mentor – Giles. Facing the Trials of the Initiation phase, Buffy meets her Shadow in the character of Faith, the rogue Slayer. In the last two seasons, which represent the difficulties of her Return, Buffy experiences death and rebirth, falls into the emotional Abyss and ultimately receives the Gift of the Goddess¹⁰⁷ which grants her the Freedom to Live. This is only a superficial glance into the deep, detailed connections between *Buffy* and Campbell’s monomyth, but it serves to illustrate the lengths to which the series goes in order to upend the expectation that “the little blonde girl”¹⁰⁸ would be a victim. The series establishes her, instead, as a monomythical hero – still maintaining, nevertheless, the feminine visual identity that is, arguably, the root of this expectation. Ultimately, part of *Buffy*’s subversive value lies in the construction of a traditional heroine that is also the unapologetic embodiment of stereotypical femininity. Buffy saves the world from apocalypse and fights unspeakable evils – and she does so in the pink nail polish and over-the-top outfits of a preppy sixteen-year-old. Here, these visual cues so often used as signifiers of frailty become, instead, battle garb.

Buffy’s unapologetic femininity and the expectation of frailty and victimhood it brings is explored in the episode *Prophecy Girl*,¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ CAMPBELL, *The hero with a thousand faces*, 2008.

¹⁰⁷ According to Joseph Campbell (1949), the Gift of the Goddess is the ultimate, final reward in the traditional heroic journey. It will be addressed further below (CAMPBELL, *The hero with a thousand faces*, 2008).

¹⁰⁸ BUFFY the Vampire Slayer, Joss Whedon, 2000.

¹⁰⁹ BUFFY the Vampire Slayer, Joss Whedon, 2000, s. 01, ep. 12.

where Buffy faces the Master, season one's "Big Bad" – a main antagonist and villain who defines the arc of any given season. Facing death in a white gown, Buffy couples the visual identity of the damsel in distress with the appropriate weaponry for her coming battle and descends into an underworld the Hero's Journey might label as the Belly of the Beast: in *Prophecy Girl*, *BtVS* is at the end of its first season and story arc, which – accordingly – leads the protagonist to her first real challenge, generating a rupture in a life marked, up to that point, by innocence.

It's worth remembering that Campbell models his pattern as a journey for a reason, with the hero trope effectively symbolising the transition to adulthood and the replacement of innocence with experience, and this transition is one that *Buffy* presented extraordinarily well.¹¹⁰

As this exceedingly appropriate quote suggests, Buffy's path of female, monomythic heroism is also closely tied to her *bildungsroman*, the second of the Foremother's four cardinal elements. In *Prophecy Girl*, Buffy's virginal white dress is smeared with blood, and her childhood seems to come to end. As Buffy is charged with responsibilities far too great for her young age, she must learn to sacrifice her personal desires – safety and normalcy – for the needs of the community – sacrifice and ultimate death.¹¹¹ In a dynamic that holds just as true for *Carmilla*, the process of becoming an adult is a path of empowerment whose steep price seems to be the acknowledgement of mortality.

¹¹⁰ SADRI, *The Super-Heroine's Journey: Comics, Gender and the Monomyth*, 2014, p. 5.

¹¹¹ HOWELL, *Coming of Age, with Vampires*, 2017, p. 137.



FIGURE 4: Frame from *BtVS* (s. 01 ep. 12).
Fonte: *BUFFY the Vampire Slayer*. Joss Whedon, s. 01, ep. 12.

The central events of Buffy's journey into adulthood closely parallel Laura's own *bildungsroman*. They are both defined by the blood which symbolizes the rite of menstruation; the sexual awakening with a vampire lover,¹¹² which penetrates the protagonist through the sexualized process of its bite;¹¹³ the death of the mother, ushering her into the role of the woman of her household;¹¹⁴ and the presence of two coexisting worlds, one familiar and comfortable – symbolizing childhood – and the other supernatural and dangerous – symbolizing adulthood. As Amanda Howell points out, *BtVS* makes extended use of this last metaphorical point as the two separate but merging worlds are intertwined literally as well as symbolically:

¹¹² *BUFFY the Vampire Slayer*, Joss Whedon, 2000, s. 02, ep. 14.

