How important is parenthood in Carmilla?

The 'vampire' is a folkloric monster that rose to mass cultural awareness in the 18th century and quickly became a staple of Victorian horror. In its earliest depictions, the vampire was a creature of unfathomable ugliness, but over time has evolved into the dangerously seductive figure often pictured in modern works. Humanity's relationship to the fictional vampiric monster—characterized by its paradoxical mix of fear, disgust, and uncontrollable attraction—can perhaps best be seen in the iconic gothic novella of *Carmilla* by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. The enthralling homoerotic relationship that exists between the beautiful vampire Carmilla and her human target, Laura, is only further complicated by the quasi-parental aspect of its nature—a perversion which only heightens the readers' disgust, while doing nothing to dull the attraction. As a motherless girl, Laura has a gap in her life which Carmilla is only too happy to fill, and the suspicious nature of her seemingly well-meaning father only worsens her susceptibility. The concept and practice of parenthood is essential to the story of *Carmilla*, in that only through its weaknesses and deficiencies can the sexual danger and feminist temptation of the vampire impede itself upon the vulnerable adolescent.

Throughout human history and spanning countless cultures, the figure of the 'monster'—in its many forms—has restlessly permeated. There has been considerable analysis as to the cultural significance of the monster figure, and consensus seems to suggest that "The monster is born… as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy… the monstrous body is pure culture".[1] In other words, monsters arise in certain time periods as a physical manifestation of a cultural fear. Considering the wide-spread sexual repression of the Victorian

[1] Jeffrey Cohen, *Monster Culture*, p. 4.

Age, specifically regarding female sexuality, it's no wonder that many monstrous creatures have arisen within the genre of the Victorian gothic. As Cohen continues, "The linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint… we distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair",[2] and perhaps no monster fits these criteria better than the Victorian vampire. Many of the characteristics of the vampire—the sensual act of their blood-sucker, their hunger for flesh acting akin to lust, and their only weakness being the phallic penetration of a stake to the heart—make it the ideal creature for a displacement of society's sexual fears and anxieties, and there's no shortage of this such analysis. In response to perhaps one of the most famous vampire novels of all time, *Dracula,* critics have written: "From a Freudian standpoint – and from no other does the story make any sense – it is seen as a kind of incestuous, necrophilious, oral-anal-sadistic all-in wrestling match…. [Dracula is] a vast polymorph perverse bisexual oral-anal-genital sadomasochistic timeless orgy".[3] Though there's some argument regarding the validity of such extreme claims, there's no ignoring the intense sexualization of every female vampire in the novel, as if the curse of vampirism itself necessitates an insatiable sexual appetite—even in once morally 'pure' women. Carmilla herself, written two decades beforehand, is the beautiful vampiric seductress who began this trend.

In considering the sexual connotations of the female Victorian vampire, it's no wonder that the most central aspect of the text of *Carmilla* is the homoerotic relationship that exists between the young Laura and the titular monster. From the moment Laura and Carmilla meet, there can said to be an instantaneous and reciprocal attraction, on simultaneously a physical and

[2] Jeffrey Cohen, *Monster Culture,* p. 17.
[3] Maurice Richardson, *Psychoanalysis of Dracula,* p. 418.

spiritual level. Both admit to being stunned by each other's sheer physical beauty, and as Laura narrates:

> Now the truth is, I felt rather unaccountably towards the beautiful stranger. I did feel, as she said, 'drawn towards her,' but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed. She interested and won me; she was so beautiful and so indescribably engaging (Le Fanu 222).

This sense of being 'drawn' towards another can easily be read as sexual attraction, particularly because of how much this feeling is said to be a direct effect of each other's beauty. The repulsion that Laura feels, however, might very well be a repulsion towards these very feelings. She's revolted by her own attraction, given its romantic and sexual nature, and projects such a feeling onto the woman herself.

