

The evolution of the vampire



The appearance of the Gothic in architecture of the Middle Ages was the start point and muse of Gothic Literary. The lack of simplicity, symmetry, regularity and nonconformation to nature inspired the features of Gothic Literature: horror/ terror, dark environment, paranormal, evil creatures, supernatural entities (vampires, ghosts, werewolves), haunted castles and mansions, isolated setting, violence, death and the sublime. The aim of this paper is to follow and compare the evolution of the vampire from the Gothic classics *Carmilla* (Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, 1872) and *Dracula* (Bram Stoker, 1897) until their film adaptations.

Influenced by Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), *Carmilla* is one of the earliest work of vampire fiction. First serialized in *The Dark Blue* magazine (1871-1872)[1] and then reprinted by Le Fanu in the *In a Glass Darkly* short story collection (1872), *Carmilla* is the story of a female her gender being important “ in the construction of her monstrosity” (Creed 1993, p. 3) vampire named *Carmilla* (anagram of *Mircalla*) that preys on females. Because of her preference for female victims, the novella is often seen as a lesbian vampire story that challenges the Victorian age ideologies of sexuality ‘ as with all other stereotypes of the feminine [the female monster] is defined in terms of her sexuality’ (Creed 1993, p. 3). The story ran in one issue of 1871 (December, pp. 434-448) and in three issues of 1872 (January, pp. 592-606; February, pp. 701-714; and March, pp. 59-78).

The plot of the novella is easy to follow and makes an entertaining reading: Laura dreams that she was visited by a mysterious figure when she was six years old and remembers being bitten “ as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment” (Le Fanu, 7). Twelve years later, Laura and

her English father were supposed to be visited by General Spielsdorf and his niece Bertha Rheinfeldt, but Bertha dies under mysterious circumstances that are to be clarified later in the novella. As Laura longs for a new companion, a carriage accident brings Carmilla in the care of Laura and her father. The friendship that develops between them is seen from two perspectives by scholars: a lesbian attempt that came from Carmilla or a mother-daughter friendship that Laura never had (both motifs are valorized in the film adaptations). Meanwhile young women and girls die of an unknown disease and Carmilla acts bizarre (refuses to attend prayers, sleeps during the day, sleepwalks outside during the night, claims that the hymns hurt her ears). In chapter 7, Laura finds a portrait of her ancestor, Mircalla the Countess Karnstein, dated 1698 and observes that Carmilla looks strikingly similar to her. During Carmilla's stay, Laura keeps having nightmares of a large cat-like beast that takes the form of a female. In another nightmare, she sees Carmilla standing the foot of her bed and hears her saying "Your mother warns you to beware of the assassin," and then wakes up with her nightgown all drenched in blood. Her health is getting worse so her father summons the doctor. After examination, the doctor speaks privately with her father and only asks for her to never be unattended. En route to Karnstein, Laura and her father come across General Spielsdorf and start talking about the strange thing that happened to Laura. Then, the General told Laura's father that Bertha had the same symptoms, when a mysterious Millarca moved with them for a short period of time, before she died and explains why Millarca is a vampire and how they can kill her. While locating her tomb, the General and Laura were alone in an old chapel and Millarca suddenly appeared. The General and Millarca fly into a

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rage upon seeing each other. Laura understands now that Millarca and Carmilla are the same person with the help of the General. In the last chapter, Laura explains the grotesque techniques of Carmilla's murder that she didn't attend to and her father sends her to Italy to regain her health, which she never fully does.

Therefore, the features of Le Fanu's vampire are: she is a female, intelligent, charm, beauty, shape shifting, vulnerability to sun light and church related rituals, sleeps in a coffin and strength, feeds on human blood.