¹¹³ *BUFFY the Vampire Slayer*, Joss Whedon, 2000, s. 03, ep. 21.

¹¹⁴ *BUFFY the Vampire Slayer*, Joss Whedon, 2000, s. 05, ep. 16.

Its core conceit, that the small California town of Sunnydale is at the centre of mystical convergence, facilitates an ongoing metaphoric trade between teen and horror genres, with coming of age imagined in terms of two generic worlds mapped one over the other. While the series begins with a strict division between light and dark, day and night, Sunnydale above and Sunnydale below, human and vampire, this division quickly breaks down as corpses start falling out of lockers and Sunnydale High becomes a site of monstrous invasions, eruptions, and conflict.¹¹⁵

The sexual awakening – so central to *Carmilla* – here takes place in the series' second season between Buffy and Angel – a vampire with a soul and thus, a humanized vampire like Carmilla never fully got to be. Le Fanu's novella and its take on the vampire/human relationship – the third of four cardinal points – left deep marks on Vampire Fiction because in it – unlike in the works of Polidori¹¹⁶ or Stoker¹¹⁷ – the relationship is characterized as more than merely sexual and predatory. Even after years of reflection, Laura's own thoughts on the subject still establish the relationship and the story as that "one great romance"¹¹⁸ found underneath the horror tale. Buffy's relationship with Angel clearly follows the archetype established by Laura and Carmilla and emulated by so many works thereafter: the young, innocent teenager discovering love meets the tortured, brooding, centenary soul of a vampire companion that can also work, at times, as an antagonist of sorts.

Due mostly to recent incarnations of this relationship found in works such as the *Twilight Series* (2005) and *The Vampire Diaries* (2009), the vampire/human romance has – through the last 20 years – inspired equally passionate measures of love and hatred from society. Interestingly, the ambivalence of desire and repulsion that is so intrinsic to the nature of the relationship seems to manifest in audiences as well as in the characters themselves. Academia seems divided: while some scholars have extensively taken the issue on – especially in vampire literary criticism – most seem cautious of

¹¹⁵ HOWELL, *Coming of Age, with Vampires*, 2017, p. 135.

¹¹⁶ POLIDORI, *The Vampyre: a Tale*, 1819.

¹¹⁷ STOKER, *Dracula*, 1897.

¹¹⁸ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 36.

getting bitten. The incredible popularity of a narrative trope such as we've seen with vampiric romances in the past decade can indeed be, in a way, frightful – like some sort of intermedial invasion. Television series, movies, magazines, books: all referencing, adapting, and influencing each other full time as they generate massive amounts of money by influencing their massive audiences. The fact is that this invasion, however distasteful one might or might not find it, should prompt deeper analysis. The more popular something is the more it effects society, regardless of the quality – or lack thereof – of its execution. It is important to highlight the ways this trope has been used to further conservative ideals of toxic masculinity and abusive heterosexual expression which are pervasive in Vampire Fiction and descendant – I have suggested – from *Dracula*. It is also important to acknowledge the ways it might be employed – like in *Carmilla* and her daughters, I would argue – to explore that intersection between danger and love which all women face through their maturation process. Through Buffy's relationships to her vampiric love interests, the trope is used to exacerbate the institutionalized imbalance of power young women tend to experience in the male/female dynamic. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – which constantly works on a metaphorical level by juxtaposing the supernatural threats a Slayer faces with the everyday struggles of a woman's coming of age – Angel and Spike work, at first, as abusive lovers intent on hurting Buffy.

Immediately after she loses her virginity, for example, the object of her affection loses his soul and becomes a literal monster, taking on the same antagonistic role Carmilla comes to embody by the novella's end. The men Buffy dates are as centenary as the patriarchal power structure encouraging them to subjugate her – or at least attempt to. A piece of subversion is found in the fact that, as the Slayer, Buffy holds the physical superiority over Angel and Spike: "I'm the thing monsters have nightmares about".¹¹⁹ By today's standards, however, we might view it as highly problematic

¹¹⁹ BUFFY the Vampire Slayer, Joss Whedon, 2000, s. 07, ep. 11.

that the audience should be made to feel as if Angel and Spike could be changed or saved – and even more so that they ultimately are. In this sense, the violence arguably found Carmilla’s ambiguous character carries over to these relationships as well, in *BtVS*’s 20th century attempt at subversion.