Later, as the girls grow closer, the romantic nature of their relationship becomes only clearer. There is much physical intimacy between them, including kisses and embraces, and when Laura asks Carmilla whether she is in love with a man, given her romantic behavior, Carmilla answers, "I have been in love with no one, and never shall… unless it should be with you… Darling, darling… I live in you; and you would die for me, I love you so" (Le Fanu 233). Rather than disgust or confusion at this sentiment, Laura seems almost enamored. She writes:

> How beautiful [Carmilla] looked in the moonlight! Shy and strange was the look with which she quickly hid her face in my neck and hair, with tumultuous sighs, that seemed almost to sob, and pressed in mine a hand that trembled. Her soft cheek was glowing against mine (Le Fanu 233).

The homosexual connotations of this scene are undeniable, with a sexual and erotic undertone created by the physical intimacy between them. Though Laura moves away from Carmilla after

this, clearly confused and disturbed by the encounter, her emphasis on Carmilla's beauty demonstrate how drawn she feels to her nonetheless. She knows that whatever is happening here is 'wrong' by Victorian standards, and yet she can't help but feel an indescribable desire.

The sexual nature of the relationship is made most clear, however, in the scenes where Carmilla is actively feeding off of Laura. In fact, it can be argued that this feeding is a metaphor for sex itself. As Laura describes the events:

> 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 (Le Fanu 240-241).

In these descriptions, one could almost imagine the situation as a consensual sexual encounter. Laura's rapid heartbeat and breathing seem to indicate that the feelings are reciprocal, and portray her as almost helpless against the sexual magnetism of Carmilla. However, Laura's unconsciousness does challenge this depiction, and as the descriptions continue—"a sobbing, that rose into a sense of strangulation, supervened, and turned into a dreadful convulsion, in which my senses left me and I became unconscious" (Le Fanu 241)—portray this scene as more of a rape than anything, with Laura as the innocent victim and Carmilla as the predatory perpetrator. This viewpoint is further depicted in the portrayal of Carmilla as an animal, a literal predator. As Laura describes, "It was a sooty-black animal that resembled a monstrous cat… it continued to-ing and fro-ing with the lithe, sinister restlessness of a beast in a cage. I could not cry out, although as you may suppose, I was terrified" (Le Fanu 237). The feedings, intimate and sexual as they may be, are by no means positive experiences for Laura. In fact, they are deeply harmful and traumatic.

Despite the clear homoerotic relationship between Laura and Carmilla, there's also much to be said regarding a more familial dynamic between the two—specifically, that between mother and child. In fact, this perspective on their relationship may be the very first that the novella presents. In one early scene, Laura describes a dream she has as a young child, in which she encounters Carmilla for the first time:

> To my surprise, I saw a solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed. It was that of a young lady who was kneeling, with her hands under the coverlet. I looked at her with a kind of pleased wonder, and ceased whimpering. She caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling; I felt immediately delightfully soothed, and fell asleep again (Le Fanu 210).

In this scene, the mother-daughter dynamic is clearly presented, specifically in the wide age-gap that exists between the two: Carmilla, a grown woman, and Laura, a young child still in need of a nursery. In soothing and caressing Laura, comforting the girl until she falls asleep, Carmilla further takes on the role of a loving, doting mother, and Laura is highly receptive to these advances. However, in a moment, this dynamic is suddenly twisted, and perhaps even flips. As the novella continues, "I was wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment, and I cried loudly. The lady started back, with her eyes fixed on me, and then slipped down upon the floor, and, as I thought, hid herself under the bed" (Le Fanu 210). In this scene, there is the implication that Carmilla has bitten into Laura to drink her blood, no longer comforting or protecting her, but obtaining her own nourishment at Laura's direct expense. As *Dracula* critic Ernest Jones claims, "In the unconscious mind blood is commonly an equivalent for semen",[4] which can partially be used as justification for the sexual connotations of

[4] Ernest Jones, *On the Nightmare,* p. 119.

the feeding vampire. However, this interpretation does not fit in an interaction in which both participants are female, neither capable of providing sperm. Therefore, if blood is truly meant as a symbol, in this case it must symbolize something else entirely. In some ways, the interaction between Carmilla and Laura is familiar, and it's through this familiarity that such symbolism can be deciphered: in a normal mother-child relationship one individual—the child—*does* obtain nourishment from the other, in the form of milk, and does so through the process of 'biting' or sucking from the breast. However, this natural and endearing relationship is repulsively perverted in the case of Laura and Carmilla. A breast is bitten, but the wrong breast, and fluid is exchanged for nourishment, but the *wrong* fluid—blood, rather than milk. It is the mother figure who takes nourishment from the child, and the child who suffers for her benefit. There is something horrifically uncanny about the interaction, so familiar to us and yet so clearly, deeply wrong.

