The Haunt of Injustice: Exploring Homophobia in Vampire Literature

Clare Nee, *Siena College*

The vampire figure is used within gothic literature tradition as a metaphorical representation of the unknown, encapsulating the fears of the given society from which the piece of literature derives. This essay investigates the connections between the evolution of the vampire, more specifically in Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, both of which depict the violent hunt of the homosexual, vampiric figure within society. This piece exposes the gothic depictions of homophobic societies and reveals the ways in which homophobic violence still remains a prevalent issue within the contemporary world.

Vampire literature uses the terrifying, superhuman creature as a fictional means to build upon the very human quality of anxiety. The vampire is a literary metaphor of the unknown, a force that has the ability to consume mortal lives and create immortal beings. Since the beginning of time, humans have thought themselves to be superior to their surroundings: to animals, the environment, etc. In a fictional world in which vampires exist, however, the human is no longer the dominant, most powerful being. Thus, the concept inflicts fear which permits the construction of the hunt in vampire literature. The classic texts of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* reinforce the notion that the vampire encapsulates societal anxieties about the "uncontrollable," one that pertains to sexuality and transforms these narratives into cultural hauntings. While some people may believe that vampire literature are composed of merely silly, "make believe" stories, the truth is that they act as platforms to address serious social issues—such as homophobia—that still haunt our society. *Carmilla* and *Dracula* portray the hunts for and violent deaths of homosexual vampires to underscore the normalized marginalization of homosexuals, a cultural haunting that extends into modern society. This essay seeks to expose the gothic depictions of homophobic societies to reflect the ways in which people have viewed

homosexuality as something dangerous which threatens the power of the heteronormative hierarchy. The textual analysis of the history of this narrative begins with the examination of Le Fanu's *Carmilla* then transitions into Stoker's *Dracula* to unveil the disturbing cultural haunt of the homophobic brutality inflicted upon the LGBTQ community within society even still today.

Carmilla presents the taboo topic of female desire through the fluidity of the homosocial and homosexual nature of the relationship between Carmilla and Laura that deviates from the heteronormative society. These desires seamlessly unravel throughout the story without much verbal discussion since they were not socially permissible during this time period. Adrienne Antrim Major supports this sentiment in her article "Other Love: Le Fanu's *Carmilla* as Lesbian Gothic." She unpacks the depiction of love within this novella and the anticipated social response to the women's relationship. Major writes, "... it poses a paradigm of feminine power and lesbian love that might well create terror in the hearts of his contemporaries..." (151). Major emphasizes the problematic response of society to homosexuality and later describes the public's perception of queer desire as perversion, which encapsulates the demonization of homosexual individuals and sets the stage for the homophobic cultural hauntings.

Major also addresses the portrayal of love within *Carmilla* as malevolent, yet argues that Carmilla and Laura's relationship offers Laura a position of power because it deviates from the traditional structure of relationships in which women were inferior. One particular scene that shows this within the novella is when Laura and Carmilla discuss the human fear of death, which Laura recognizes as universal to all humans. Carmilla responds, "But to die as lovers may—to die together so that they may live together. Girls are caterpillars while they live in the world, to be finally butterflies when summer comes; but in the meantime there are grubs and larvae..." (27). This quote exemplifies the sinister tone that the character of Carmilla adopts because it shows death in the context of lovers as a state that is embraced, or rather idolized. It is important to note that death as lovers is the only true way that this lesbian couple would be able to be together during the 19th century since openly homosexual relationships were not permitted. The comparison of women to insects metaphorically represents the lack of power that women have within society. Carmilla advocates, in a rather dark way, for Laura to die with her because the choice of death would be a final assertion of agency and power through their refusal to conform to the heteronormative society around them. Thus, the notion of sexuality transforms into a supernatural context as the heteronormative society haunts these individuals with torment and suppression to conceal this part of their identity.