Carmilla’s theme of queer, female sexuality also finds its way into *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* through the characters of Willow and Tara, whose relationship ranges from season 4’s *Hush*¹²⁰ to season 6’s *Entropy*.¹²¹ Le Fanu’s work broke new ground when it tackled female queerness in the 19th century; Whedon’s work also innovates within its cultural context when it airs one of the first recurrent, committed lesbian relationships in American television – the importance of which has been discussed in academic papers¹²² and blog posts alike. In *Carmilla*, the magical quality of the vampire often symbolizes female queerness, in a metaphorical relationship which works to afford that Otherness with an intrinsic power which is also rooted in nature itself: “And this disease that invades the country is natural. Nature. All things proceed from Nature – don’t they?”.¹²³ That same metaphor is found in Willow and Tara’s relationship – which is often symbolized by the witchcraft they are both adept at. Restricted by censorship and network executives, the series starts out by using spells to represent kisses or sexual intercourse they were not yet allowed to air – also making that conceptual connection quite clear by blatant substitution of the term “lesbian” for “witch”. “Witchcraft”, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a powerful force deriving specifically from a Nature which is made female: Hecate and Gaia are invoked, along with other Goddesses, to award these women with an Otherness that is literally empowering.

By equating witchcraft and queerness *Buffy* additionally equates queerness with power to be turned against the patriarchy. *Carmilla*

¹²⁰ *BUFFY the Vampire Slayer*, Joss Whedon, 2000, s. 04, ep. 10.

¹²¹ *BUFFY the Vampire Slayer*, Joss Whedon, 2000, s. 06, ep. 18.

¹²² For more on this, see: HORNYAI. *Buffy, the Taboo Slayer: How a Show About Vampires Changed Teen LGBT Representation in Television*. 2013.

¹²³ LE FANU, *Carmilla*, 2007, p. 32.

affords its female characters with narrative, physical and intellectual power while simultaneously highlighting how disenfranchised they are by the structures of society, as men hold institutional dominance in the form of endless titles. Female force in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is similarly surrounded by the patriarchal institutional power encroached still today in our cultural reality. The Slayer is female power personified: the Chosen One, always a woman – and yet, she is under the control of the Watcher’s Council, a group of men with no power but the institutional authority they were given by history. Ultimately, Buffy overthrows the Council and prevails over the millenary patriarchal forces around her, stating: “Power. I have, they don’t. This bothers them”.¹²⁴ This is yet another example of how *Buffy* furthers the ideas of the novella to maintain the subversive nature they had in the 19th century.

The series’ ending point also seems to echo the novella’s, but with a different tone. In *Carmilla* we find out that – since everyone targeted by the vampire will eventually become vampires themselves – all the women Carmilla comes into contact with throughout the book – including Laura – will ultimately turn into symbols of female power. Similarly, when *BtVS* ends in 2003 audiences discover that the Gift of the Goddess – the ultimate reward at the end of this feminist heroine’s journey – is, significantly, the empowerment of others. It is through Willow’s natural, queer witchcraft that the Slayer’s power becomes democratized: as the series comes to a close, every girl with the capacity to be a Slayer will have that potential realized.¹²⁵ Buffy passes the baton to the next generation, with the series’ final moments showing the empowerment Buffy the character ultimately brings to women all over the world – effectively echoing the effect *Buffy* the series hopes to exert on the cultural landscape.

The Foremother’s subversiveness evolves to serve a new time and purpose: while *Carmilla* uses ambiguousness to question the

¹²⁴ BUFFY the Vampire Slayer. Joss Whedon, 2000, s. 05, ep. 12.