Throughout the novella, even as the romantic and sexual connotations of Laura and Carmilla's relationship continue to unfold, the mother-child dynamic between the two still persists. This can be seen, firstly, in the direct biological relationship that exists between Laura and Carmilla. In one scene, where Laura is describing her father looking through old family portraits, she writes, "My mother was of an old Hungarian family, and most of these pictures, which were about to be restored to their places, had come to us through her… The artist now produced [one portrait], with evident pride. It was quite beautiful; it was startling; it seemed to live. It was the effigy of Carmilla!" (Le Fanu 232). In this scene, though Laura does not yet come to the correct realization, it is revealed through her portrait that Carmilla is an old relation of the family, by the name of Countess Mircalla. This genetic relation is no coincidence, and neither is the fact that this relation exists on the mother's side of Laura's family tree, rather than her

father's. In this way, Carmilla acts not just as a generalized mother figure but specifically as a stand-in for Laura's absent mother.

Under these considerations, it can be argued that Carmilla acts as "a demonic shadow mother to motherless girls",[5] not just to Laura but to her orphan cousin, Bertha, whom Carmilla kills before the novel begins. Carmilla's role as the 'shadow mother' can be seen specifically in one scene, occurring after weeks of Carmilla sucking Laura's blood in the night. As the text describes:

> One night, instead of the voice I was accustomed to hear in the dark, I heard one, sweet and tender, and at the same time terrible, which said, 'Your mother warns you to beware of the assassin.' At the same time a light unexpectedly sprang up, and I saw Carmilla, standing, near the foot of my bed, in her white nightdress, bathed, from her chin to her feet, in one great stain of blood (Le Fanu 241).

In this scene, the general consensus is that Laura has received an otherworldly message from her dead mother, warning her against Carmilla. Interestingly, the mother's 'sweet and tender' voice is juxtaposed against the hideous scene of the blood-soaked vampire. Simultaneously, however, Carmilla's form is almost superimposed over the absent mother, with her standing where the mother's ghost might be expected to be, and there is enough ambiguity in the scene to suggest that the voice might've instead come from her. The boundary of identity between Carmilla and Laura's mother is thusly blurred, painting Carmilla as the other, darker side of motherhood.

What makes Carmilla so demonic a force is that, despite the motherly role she sometimes fills, she often reverts to the alternative figure of a child instead. As she herself explains, "People say I am languid; I am incapable of exertion; I can scarcely walk as far as a child of three years

[5] William Veeder, *The Art of Repression*, p. 213

old: and every now and then the little strength I have falters, and I become as you have just seen me" (Le Fanu 234). On top of her infantile weakness, she also often exhibits a childlike control over her emotions—such as when she throws a fit over a passing funeral procession—and Laura even begins to behave motherly towards her instead. She attempts to keep Carmilla in the dark about ghostly rumors which might scare her, claiming, "She is, if possible, a greater coward than I" (Le Fanu 238), and when Laura 'dreams' of Carmilla's mouth covered in blood her first thought is that Carmilla is in danger, and she runs to her room in order to protect her. The most significant argument of Carmilla's child-like tendencies, however, is her need to take nourishment via blood from others. As William Veeder claims, "these girls function as Carmilla's 'mother' when her vampiric, sexual needs drive her to suck from their breasts".[6] Carmilla is simultaneously a mother-figure, a child-figure, and a lover-figure, her desire for blood easy to read symbolically as lust for young women—particularly because these individuals seem to be the only she targets. In this way, the novella paints not just female sexuality but specifically lesbian relationships as almost grotesquely incestuous, not surprising given the social contempt of homosexuality during the Victorian Age. The vampire figure of Carmilla, therefore, represents not just the Victorian fear of sexuality, nor the fear of female sexuality, but specifically the fear of homosexuality, which threatened both the idealistic depiction of pure, virginal womanhood as well as the rigid structure of heterosexual monogamy essential to the formation of Victorian society.

