



VAMPIRISM AND LESBIANISM IN *CARMILLA* BY JOSEPH SHERIDAN LE FANU

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Abstract:

The Vampire is a mystical figure that embodied the most primitive sentiments and became an icon of the Gothic literature of the nineteenth century. Among these icons, we have the character Carmilla, better known as the vampire of Karnstein. The present work aims to analyze the novel *Carmilla*, by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu in the light of his textual corpus in order to discuss the historical and social circumstances to understand the work, as well as to outline a discussion between vampirism and lesbianism. In Brazil, the novel is little known and explored, presenting few studies of analytical nature involving the themes vampirism and lesbianism.

Keywords: gothic literature, vampirism, lesbianism

1. Introduction

The vampire is a mystical figure that represents what is most primitive and savage. It is the reincarnation of the impulses of destruction and death, because it is a representation of what transits between the middle term: undead. During the nineteenth century, it becomes a transgressive and predator figure. However, there are significant differences between the vampire (male) and the vampire (female), at the level of character construction in the Gothic literature. While the vampire male is seen as a powerful, transgressive figure and as the one who breaks the rules and protocols of society, the female vampire is represented as beautiful, fragile, home wrecker and sexualized to the extreme, negatively.

The novel *Carmilla* was published for the first time in the Dark Blue magazine, in three parts, from December 1871 to March 1872 by Irish writer Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. It was one of the most important writers of ghost stories of the nineteenth century and its influence was decisive in the development of this genre and for the creation of the vampire in literature. As Argel and Neto suggested that "*Stoker himself must have read it and used it as research material for Dracula, although he has not left written records of it*". (2018, p.93)

According to Argel and Neto (2018), the story of the vampire of Karnstein inspired several movies getting behind only *Dracula* in number of adaptations to the big screen. It was also an

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inspiration for a large number of novels, comic books, music, theatrical adaptations, series and video games. A recent Canadian web series, *Carmilla* (2014-2016, creation of Jordan Hall, with Elise Bauman and Natasha Negovanlis), received very favorable reviews, especially by the mostly feminine cast, for presenting a re-reading and modern adaptation of the work, Insertion of LGBTQI+ characters and the critical approach involving sexuality and gender issues.

Retaking the classics of world literature is an inexhaustible exercise so that history, social reality can be understood and identify the nuances of life in society. It's a way of thinking about the world today, too. Giddens states that "*the classics are the founders who still speak to us as a voice that is considered relevant*" (1998, p. 15). Literary works with a certain supernatural or macabre content, according to Lovecraft (2008, p.10), requires the reader a certain dose of imagination and a day-to-day shutdown capability. outside the door, and descriptions of ordinary emotions and incidents, or the vulgar sentimental disfigurements of these incidents and emotions.

Thus, this work aims to analyze the novel *Carmilla*, by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu in the light of his textual corpus in order to discuss the historical and social circumstances to understand the work, as well as to outline a discussion between vampirism and lesbianism. It seeks to insert the work in the Romantic period, initiated at the end of the eighteenth century until the nineteenth century and in what became known as Victorian Era in the United Kingdom.

2. Romanticism and the Victorian Era: some considerations about the woman's condition

For Proença Filho (2002) no movement is born from day to night. The romanticism began at the end of the eighteenth century, in the region that today corresponds to Germany and the United Kingdom of Great Britain. It must also be emphasized that romanticism is not only a state of mind in which feelings speak louder than reason itself.

Chaves (1988) affirms that in "*the history of literature, Romanticism is the name of a literary school that emerges in the last decades of the eighteenth century and will be characterized precisely by replacing the empire of reason for the realm of emotion and fantasy*" (p.56). Strict order, based on discipline, will give way to a style that defends creative freedom and values insubordination. The romantic man is a disgruntled who seeks to express his uneasiness in the world. This dissatisfaction is perceived as a consequence of the difficulty in understanding a world that is undergoing profound transformations.

Both Romanticism and the Victorian Era were marked by criticism of the new social organization, which suffered the first consequences of capitalism and the Industrial revolution. The bourgeoisie is consolidated and provokes serious changes in the organization of society. The fall of nobility and the taking of power by the bourgeoisie will prove that society is changing, which will generate a certain concern in men in their social classes.