¹²⁵ BUFFY the Vampire Slayer. Joss Whedon, 2000, s. 07, ep. 22.

assumption of female weakness as intrinsic and female strength as evil, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* actively affirms that these assumptions are false and that queerness and female power are not only in line with nature, but also necessary and good at their core. As the essential subversiveness manifests this time, there is no need for ambiguousness: it is literally what saves the world.

“Just be Normal”: Jordan Hall’s *Carmilla* and the unambiguous normalcy of subversion

“Miss Sheridan is gone, girl.”

Mel – (Jordan Hall)

It seems only appropriate that this book should end where it began: with *Carmilla* herself – albeit in a new costume. Our next and final object is an acknowledged, homonymous adaptation of Le Fanu’s novella, as well as a clear recipient of *Buffy*’s passed baton. *Carmilla*, the 2014 webseries – hereafter referred to as *Carmilla 2.0* for differentiation purposes – is the best possible closing point for this study not only because it is a successful remediation of our central object, but also because it is so clearly influenced by other works following its tradition – sharing many structural and thematic similarities with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* specifically. In many ways, it might be said that *Carmilla 2.0* is *Carmilla* post *Buffy* – as the former exists, then, under the overlapping palimpsestic shadows of both ancestors.

Written by Jordan Hall, directed by Spencer Maybee and produced by Kotex, *Carmilla 2.0* aired from 2014 to 2016 on the YouTube channel VervegirlTV (later rebranded as Kinda TV). The webseries departs greatly from Le Fanu’s novella in many ways while still replicating those essential aspects and cardinal points already discussed: the subverted expectation of female victimhood; the *Bildungsroman*; the vampire/human romance; and the queerness. In a remediated, contemporary version of Le Fanu’s story, Laura’s family castle becomes the sinister fortress of Silas University and Laura becomes a college freshman uncovering a mystery for her journalism project. *Carmilla* arrives on the scene suddenly and becomes Laura’s roommate – in a parallel

to the events from the novella's second chapter. The series follows Laura and her friends through three seasons as they face a plethora of supernatural threats and save the world – and the school – from apocalypse. In this sense, it is very clearly influenced by Buffy and her "Scooby Gang" of allies, and several direct mentions and references to *BtVS* are made throughout the three seasons. When asked in an interview about the "influences that flavored the adapting in [her] version" of the novella, Jordan Hall directly cited herself as "massive fan of Joss Whedon",¹²⁶ thus synthesizing the ideas herein stated about the combining effects of palimpsestic influence.

YouTube has been a very successful platform for online videos, but traditionally it was not the ideal place for serialized fiction to thrive. The recent trend of adapting older books – ones no longer subject to copyright laws – into webseries started with the success of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012), a retelling of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) set in contemporary times, and launched adaptations of huge classics such as *Emma* (1815), *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Peter Pan* (1930). It is in this context that *Carmilla 2.0* emerges, a virtual unknown among giants of the Canon. With a total of over 50 million views on YouTube and a 2017 film¹²⁷ released online on VHX, it has been an unexpected success. Episodes were released biweekly and their length ranged from three to sixteen minutes long. Since episodes are presented as Laura's journalistic endeavor which she records on her computer, the audience is confined not only to Laura and Carmilla's room but also to a single camera angle.

¹²⁶ KINDATV, *Carmilla* | In Conversation with Jordan Hall & Elise Bauman II. 2016.

¹²⁷ The film works as an epilogue of sorts, providing audiences with a look into the character's lives after the webseries' end. Its villain's last name, "Sheridan", is a clear allusion to Sheridan Le Fanu and a possible rejection of the Victorian ambiguities of his novella.



FIGURE 5: Frame from the webseries (s. 03 ep. 16).
Fonte: KINDATV. Carmilla | S3 E11. 2016. 1 vídeo (6min). Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWxW3PJ0kS0>>. Accessed on: 28 jan. 2019.

These limitations of format push Hall and Maybee to come up with creative ways to explore the boundaries between showing and telling within their story. While *Lizzie Bennet* and others are mostly focused on normal characters leading normal lives, *Carmilla* is – even more than a love story – an adventure-filled mystery. This makes the tension between showing and telling infinitely more complicated, as characters go on quests, fight battles and explore an entire supernatural universe that we only get to hear about.