In reading Carmilla as a sexual threat, it prods the questions of why Laura, as well as her cousin, are targeted in such a unique way. Unlike the numerous peasant girls who die mysteriously throughout the novel—implied to be victims of Carmilla's nightly bloodlust—

[6] William Veeder, *The Art of Repression*, p. 213

Laura and Betha are instead befriended and slowly fed upon throughout the course of several weeks. Because Carmilla first introduces herself to Laura as a mother-figure, it might be said that being motherless is an emotional vulnerability which Carmilla is eager to exploit. Bertha herself is orphaned, with an uncle as a father figure but no respective mother-figure, and as Laura explains, "I and my father constituted the family at the schloss. My mother, a Styrian lady, died in my infancy, but I had a good-natured governess … whose care and good nature now in part supplied to me the loss of my mother, whom I do not even remember, so early I lost her" (Le Fanu 209). Without siblings nor mother, Laura and her father are a remarkably small family unit, and though Laura claims her governess 'in part' stood in for her absent mother, it's clear that Laura is missing something in her life. As she admits, "My life was, notwithstanding, rather a solitary one" (Le Fanu 209). and in describing her discovery that Bertha has died, thus canceling her visit, she further elucidates, "I was more disappointed than a young lady living in a town, or a bustling neighborhood can possibly imagine. This visit, and the new acquaintance it promised, had furnished my day dream for many weeks" (Le Fanu 212). Doubtlessly, Laura is exceedingly lonely and perhaps even emotionally empty, being so isolated from others her own age and without a true mother in her life. This provides the perfect opportunity for Camilla's entrance into her life.

However, the mother is only one significant parental figure in the life of a child, and the influence of the father cannot be overlooked. On the surface, Laura does not seem to be lacking anything in this aspect of her life. Her father is both alive and, as she claims, "the kindest man on earth" (Le Fanu 209). In some ways, this characterization does appear to hold up; Laura's father clearly dotes on her, and is more than happy to take in Carmilla when a carriage crash leaves her injured outside their home. Of course, this isn't necessarily a positive attribute—as Laura admits,

she was “a rather spoiled girl, whose only parent allowed her pretty nearly her own way in everything” (Le Fanu 209), which itself might leave her more vulnerable to sexual whims—but there’s something to be said regarding the fact that Laura’s father may be more dubious a character than the narrative leads on. At the start of the story, Laura and Bertha—both around the age of twenty—have long reached sexual maturity, and are entering the time in their lives where marriage is likely in discussion. Both Laura’s father and Bertha’s uncle, General Spielsdorf, are much older, unmarried men, and though it’s never addressed in the text, there’s a question of why the General and his niece might be planning to visit for such a long stretch of time to begin with. With some slight further analysis, it can be guessed that this encounter has more sinister intentions than at first it appears. Laura’s unmarried father, with a daughter who has just reached marriageable age, has invited over another unmarried middle-aged man with a marriageable niece—it can be assumed that they intend to ‘swap’ daughter figures as wives, and because Laura is preoccupied only about meeting the niece, she has not been made aware of this fact.

From this lens, the whole story begins to look slightly different. The threat of Carmilla’s sexuality becomes even more urgent to the surrounding men, for she directly ‘steals’ two young women who would’ve otherwise belonged to their future husbands. This is the viewpoint that literary critic Elizabeth Signoretti takes, for as she claims: “Carmilla’s sexual possession of Laura foils Papa’s attempts to marry her to General Spielsdorf, a match that could reestablish the male bond and the male exchange of women”.[7] Even so, before the sickness of their respective niece or daughter, the men seem unusually fond of Carmilla, particularly Laura’s father. Both are suspiciously easy to persuade to take in this unknown young girl for an undefined length of time, and when Carmilla suggests leaving to Laura’s father, he tells her:

[7] Elizabeth Signoretti, *Feminist Reading,* p. 617.