On the other hand, the working mass was unjustifiable, received little, worked an exhausting workload and in bad conditions. In view of these constraints in which most people lived at the time, one of the common characteristics was nostalgia, the attempt to escape reality and the memories of the past, totally romanticized and idealized. The literature of the time approached the surreal, the fantastic and the grotesque depicted in the classics such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Mary Stelley's *Frankenstein*.

The Victorian Era although it was a period of great changes and transformations was also marked by violence, diseases and deaths. Strong control over the sexual behavior of men and women, more incisively, is highlighted about women. Despite this period the monarch is a woman and head of state. Queen Victoria attributed the success of her reign to the morality of the Court and the harmony of domestic life. For Michael Foucault, the discourses of the Victorian Era functioned as a symbol of repression and interdiction of sex. Thus, morality led to sexuality through the conjugal and heterosexual family, legitimated by sexual practices of reproductive nature and imposed as a model and discourse of truth.

The woman is confined to the domestic space, which will extend until the nineteenth century. It becomes the symbol of the modesty and fragility that should be protected from the outside world. Thus, the first discourses of containment of sexual impulses emerge, which originate in this century, influenced by the medical thought and the current education. The excessive care of the body was a reflection of a discourse of control of the passions and the dressage of wills. Luciana Santana (2016, p.7) suggested that

"...this control framework, not very often, was in acts of great violence. An example of this is the proliferation of brothel by all major cities in Europe. The "Necessary evil", seen as a way to protect the virtuous wives from the passionate accesses of their husbands, imposed on women "fallen" a life of misery, abandonment, violence and social exclusion. These women were confined to "tolerance houses" constantly monitored by public authorities and visited by physicians to try to prevent diseases from proliferate. Similarly, the heinous crimes, committed between August 31 and November 9, 1888, by the celebrated serial killer Jack the Ripper, atone to the degree of savagery to which the prostitutes in the district of White Chapel were exposed, a stronghold of misery and violence, in Center of the Victorian Empire."

William Acton (1995) asserted that the denial of male impulses could be harmful to health and that the woman could never be sexually denied to man when he requested it. Still in this period, the literature propagated female models created by male writers in order to disseminate and preserve hegemonic models, besides domesticating the behavior of women. It is, therefore, by the novels that the women of the domestic space read on the sly, that their behavior is being built and internalized their destiny.

The woman in the Romantic period represented models (mother, daughter, pure virgin and demon woman) and often they internalized these representations because they believed they were true. This was essential for the support of a patriarchal legacy, because the woman lived subjugated to a system where they were minorities. The novels of this era were true bookcases of morality and good feminine customs, because the writers described how hard women should behave and demonstrate certain qualities (innocence, modesty and modesty).

It is noteworthy here that the demon woman will be used as an educational and pedagogical instrument of all that a woman could not be. On the other hand, any movement in defense of women's rights that threatened the virtue of fragile sex and reflected in life was silted and fought through medical and scientific discourse.

Cloisted from the public world and collected in the private space of the home, the stratifications of society were justified by the differences of the sexes. For to Maria Conceição

Monteiro (2019) the young people of good family received a shallow and superficial education "intended only to make them reluctant in the visiting rooms and to captivate with their brilliance the look of some intends" (p.68). All these were forms and mechanisms to control the public, private and sexual life of women. However, it must be emphasized that some literary works of the Victorian era, as the Gothic literature had an infraction content with the insertion of monstrous figures, such as the vampire, who had the function of representing the desires, wills and wishes of society.

3. About the novel *Carmilla*: the vampirism and lesbianism

The novel *Carmilla*: The Vampire of Karnstein explored a society that lives the influences of the Victorian Era. Throughout the narrative, deep themes like love, secrets and memories. Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu innovates by bringing for the first time the myth of the incarnate vampire in a female figure influenced perhaps by the poem *Christabel* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and other French supernatural tales.

Carmilla was first published in the book *In a Glass Darky* in 1872. Le Fanu with this work helped popularize the stories of ghosts and terror. The story is narrated from the viewpoint of the young Laura, resident of a schloss, located in Styria, East Central Austria. The character Carmilla is of noble origin, surrounded by mysteries and at the same time carries with it a dark and monstrous identity. It does not perceive very well, about the natures of the attacks of the character, whether this is a cat, a ghost or simply a spectrum. Sometimes, Le Fanu describes a character that contradicts the laws of physics by occupying two places at once.