The webseries functions as a remediation of the novella: although the events themselves are almost completely altered, we find doubles for nearly all the book's characters, as well as for many of its smaller plot points. Moreover, the show manages to reproduce, in different terms, the "as if character"¹²⁸ present in the book: while Le Fanu's *Carmilla* is a novella "as if" it was a series of letters in a scientific study, Hall's adaptation is a webshow "as if" it was a series of videos in a journalistic investigation. This allows for narrator and

¹²⁸ RAJEWSKY, Intermediality, intertextuality, and remediation: A literary perspective on intermediality, 2005, p. 54.

point of view to be replicated also: due to the vlog-like structure of the videos, audiences experience the story through Laura's first-person interpretation of events – and she remains as unreliable as her Victorian double. In this narration, ancestor and descendant both break the fourth wall by having Laura directly address viewers and readers, another aspect of the book which the webseries captures. Interestingly, the show functions not only as an adaptation but also as a sequel of sorts: Carmilla's backstory – as seen in season 1 – seems to be a slightly altered version of the book's events. Thus, the webseries works dually as a sequel to the plot and a transposition and remediation of the themes, characters and structure.

Linda Hutcheon points out that although “most theories of adaptation assume that the story is the common denominator, [...] ‘equivalences’ are sought in different sign systems for the various elements of the story”.¹²⁹ In other words, a similar plot is not a requirement for a successful adaptation, since a story's cardinal elements often lie elsewhere. *Carmilla* 2.0 maintains enough of the novella to remain recognizable, but the changes made are, perhaps, even more relevant to the process of adaptation than the repetitions. While Le Fanu's work may have been subversive within its own historical context, today it might be viewed as conservative and dated. It was by altering events, relationships and consequences that the webseries managed to continue its Foremother's tradition. This is another reason why the show was chosen as an object: while there are many other adaptations of the novella, most of them tend to replicate plot points in detriment of essence, losing, in the process, the subversion which lies at the crux of *Carmilla*'s lineage.

A lineage defined, first and foremost, by femaleness. Out of the three objects herein discussed, this show is perhaps the most visibly female of all. It was produced, written and starred by women – a rarity even now in the entertainment business. Even more uncommon is the fact that virtually all significant characters are women. *Carmilla* presents us with universe ostensibly lead and populated by complex

¹²⁹ HUTCHEON, *A theory of adaptation*, 2006, p. 10.

women: Danny Lawrence – Laura’s love interest for the first half of season one – is arrogant and overbearing, yet deeply loyal and caring; Perry – the equivalent to Madame Porrodon – is sweet and motherly, but insensitive and stubborn; Mattie – Carmilla’s sister and the equivalent to Matska in the book – is threatening and violent, but still funny and loving towards her sister. In the process of adaptation, Laura gains boldness and courage, while Carmilla gains humanity and a past. As the vast majority of Fantasy stories – particularly ones centered around heroism – are spearheaded by men, *Carmilla 2.0* stands out due to its fleshed-out representation of vastly different women working together as protagonists of their own stories. As Laura puts it: “We need to girl the hell up! United front”.¹³⁰

Furthermore, the webseries’ approach to that femaleness is the same as its predecessors’. The thematic focus on female empowerment is carried out by uprooting the notion that women will always be victims – that is the first of those four central genes passed down from our Foremother to her descendants. As in *Carmilla* and *Buffy* before it, the webseries sets the scene by placing a woman in danger and then establishing her as the agent of power in that situation. Through three seasons, Hall’s Laura is targeted by supernatural forces she has no way of overcoming, due to her lack of special abilities – the show chronicles her attempts to exert agency over those events, in an overt refusal of the victim role. Like Buffy, she hopes to conquer unspeakable evils, and the attempts made by the men around her to offer protection are depicted as unnecessary and invasive. One example of this trend can be observed in the University’s fraternity – the Zeta Brothers – and their constant efforts to regulate Laura’s decisions under the guise of chivalry during the first season. This situation is parallel to the General’s attitude towards Carmilla and her mother in the novella’s fourteenth chapter – there too the good intentions of condescending men are used against them. In a clear parallel with her methods from the novella, Carmilla’s mother poses as a defenseless damsel in distress to take advantage of a Zeta’s attempt to rescue her: “Isn’t he darling? I do so