Further addressing gender and sexual agency, vampire literature works with familial structures to reflect cultural hauntings. The incorporation of the familial structure enforces the cruciality of power dynamics within the microcosm of the private sphere to reflect the larger macrocosm of disparity between male and female power. In the article "Repossessing the Body: Transgressive desire in 'Carmilla' and *Dracula,*" Elizabeth Signorotti compiles the variation of interpretations that scholars have formed regarding sexuality within *Carmilla* and *Dracula*. Signorotti further describes the implications of homosexual relationships within a heterosexually dominated society. She explores the notion of power dynamics within the family, particularly between Laura and her father. Signorotti states that the "... lesbian relationship defies the traditional structures of kinship by which men regulate the exchange of women to promote male bonding" (607). This quote reinforces the objectification of the female within the heteronormative society, which gave males the familial power to control women through marriage. As with sexual dynamics, gender dynamics further exemplify the social haunting of marginalized people.

The relationship that is created between these two women threatens the very reassurance of male power within this traditional scope. This is particularly evident within the novella when Laura's father and the General reflect upon the death of his daughter. The General proclaims, "... inveighing against the 'hellish arts' to which she had fallen victim... and his wonder that Heaven should tolerate so monstrous an indulgence of the lusts and malignity of hell" (49). The use of religion permits the General to invalidate the relationship of Laura and Carmilla by denoting it to an "indulgence of the lusts." He regards female desire as something that detracts from the normality of human beings. Moreover, he portrays the homosexual vampire, Carmilla, as an evil "other" that corrupts the conditions of society and robs him of his own power. This displays another instance in which homophobic beliefs haunt the society in which these relationships exist and, furthermore, causes these individuals to suffer in turn.

After Carmilla is demonized for her sexuality and involvement with the daughters of these men, she is hunted by the male alliance who seek vengeance and the restoration of their own power and control within the world. They claim that an eye for an eye is the only true way to restore justice, or at least what they believe is a just society. The notion of justice, however, is skewed by the homophobic undertones that haunt these individuals. Some critics argue whether the General's daughter even died, or if this is merely symbolic of the death of her purity. Signorotti quotes Sian Macfie's perspective regarding lesbian relationships and blood in her article, arguing that it is not death that takes the General's daughter away from him but rather the notion of the "psychic sponge" and lesbianism as a consumption of her youth and purity (610). Moreover, she

loses all value within society, ultimately leaving her undesirable by men. Macfie states that "... close female bonding and lesbianism are conflated with notions of the unhealthy draining of female vitality" (qtd. in Signorotti 610). Critics argue that lesbianism threatens the very nature of the social exchange of women, which gave men power over their daughters. The metaphor of vampirism in relation to lesbianism unveils the homophobic perspective of same-sex relationships producing an impurity of blood. This belief echoes the homophobic presumptions and beliefs that have haunted our society, which was particularly evident during the AIDS crisis within America during the 1980s. Furthermore, the relationship between the society in which this text was written and our modern world reflects the homophobic trepidations regarding same-sex relationships and the purification of the body, as well as the cultural haunting that these beliefs constructed.

Despite how much power has been attributed to Carmilla and her ability to steal all of Laura's vitality, the hunt ends with the sacrificial persecution of this homosexual vampire. It becomes abundantly clear, however, through Le Fanu's description of Carmilla's death that there are some overlaps between Carmilla as a vampire and as a human being. In the final scene of her life, Le Fanu writes, "... a sharp stake driven through the heart of the vampire, who uttered a piercing shriek at the moment, in all respects such as might escape from a living person in the last agony" (70). In this final scene, the end of Carmilla's life emphasizes her human-like qualities, such as the ability to feel pain. Le Fanu contrasts the characters of Laura and Carmilla to depict the two binary identities that women could obtain within this society: the victim or the monster. In Julie Miess' article entitled "Celebrating the Female Monster: Undead Housewife and Likeable Lamia," she expresses that women had the scarce options of either being "... the passive victim or, if she chooses not to inhabit that role, she is figured as the inhuman mythological female monster" (236). Moreover, Le Fanu intentionally creates the dichotomy between Laura and Carmilla to construct a cautionary tale. In this sense, if one chooses to be a "monster" through the embracement of one's own lesbian sexuality, that person will face marginalization and social death. Whether the woman's death comes figuratively or literally, men remain in power within the heteronormative patriarchy, a haunting reality that still exists in today's world.