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu risks and innovates by bringing the myth of the incarnate vampire into a female figure for the first time. Carmilla is a mysterious character and the same monstrous, who feeds on blood to the innocence of the young. It is a transgressive figure and a threat to the patriarchy of a society that lives under the aegis of the Victorian Era. For Michael Foucault (2015) the speeches of the Victorian Era functioned as a symbol of repression and interdiction of sex. Thus, morality led to sexuality through the conjugal and heterosexual family, legitimated by sexual practices of reproductive nature and imposed as a model and discourse of truth. Carmilla, for not following this expectation and what was expected of a young woman, must be eliminated and silted for breaking the norms and standards of a society commanded by men.

It should be noted that the events occurring throughout the novel are reported from the perspective and memories of the character Laura. She tells us her experience of conviviality, affectionate and loving with the mysterious Carmilla, who is staying at the schloss of her family. The arrival of Carmilla leaves Laura very euphoric and cheerful, for she is shown to be a young girl lacking in female friendships. Laura is a kind of instrument that places us alongside situations and scenarios that automatically inserts us into history as witnesses of a terrible and traumatic experience.

Carmilla will be an entity that will mark Laura's transition from adolescence to adult. This process of remembering events will make the character no longer the same. Before meeting the vampire, Laura lived under the protection of her father, her nannies and her educator Mademoiselle De Lafontaine. There is a physical and emotional involvement between the two

female characters. Sheridan Le Fanu sustains a perception of lesbianism in the book depicted in something torturant and codified in a double system of opposite binary significations such as pleasure/displeasure; love/hatred; joy/rage and forbidden/desirable. The passages below exemplify these feelings.

"In these mysterious moods I did not like her. I experienced a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable, ever and anon, mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust. I had no distinct thoughts about her while such scenes lasted, but I was conscious of a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence. This I know is paradox, but I can make no other attempt to explain the feeling". (17; ch. 4)

"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". (17; ch. 4)

The suggestion of a homoeroticism among the characters is codified in "*a system of double bonds, systematically oppressing people, identities and gay acts*" (Sedwick, 2007). *Carmilla* is an object of transgression. Sheridan Joseph Le Fanu develops lesbianism in a discreet and subtle way, because both aggressive female sexuality and homosexuality were seen by Victorian society as a degeneration of moral and social codes. The writer used elements of vampiresque literature to give an evil and unwanted content to the vampiresic behaviors of *Carmilla*, also inserting the representation of the *femme fatale* that must be fought and moralized.

The governesses and the educator of Laura, Mademoiselle De Lafontaine, controlled her, as well as the father, her only relative, who allowed her to choose her own path in almost everything, without breaking this bond or the development of an emancipation. *Carmilla* emerges as a figure of enchantment, friendship and lover, because she is the only person Laura develops a more intimate relationship. *Carmilla* is a young woman who travels through places that Laura has no access to. She's attractive, sensitive and delicate young. Seduce everyone with their beauty, education and mysteries. In his vampiresque form, he treats all his victims as food, however, it is by the young of higher social classes that she falls in love and establishes an emotional, affective and loving bond. In the narrative of the book there is a loving attraction between Laura and *Carmilla*, but there is also a feeling of female sexual repression. The lesbianism in the narrative is repressed. The loving involvement between the two female characters is sometimes represented as repulses, disgust or something that should not be felt.

"From these foolish embraces, which were not of very frequent occurrence, I must allow, I used to wish to extricate myself; but my energies seemed to fail me. Her murmured words sounded like a

lullaby in my ear, and soothed my resistance into a trance, from which I only seemed to recover myself when she withdrew her arms". (17; ch. 4)

"In these mysterious moods I did not like her. I experienced a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable, ever and anon, mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust. I had no distinct thoughts about her while such scenes lasted, but I was conscious of a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence. This I know is paradox, but I can make no other attempt to explain the feeling". (17; ch.4)

However, even if there is a desire between the two characters, there is a repression of this feeling, because the woman was not a free subject to live her personal, loving and affective wills in the Victorian Era. The report of conviviality and social experience that Laura had with Carmilla is permeable by a coercive and fearful feeling. Sheridan Le Fanu used the artifice of personal account and remembrance, even if in a fictional way, as a presupposition for Laura to take from the whole situation lived a lesson based on experience and the pain of having lived with Carmilla.