¹³⁰ HALL, 2014, s. 01 ep. 18.

enjoy chivalry!”.¹³¹

Laura's father and his overbearing protectiveness constitute another example of this notion. Like in the novella, the character is depicted as a good, well-meaning man who arrogantly believes he knows what is best while having no real knowledge or agency over the events surrounding his daughter. He is nice, but patronizing and ultimately useless. Between him and Laura's deceased mother, the young woman is effectually parentless – in yet another similarity between Le Fanu's book, *Buffy*, and the webseries. Like the prior protagonists, Laura's character is marked by the absence of her mother – which plays an important part in her coming of age. All three objects herein discussed are examples of *Bildungsroman* – the second of those principal cardinal points being replicated through a process of palimpsestic influence. The journey into adulthood undertaken by this version of Laura is profoundly informed by Buffy's own maturation, since here the supernatural threats also seem to exist mainly as a metaphorical pretext for the protagonist's realizations about real life.

As it was with her ancestors' journeys, this fantastical version of a woman's coming of age is imagined through the metaphorical blending of two different universes. Like with Buffy before her, Laura's exertion of her agency throughout her coming of age is portrayed as a moral necessity. Her disregard of her father's wishes is not depicted as an irresponsibility to be corrected but as an adult woman's right – the only possible path against the dangers of the absurd, challenging reality she suddenly finds herself in. However, despite the visible connection between *Carmilla* 2.0 and *BtVS*, there is a significant shift in tone. While Buffy is the undefeatable, monomythic hero we previously explored, Laura and Carmilla are profoundly flawed people, and the moral world they inhabit is considerably greyer. Laura's path into adulthood often seems to lie within the realization that there are no obvious heroes, and that her efforts to stand up for others will often lead to failures and painful consequences: "Maybe this is just life, where there are no heroes. [...] The universe doesn't care

¹³¹ HALL, 2014, s. 01 ep. 32.

whether you live or die, you just do or don't".¹³² In this sense, *Carmilla* 2.0 adapts to a new cultural context by allowing its female characters to be more fully realized people, facing moral dilemmas that *BtVS* didn't customarily present Buffy with.

Beyond this, Laura's *Bildungsroman* is also marked by a sexual awakening with a vampiric lover. The human/vampire romance – our third cardinal point – here seems to be, effectively, "the PG-13 version of [Laura and Carmilla's] happy ending".¹³³ The ambiguity found in Le Fanu's portrayal of Otherness and the grim ending he gave his protagonists is erased in favor of a new, adapted version, more concordant with a new cultural context. As the webseries progresses, Laura and Carmilla engage in a relationship which bears striking resemblance to that archetype established and developed by our prior objects. These versions of Laura and Carmilla might bear the names of the characters from the novella, but it is the palimpsestic influence of Buffy's relationships to Angel and Spike that is most glaring – right down to the obligatory black leather.

If *Buffy's* romances exist under the palimpsestic shadow of the Le Fanu's Laura and Carmilla, then the relationship seen on the webseries clearly exists under the compounded influences of both those works. It bears repeating: in its approach to many themes and aspects, *Carmilla* 2.0 seems to be *Carmilla* in a post *Buffy* world. As suggested, part of how Whedon's television series contributed to this new world is through the normalization of queer representation in media. The characters of Willow and Tara – which emerged at a time when queer representation was virtually non-existent – were a piece of the puzzle which ultimately allowed the webseries to showcase its own adapted, queer version of Buffy and Angel's romance: the assertive young woman and the humanized, brooding vampire.

In turn, then, in its approach to queerness – the last of the tradition's cardinal points – *Carmilla* delivers something not often seen in our cultural productions: queer characters with lives and

¹³² HALL, 2015, s. 02 ep. 34.