Twenty-six years after *Carmilla* was published, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* evolved and added to the genre of vampire literature. Stoker continues with the concept of "otherness" in society within vampire literature by approaching the topic of homosexuality in a drastically different way than Le Fanu. Many scholars critique this novel for being Stoker's way of reinstating the heteronormative beliefs of Europe during this time period, especially since it was published merely two years after Stoker's close friend, Oscar Wilde, was persecuted for being a homosexual (Clark 167-68). This is

particularly evident throughout the novel with Stoker's incorporation of female dialogue in the form of letters. Mina and Lucy share a homosocial bond, emphasizing their intimate connection, in which they often forcefully convey that their only purpose as women is to serve the men within a marriage. In a letter to Mina, Lucy writes, "My dear Mina, why are men so noble when we women are so little worthy of them?" (Stoker 73). This quote speaks volumes to the societal perception of women as inferior to men within the public and domestic spheres, and it also illumines the enforced heterosexual nature of relationships, which persists as a cultural haunting.

The examination of this text raises questions about Bram Stoker's own sexuality, suggesting that he hid behind these traditional structures in order to hide his homosexual relationship with Henry Irving (Primuth 17). In the article "Vampires Are Us," Richard S. Primuth explores not only the sexuality of the character Dracula, but also of Stoker. The author argues that Stoker used Oscar Wilde's letters to Lord Alfred Douglas as a means of inspiration for his unconventional style of text. Primuth explains that, "at a time of extreme repression and fear for gay people, using their characters as a metaphor for their own hidden sexuality was an outlet for self-expression" (17). With that being said, whether or not Stoker himself was gay is left unknown. It is apparent, however, that he used his knowledge of heteronormative structures to create a homosexual vampire as the demonized "other" within the novel.

Stoker writes Dracula as an exotic being who lives in complete and utter isolation to reflect the haunting marginalization of the LGBTQ community within society. Dracula traps Jonathan Harker merely to have connection with other human beings; however, Stoker's tainted description of Dracula portrays him as predatory rather than lonely. Stoker describes Dracula's hands as "... rather coarse—broad, with squat fingers. Strange to say, there were thin hairs in the center of his palm... nails were long and fine and cut to a sharp point" (25). This quote highlights the dramatic dehumanization of Dracula as the "other," attributing animalesque qualities to him to emphasize his predatory nature. This description creates a notion of disgust and repulsion within the readers at the sight of Dracula, exploiting the uncanny resonance connects the human world to the supernatural.

As the text continues, Harker discovers that there are sexy female vampires who live within the shadows of Dracula's castle, and they try to seduce him. Dracula bursts into the room and exclaims, "How dare you touch him, any of you... This man belongs to me! Beware how you meddle with him, or you'll have to deal with me" (Stoker 50). This shows his intense level of infatuation with Harker and is the first example in which he establishes sexual ownership over him. Dracula also claims that he has the ability to love, which directly implies his homosexual intentions with-

in his relationship with Harker. The article "Metaphor into Metonymy: The Vampire Next Door," written by Jules Zanger, explores the function of the female vampires within Dracula's castle as a haunting of the European past traditions. Zanger asserts that they serve no purpose except to exist as symbols of "... proper Victorian ladies, remaining properly at home while the master of the house goes forth to do solitary battle against the forces of virtue" (18). He argues that the women are merely objects of past traditional images of the heteronormative household. Thus, there emerges a familial dynamic of power within the household similar to the one that is established within *Carmilla*. It differs, however, in the sense that this structure actually favors the homosexual vampire. The women are necessary to the plotline of the story and act as "mediators" to the homosexual undertones that Stoker intends to convey (Craft qtd. in Schopp 235). With that being said, the women exist simply to make the homoerotic undertones less abrasive within the text, since that would have been socially unacceptable during the turn of the 19th century.

The heteronormative frame within this story uses the binary contrast of gender to make the homosexuality less explicit between the men. Andrew Schopp's article "Cruising the Alternatives: Homoeroticism and the Contemporary Vampire" explores the transformative evolution of the vampire and the ways in which its purpose changes to reflect the cultural anxieties and hauntings (231). Many scholars, like Schopp, believe that "the vampire product creates a space for performing alternatives to social/cultural mandates, and the act of reading allows the reader to participate in, and contribute to, the use of the space" (235). In the case of *Dracula*, however, this belief does not apply. While some critics argue that the importance of vampire literature is the product of fictional space created to address social injustices, the space created within *Dracula* reveals the reinforcement of homophobic perceptions. Thus, while more modern-day literature reflects progression towards the use of fiction as a means to right the wrongs within society, it is evident through the animalistic depiction of the "other" within European society that homosexuality will result in the marginalization and cultural haunting to which Dracula is subjected.