> But you must not dream of any such thing… We can't afford to lose you so, and I won't consent to your leaving us, except under the care of your mother, who was so good as to consent to your remaining with us till she should herself return… We should suffer too much in parting from you to consent to it easily (Le Fanu 235).

He's clearly extremely attached to Carmilla and eager for her to remain at his house. This isn't itself suspicious, but later, when Laura finds the portrait which looks exactly like Carmilla—and is, in fact, who she used to be—his reaction is somewhat of a cause for alarm. As Laura narrates, "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" (Le Fanu 232). Laura's father's complete under-reaction to the situation is startling at the least, and in consideration of the dangerous truth this portrait indicates, almost neglectful. Considering that the young girl who Laura's father might have been planning to marry has recently died, it's arguable that his attachment to the beautiful Carmilla—to the point where he pointedly rejects all evidence of her inhumanity—is because he, consciously or unconsciously, wishes to marry *her* as a replacement. This all comes to a head the day before Carmilla is murdered, when Laura narrates:

> [My father] was going to Karnstein, and had ordered the carriage to be ready at twelve, and that I and Madame should accompany him; he was going to see the priest who lived near those picturesque grounds, upon business, and as Carmilla had never seen them, she could follow, when she came down, with Mademoiselle, who would bring materials for what you call a picnic, which might be laid for us in the ruined castle (Le Fanu 248).

There's something rather suspicious about this situation—why, when Laura is so sick, would her father decide to take her to an abandoned chapel, bringing along Carmilla as well as a priest?

One might argue that the father knows more than he's letting on, and already plans to kill Carmilla; yet, when they meet the General and he tells them that Carmilla is a vampire, Laura's father is surprised and clearly skeptical. Considering all the elements of this day—the father, the daughter, the priest, the church, Carmilla, and the picnic celebration to follow—it may very well be that Laura's father is not planning a murder, but a wedding. The "business" with which he is calling the priest is the officiation of his marriage with Carmilla, and all this while he keeps Laura entirely in the dark. From this perspective, Laura's father's supposed 'goodness' becomes much more sinister and self-serving, and Laura's biased first-person narration regarding him becomes much more difficult to believe. As Veeder tells it, "Laura's father is too fundamentally out of sympathy ever to provide the help she needs",[8] and, in fact, he's often the one who puts Laura most at threat.

With a long-absent mother and a deeply flawed father, it's no wonder that Laura has such a dire need in her life for a new parental figure, which she finds in the personage of Carmilla. Interestingly, Carmilla, too, has questionable parental relations. Just as Laura has no mother, there is absolutely no mention of Carmilla having any sort of father figure in her life—yet, there is the mysterious and unexplained figure of her mother. As Laura narrates, "She was what is called a fine looking woman for her time of life, and must have been handsome; she was tall, but not thin, and dressed in black velvet, and looked rather pale, but with a proud and commanding countenance, though now agitated strangely" (Le Fanu 216). There is little description given of Carmilla's mother outside of this, and no explanation, which raises questions regarding her own vampire status, the honesty of her claims, and the true nature of her relationship with Carmilla. At least on Carmilla's part, there does seem to be some familial affection. When she wakes up in

[8] William Veeder, *The Art of Repression*, p. 203.

Laura's home after her mother has departed, she asks—very much like a young, overly-attached child—"Where is mamma?" (Le Fanu 218). Later, when the General is discussing a parallel situation in which the mother dropped Carmilla off to live with him, he describes how desperate she was to watch her mother as she left, crying plaintively, "'She is gone… She did not look up'" (Le Fanu 257). It's clear here that Carmilla has at least some attachment to her supposed mother, for she feels pain at their separation and is upset that her mother does not exhibit signs of distress at separation herself. Taken at face value, there's much to be said regarding Carmilla's mother's sufficiency as a parent. As Laura narrates, "The lady threw on her daughter a glance which I fancied was not quite so affectionate as one might have anticipated from the beginning of the scene… then then hastily kissing her she stepped into her carriage" (Le Fanu 217). The woman being 'not quite so affectionate' indicates less than a mother-daughter love between herself and Carmilla, and her eagerness to leave her alone and injured with a family of complete strangers would be remarkably concerning and even neglectful under normal circumstances. Furthermore, as Laura continues:

> She beckoned slightly to my father, and withdrew two or three steps with him out of hearing; and talked to him with a fixed and stern countenance, not at all like that with which she had hitherto spoken. I was filled with wonder that my father did not seem to perceive the change, and also unspeakably curious to learn what it could be that she was speaking, almost in his ear, with so much earnestness and rapidity (Le Fanu 217).