¹³³ HALL, 2015, s. 02 ep. 01.

personalities outside of their sexualities and gender identities. The changes made to Carmilla and Laura's relationship as well as the ones made to the individual characters all have one common goal: to establish them as more plausible people with hopes, fears and traumas, adding humanity to them and consequently to the relationship. The predatory aspect from the book is removed and replaced with a mutual, gradual movement towards each other.

Out of the alterations made for the relationship's benefit, maybe the most significant one is to the story's ending. If not for Carmilla's death in chapter 15, Le Fanu's story might not be viewed in a conservative light, even by today's standards. That demise – which can, as discussed, be interpreted as a form of punishment for the character's sexuality – is now substituted for the already mentioned happy ending: in many ways, the webseries is a love story, and Carmilla and Laura are ultimately united. While this may not seem like the most subversive notion, it is important to remember that this is a homosexual relationship and that positive queer representation – especially when attached to a happy outcome – is still notably rare in mainstream media, as exemplified by the recurrent television trope in which queer characters are killed off at a higher rate than other groups. This trend has been popularly dubbed the "Bury Your Gays" trope, and it has been much discussed in websites, columns and even academic works dealing with television and queer representation.¹³⁴

The online magazine *Autostraddle* conducted a thorough statistical study of the "Bury Your Gays" trope and found that out of all lesbian and bisexual characters depicted in American television from 1976 to 2016 only 10% them lived to see some form of happy ending. In contrast, 32% of them died or saw a partner die. It is in this context that we can understand Carmilla and Laura's seemingly inconsequential and uncontroversial relationship as subversive: their

¹³⁴ For more on this, see: DESHLER, *Not another dead lesbian: the Bury Your Gays trope, queer grief, and The 100*, 2017.

queerness is not marked by strife, pain and prejudice – it simply is.

The series' portrayal of LaFontaine – the equivalent to Mademoiselle de Lafontaine from the book – as a genderqueer¹³⁵ character that goes by “they/them” pronouns is another example of the show’s envelope-pushing queerness. However, LaFontaine’s character is not defined by their expression: it is merely another aspect of their character, much like their love for biology and their obsession with the supernatural. While so many movies and shows tackle minority representation from a “tokenizing” standpoint, I would argue that *Carmilla* departs from that trend considerably. *The American Heritage Dictionary* offers the following definitions for the word “token”:

2. A person who is considered as representative of a social group, such as a lone individual or one of a small number of employees hired primarily to prevent an employer from being accused of discrimination.
3. A keepsake or souvenir.¹³⁶

The most obvious reason why *Carmilla* does not tokenize its queer characters is that they are not “sole individuals” simply aimed at representing a group, nor are they in “small number”: they are the story’s protagonists and make up a very large portion of the characters. The subtler reason, however, is that the show does not treat them as prizes or “souvenirs” to be dangled in front of the audience as proof of inclusiveness: in fact, the show barely mentions their queerness at all.

The subversiveness of *Carmilla*’s approach to queerness lies precisely in its normalization of it. As discussed, this is a show which constantly deals with the delicate balance between showing and telling. In its approach to queerness and gender, the choice made by Jordan Hall is clear: show, not tell. These characters do not talk about the fact that they are women, that they are queer, that they are non-binary in their gender expression: they simply live it. While these traits are intrinsically part of the characters they belong to, they do not define

¹³⁵ A person is genderqueer when they do not identify with the male/female gender binary.

¹³⁶ TOKEN. AMERICAN Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.

them, or the trajectory in which their stories unfold. Both of Laura's relationships – first with Danny and later with Carmilla – develop without any acknowledgment of the fact that they are homosexual relationships. Furthermore, labels pertaining to gender or sexuality are scarcely mentioned by any of the characters. This is what is so new and engaging about the story: the subversion in these characters derives mostly from the fact that they are – within their fictional universe – completely and utterly normal.