After Jonathan escapes from Dracula's castle and returns home, the homosocial group of men—Van Helsing, Seward, Morris, and Arthur—make it their conquest to track Dracula down and slay him. With the assistance of Mina, they are successful in this endeavor. They have condemned Dracula as an evil monster and refuse to allow him to assimilate into their traditional English culture due to his foreign origins and sexuality. This condemnation leaves him susceptible to being pushed out on the margins of society. The group, however, does not even allow him to exist on the margins of society, because they will not stop until the hunt is completed and Dracula is dead. Nina Auerbach's *Our Vampires, Ourselves* describes the complex relationship between this

overarching group of men. She argues that Dracula solely preys on the important women within Jonathan's social group because "... Mina is only a pawn in his battle against the men. Stripped of his power of combination, catalyzing homoerotic relationships in which he cannot participate, this vampire loses his story, for he has no confidante willing to hear it" (82). This shows the deep level of isolation inflicted upon Dracula, which subsequently results in the unfortunate deaths of many individuals within this social group. Dracula goes against the traditional nature of homosocial relationships because he seeks to pursue a homosexual relationship with Jonathan Harker. What is also important to draw from this quote is Auerbach's acknowledgement of the lack of a narrative that we, as readers, receive from Dracula. Thus, the reader is simply left with the tale that is told through the homophobic perspectives of the men, who are too afraid to go against the societal norms to allow themselves to view Dracula not as an "other" haunted by societal anxieties, but as a man.

In the context of society, vampire literature reflects the current conditions and injustices that haunt our society. Through the literary examples of Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the social injustices regarding homosexuality and homophobia within society prevail. What is particularly interesting about both works is the lack of narrative of the homosexual vampires. Carmilla never has the opportunity to tell her story, and neither does Dracula. One can infer that these narratives would have constructed a more empathetic and sympathetic view of these characters as a way to re-humanize them. But alas, the world may never know. One critique claims that internal vampiric dialogue "... described from within is transformed from a code of hegemonic anxiety to a signifier of cultural change" (Miess 235). These narratives, however, are intentionally left out to reflect the cultural hauntings and oppression via silence of the marginalized "other" within society: those belonging to the LGBTQ community.

While it is true that Western society has moved in a more progressive direction towards equality of LGBTQ rights, the unfortunate reality for many of these individuals is that they are still greatly oppressed. The homophobic hunt that continues today and haunts our world exemplifies this oppression and can be seen in incidents like the Pulse Nightclub massacre where 49 individuals lost their lives. Unfortunately, this is merely one example within the American society of mass murder that was targeted at the LGBTQ community. The FBI revealed that there has been a steady incline of hate crimes against this community over the past fifty years, with a specific emphasis on the years of 2014-2017 in which the hate crimes against this community of individuals rose approximately 3% (Hauck 1). In 2017, the FBI reports that there were 1,130 incidents of hate crimes reported against the LGBTQ community, a majority of which were targeted at gay men

(Hauck 1). These are solely the incidents that are reported and documented, which is indicative that there are likely to be even more incidents of violence that go unreported. Fear, violence, and hatred are perpetuated within these tragic events of the modern world and accentuate the cultural haunting of homophobia. The increase in violence and marginalization against the LGBTQ community urgently calls for societal action and expulsion of these homophobic mindsets that infect our society and culture. Both *Carmilla* and *Dracula* remind readers of the homophobic mindset that haunts our society and create a linear history of the transgressive marginalization against homosexuals within society. The power of these works derives not from what they lack, but rather what they stand for: an acknowledgement of the history of violence and hatred towards these individuals. They manifest these notions in terms of vampire literature to create a response of resistance towards these mentalities and a deconstruction of the injustice that continues to haunt our world.

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