4. Conclusion

Before I met Carmilla, Laura was trapped in ignorance of nothing to know about passion and love. In this sense, Laura changes and ceases to be an innocent and immature young woman. Even with the tragic end of the vampire, she will remain eternally in the mind Laura as a beautiful, mysterious and seductive young woman. Carmilla is the representation of the repressed desires of a sexually repressed society. Otherwise, the abnormalities of the vampire are part of both Laura and ourselves, because the vampire as an artistic and literary manifestation allows us to demonstrate the foundations of our humanity, perversion and savagery. The vampire with his dual condition of aversion and seduction teaches us about conflict what is primitive and fragile of the human being.

Laura is fascinated and in love with Carmilla. The vampire acts slowly and meticulously until she satiates her passion and sucks all the lives of her poor and helpless victims. For the male characters present in Le Fanu's narrative, the vampire embodies transgression, abnormality and the ability to perhaps dominate and devour these same men. This femme fatale vampire, demonic and dangerous is an outlaw, a threat to patriarchy and the masculinity of male characters existing in Le Fanu's narrative.

Carmilla is a monster whose practices need to be interrupted and forbidden. His end needs to be an "example" and his appetite and sexual desire banned by mens (Laura's father and general Spielsdorf) in defense of his daughters and family. The vampire must be eliminated for committing prohibited acts and by breaking the click of life, that is, being a undead. It attacks the established social order and the structures of power, authority and hierarchy.

The vampire Carmilla breaks with Laura's innocent essence, dazzles the young woman with her stories about the vast world outside the schloss. She is a figure without stability, bankrupt and homeless who lives going from one property to another in search of new victims. Causes an imbalance in the faith of the characters and in science itself, since Carmilla causes

Laura and her father to question the human understanding of supernatural or superstitious events that do not allow a scientific explanation. The relationship between the vampire and young Laura is dangerous and at the same time profound, strange, familiar and repulsive. Carmilla teaches Laura the dark side of love with kisses and hugs from which the young woman could not get rid of: "*It was like the ardor of a lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet overpowering; and with gloating eyes she drew me to her, and her hot lips traveled along my cheek in kisses*". (17; ch. 4)

The moment young Laura finds herself in Carmilla's hugs she feels paralyzed, with no energy to escape the vampire's loving raptures. The vampire failed to fully get hold of Laura, as her intentions failed the moment she became the hunt for General Spielsdorf. With the hunt of Carmilla and consequently his death society will return to normal no more transgressions and abnormalities. The vampire will no longer be a threat to order and society. At the end of Carmilla's reading, we perceive that Laura transforms and ceases to be so innocent and ceases to live the ignorance of nothing knowing or knowing about the passion.

"I write all this you suppose with composure. But far from it; I cannot think of it without agitation. Nothing but your earnest desire so repeatedly expressed, could have induced me to sit down to a task that has unstrung my nerves for months to come, and reinduced a shadow of the unspeakable horror which years after my deliverance continued to make my days and nights dreadful, and solitude insupportably terrific". (53; ch. 16)

Even with Carmilla's death, his love for Laura became indestructible. With a tragic end it is perceived that love between women was not allowed by a Victorian society. It was unacceptable in the Victorian era that a woman was independent and free as Carmilla. Nor was it allowed women to be free to move freely as Carmilla had and to live intensely their love for innocent young womans. The vampire has autonomy to decide on her life, where she wants to go and choose his ways. You don't need a man to decide your actions, ways to be and live. All this becomes a threat to the men who appear in Le Fanu's fiction. Carmilla is a provocation and a debauchery of Victorian society, where women are destined for the private space of the house and motherhood. Being a vampire, Carmilla carries with him an evil connotation and a way of representing everything a woman should not be.

However, even with the tragic end of the vampire this remains eternally in Laura's mind and in the pages of the book of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu as a beautiful, seductive and mysterious young woman.

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Master's degree in Culture and Society from the Federal University of Maranhão. Professor in Basic Education, early years, in the municipality of Paço do Lumiar, Maranhão, Brazil. Have graduation in Letters with qualification in English language and literature. Have publications in the areas of gender studies, feminist studies, education and in Portuguese and English literature.

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