The first film adaptation, *Byzantium* (2012) focuses on the mother-daughter side of the story. In the film, Clara is a prostitute that transformed into a vampire by stealing the map that gave the location of a cave that had the power to do such thing. Enjoying the life of darkness, she transforms her daughter (that she abandoned at an orphanage/ catholic school in order to protect her of such a life, but still provided money for her) and makes her promise she won't tell anybody. This is another similarity with the novella: during the ball at the General's residence, the mother of Carmilla also forces her to remain silent. Eleanor respects her mother's wish for 200 years, until she feels like she can't keep the secret anymore. When she meets Frank, a teenage boy and fell in love with, she tells him her secret. At first, Frank tells about this to the high school director, which calls for Clara and ends up being killed by her for founding the truth. But in the end, he begs her to transform him in a vampire as well. She does, and her mother sets her free. Clara and Eleanor have similar features as Carmilla: they are both beautiful, charming, intelligent (Eleanor more in comparison to her mother) and feed on human blood. However, Eleanor chooses not to prey on ordinary humans, like her

mother, but to only drink from elders that are about to die and always asks them for permission.

The second film adaptation, *The Curse of Styria* (2014) stays truer to the novella. Lara (and not Laura, as the novella character) is the daughter of an ex Cambridge professor. They both go to Styria and stay at a castle they rented for a week because her father had to complete a study. As in the novella, they awaited for the professor's co-worker and Lara's friend, but they didn't make it because they could not pass the border. Lara suffers greatly because she cannot be together with her friend and that is when Carmilla appears in her life, similar to the way Carmilla appeared in Laura's life: by a vehicle accident. In this film, the lesbian side of the novella is much more highlighted than the maternal side, Carmilla holding hands with Lara when she influenced her to sneak out and see the view and starts with her and even sharing a few kisses with Lara in the second half of the film. As in the novella, Carmilla finds funerals pointless and annoying. She also feeds with human blood, is charming, beautiful, intelligent and somehow evil because of her vampire nature. In the near-by village girls and young females start acting bizarre and Lara suspects that it is because of Carmilla. Turns out she was right and Carmilla got murdered in the same grotesque as Carmilla from the novella.

Although the films were completely different from each other, I consider that they both represented Le Fanu's Carmilla beautifully the kind of vampire Carmilla was: intelligent, gorgeous, mysterious and blood consuming entity in both her maternal and lover side.

Dracula (1897) by Bram Stoker introduces the character of Count Dracula, the classic image of a vampire everybody now has. The plot is more complex than Carmilla's because Dracula is one of the first Gothic novels that appeared in English literature. The Count is based on Vlad The Impaler (Dracul), voievod of Wallachia that later inspired even video games characters (such as the Castlevania series) " Who was it but one of my own race who as Voivode crossed the Danube and beat the Turk on his own ground? This was a Dracula indeed! Woe was it that his own unworthy brother, when he had fallen, sold his people to the Turk and brought the shame of slavery on them! Was it not this Dracula, indeed, who inspired that other of his race who in a later age again and again brought his forces over the great river into Turkey-land; who, when he was beaten back, came again, and again, though he had to come alone from the bloody field where his troops were being slaughtered, since he knew that he alone could ultimately triumph!" (Chapter 3, pp. 19). Profesor Van Helsing is also speculating the identity of the Count: " He must, indeed, have been that Voivode Dracula who won his name against the Turk, over the great river on the very frontier of Turkey-land." (Chapter 18, p. 145).

The story is told in epistolary format, diary fragments, newspaper articles and short travelogue entries. Jonathan Harker travels to " the extreme east of the country, just on the borders of three states, Transylvania, Moldavia and Bukovina, in the midst of the Carpathian mountains" (Chapter 1, p. 6) to help the Count buy some properties in the United Kingdom. The route to the castle is filled with Gothic elements such as wolves, dark forests, the strange circle of blue fire and many others. Soon Harker realizes he is Dracula's