Final Thoughts

A Foremother is only long lost if one does not attempt to map out their roots. *Carmilla's* importance to Vampire Fiction can be observed in so many aspects of the subgenre that the limited length of this short book could, in no way, exhaust all possible parallels and connections. But, hopefully, this is a start. Through the opening chapter, the highly significant relationship between *Carmilla* and *Dracula* helped to establish several possible avenues of exploration. Even if Foremother and Forefather stand in opposition – calling for different objects of separate lineages – they still converse, influencing Vampire Fiction in contrasting and yet complementary ways. While this present text did not bear the scope or the intention to delve into a work that has already been so thoroughly analyzed, the investigation of *Dracula's* palimpsestic shadows could also prove fruitful to the better understanding of *Carmilla's* own adaptive repercussions. Aforementioned objects such as *True Blood*, *Twilight* and *The Vampire Diaries* could certainly be analyzed with both Foremother and Forefather in mind. Another avenue of possible exploration I would hope to undertake in the future relates to a deeper analysis of *Buffy*, as informed by its overarching, structural connections to the Hero's Journey. However, that initial intention of charting subversion through time stands independent of future endeavors.

The analysis of *Carmilla's* essence in the second chapter has provided points of comparison which can begin to tell us how a tradition of subversiveness manifests throughout vampiric descendants of all

media and historical context. By playing with Victorian preconceptions of womanhood and foiling readers' expectations of the power they could or could not have, Le Fanu created a protagonist whose coming of age is marked by the romantic, vampiric exploration of a queer sexuality, effectively tying all the novella's cardinal points into one: the subversive femaleness of Laura's sympathetic Otherness. Through Carmilla's bite, Laura's journey into adulthood and her exploration of love and sex becomes symbolically tied to the discovery of her own status as a dehumanized, marginalized human. Arguably, the spark of recognition Laura describes feeling in chapter 3 when Carmilla enters her life isn't merely the recognition of a face – the same one she first identified in that early, childhood fright of hers – but also the recognition of herself within that face and essence. Consequently, those three distinct moments in Laura's life and *Bildungsroman* are all interwoven with the woman's Otherness and thus, with her subversive power: if Carmilla is a marginalized Other, then – through their homosexual relationship – so is Laura. The ambiguousness with which their relationship is represented might not translate easily into today's standards of progressive thought, but alas, that was subversion in the 19th century.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, on the other hand, takes a much more straight-forward approach. The vivacity of feminist discussion in the latter half of the 20th century allowed for the kind of metaphorically based activism that *Buffy* uses to send a clear message to its audience: girl power is here to stay. By tying the protagonist's intrinsic, supernatural power to the series' extended metaphor of a journey into adulthood, *BtVS* constructs itself around the necessity of female empowerment. The connection drawn between that supernatural force and the female, queer witchcraft of Willow's character at a time when queerness in media was certainly not in vogue takes that empowerment another step further into subversion. It is, after all, Willow's magical Otherness that ultimately saves the world by bringing that power to women everywhere at the series' end. However, the presence of toxic, romanticized vampire/human

relationships between Buffy and the man in her life – along with the death of Willow’s first girlfriend, Tara – seems to suggest that our definitions of subversiveness have since adapted, and that the 1990’s feminism of *BtVS* isn’t always in line with current conceptions.

This is where *Carmilla* 2.0, the small-budget webseries with an unending array of female, queer representation comes in. It is clearly influenced by the heroic, symbolic exploits of Buffy, but it goes where Whedon’s series never could due to its historical context: nonchalance. While the Foremother had to subvert though subtext and *Buffy* had to climb on the metaphorical soapbox, the webseries explores female power and queerness through the lenses of a 21st century willingness to live and let live. Here, the palimpsestic shadows of the two predecessors compound and all four cardinal elements come together seamlessly as Laura herself encompasses them all – not necessarily as an outwards political statement, but with the subversiveness of one who refuses to make their identity anything more than a simple, indisputable fact. By inserting characters into a fictional world where female empowerment and queerness are the norm, Jordan Hall creates a universe where they are never Othered in the first place, allowing Laura to grow up, live her romance and fight for a better world without having to justify herself. This is how the webseries innovates in a context where the notion of subversiveness has yet again evolved. It is as if Silas University exists in a magical, strange parallel universe where impossible things happen: giant mushrooms rain down from the skies; the library is sentient; nobody cares if you are gay.

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