prisoner and he barely escapes alive. Meanwhile, Dracula is stalking Lucy Westerna, Mina Hurray's friend, and communicates with Renfield, an insane patient that eat insects, birds and rats in order to absorb their " life force". He is the only one able to detect Dracula when he arrives. Lucy suspiciously begins to waste away and Seward (Renfield's doctor) summons his old teacher, Van Helsing. Van Helsing is able to immediately detect Lucy's disease but refuses to acknowledge and diagnoses her with blood-loss. Dr. Seward, Helsing, Quincey and Arthur (Lucy's fiancé) all contribute but she still dies. After her death, many children start disappearing and Helsing knows that this is Lucy's fault, so he tells the rest of them that she actually transformed into a vampire. They hunt her down, stake her, behead her and fill her mouth with garlic. Around the same time, Jonathan Harker arrives from Budapest, where Mina marries him. The vampire hunters try to learn about vampires as much as they can through folklore legends and superstitions in order to understand his powers and his weaknesses. Mina plays an important role in this act as well, collecting relevant data about him from newspapers and journals. They manage to discover all the propeties he bought in London and they destroy all his boxes with dirt that he needs to be able to walk there (since Dracula can only walk and rest on dirt from his homeland), however they do not find all the boxes because some of them are sent back to Transylvania. After leaning their plans, Dracula attacks Mina and feed her his blood in order to control her, but not fully transform her into a vampire. Mina helps the group find Dracula's location using what she received from the Count, but urges the group not to tell their plans in fear that Dracula could be listening. They learn that he is travelling back to Transylvania with gypsies. They manage to ambush him, Harker shears his

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throat and the mortally wounded Quincey stabs the Count in the heart. Dracula transforms into dust, Mina is cured of vampirism and Quincey dies. The last chapter is a note from Jonathan Harker that describes his life with Mina, their marriage and their son, named after all the men who fought against the Count.

Here, the vampire features are almost the complete opposite of Carmilla's: the Count is a male, he is old and hideous “ with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils; with lofty domed forehead, and hair growing scantily round his temples but profusely elsewhere (...). The mouth, so far I can see it under the heavy moustache, was fixed and rather cruel-looking” (Stoker, p. 24), “ his hands (...) were rather coarse- broad with squat fingers. Strange to say, there were hair in the centre of the palm.” (Stoker, p. 24). His breath “ was rank” (Stoker, p. 24), he did not have a reflection “ I had not seen him, since the reflection of the glass covered the whole room behind me” (Stoker, p. 32), he could not stand garlic and could only walk on dirt from his homeland. But, as Carmilla, he had the intelligence, the ability to shape shift (into a large wolf), the Christian related symbols did affect him, he could not walk during the day, he could manipulate others, feeds on human blood and the way he dies is similar to Carmilla's. Stoker created the classic vampire definition that is to inspire many more plays, films and authors.

There have been many film adaptations of Stoker's Dracula, starting from the classic *Nosferatu* (1922) and ending with modern day (a new adaptation of *Nosferatu* that came out in 2017). But the one that I consider to be as faithful to the novel as it can be and at the same time a cinematographic masterpiece is the 1992 adaptation *Dracula*. The Count is represented

almost as the book described him, however he can shape shift his form into a younger and attractive male that seduces Mina (who looks strikingly similar to his long lost wife, Elisabeta) and makes her have an affair with him while Jonathan Harker still tries to escape his castle back in Transylvania. Lucy also ends up transforming into a vampire and being killed by Van Helsing, Arthur, Quincey and Seward. The ending is magnifically portrayed, one cannot turn his head away from it.

The features of the vampire may differ from Carmilla's, but they managed to live through out history, molding the definition of the vampire as we know and love today. The novel and films inspired many other creators, new adaptations of Dracula never ceasing to appear (with better and better cinematographic techniques and make up). It also inspired many authors, such as Anne Rice (Interview with a Vampire, also adapted into a film), Richelle Mead (Vampire Academy), Stephenie Meyer (The Twilight Saga; every was adapted into a film), Charlaine Harris (whose saga Sookie Stackhouse also inspired the TV show Tru Blood), Cassandra Clare (The Mortal Instrument) and many others. The idea of the vampire was adapted and manipulated in various forms by each creator.

In conclusion, the vampire concept survived throughout history thanks to the legends that represent the origins of the Gothic classics Carmilla novella and Dracula novel. Those two masterpieces were only the starting point of the supernatural fiction world that we all know and love today. From literature to films, the vampire maintained the image of the representative undead creature that should send shivers down the spine of everyone who heard of it.

Works Cited

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