In this subtle scene, Carmilla's mother tells Laura's father a secret which might explain his eagerness to keep Carmilla at his home and prevent her from leaving—potentially, she is offering Carmilla as a future marriage partner. As Signoretti describes the scene, it is an

"exchange of women".[9] In this way, Carmilla's mother becomes a parent on level with Laura's father and the General, offering up her child with little regard for her own agency and desires. Carmilla is, from this perspective, just as much as victim as Laura and the others. One could even argue that it's her mother's insufficient parenting that leaves Carmilla vulnerable to her own vampirism, symbolic of her lesbian desires, for "only a 'bad' mother would loose her daughter into a staid patriarchal system and allow her to disrupt social order".[10]

For a vampire novella, *Carmilla* does seem remarkably sympathetic to its monster figurehead. Though her vampiric ways are clearly portrayed as moral wrongs, the novella seldom overtly demonizes Carmilla, and even goes out of its way to depict the more 'human' aspects of her character. For instance, the love she feels for Laura—while clearly toxic—is never displayed as dishonest or exaggerated, and as Laura writes:

> The vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons… 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. In these cases it seems to yearn for something like sympathy and consent (Le Fanu 270).

This description demonstrates the validity of the romantic feelings that Carmilla expresses for Laura. Diction such as 'consent' seems to suggest that even as she feeds off of Laura she wants her to agree to and perhaps even enjoy the interaction, as if it were sexual intercourse. Though the feeding scenes are often depicted as rape, it's clear that Carmilla does not want them to be, but desires Laura to enjoy being fed on as much as she enjoys doing the feeding. Considering

[9] Elizabeth Signoretti, *Feminist Reading,* p. 613.
[10] Elizabeth Signoretti, *Feminist Reading,* p. 613.

Laura's father's own disregard for her agency, this consideration of Laura's desire is fairly significant. As Signoretti suggests:

> It becomes increasingly clear that Laura's and Carmilla's lesbian relationship defies the traditional structures of kinship by which men regulate the exchange of women to promote male bonding. On the contrary, 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.[11]

In this interpretation, the homoerotic relationship between Laura and Carmilla can almost be read as a positive event—a claim for female agency in a situation where fathers control the romantic futures and sexual ownership of their daughter's bodies. Carmilla, therefore, is not just a lesbian threat, but a feminist one, freeing young girls with flawed and abusive parents from the confines of male control. As the novella itself describes, the vampire "visits living people in their slumbers; they die, and almost invariably, in the grave, develop into vampires" (Le Fanu 271). From this consideration, one can argue that Carmilla is not heartlessly murdering young girls, but freeing them from patriarchal influence by biting and killing them, thus granting them the immortality of vampirism which assures their freedom from men for the rest of eternity. In a modern lens, Carmilla could even be seen as the hero of the story, for as Signoretti writes: "By the time the tale reaches its readers, both Laura and Bertha have died, yet presumably they continue to live as resurrected vampires, perpetuating the chain of female alliances begun by Carmilla".[12] However, considering the novella's publication during the Victorian Age, even a 'progressive' author like Le Fanu was likely only sympathetic to the feminist plight to a limited

[11] Elizabeth Signoretti, *Feminist Reading,* p. 607.
[12] Elizabeth Signoretti, *Feminist Reading,* p. 618.

extent, and—as is clear by his demonization of it—was certainly no proponent of female homosexuality.

Ultimately, it's clear that Carmilla, as a fictional vampire, represents a sexual and political threat to the 'pure,' virginal figure of the Victorian young woman, represented here by the character of Laura. The absence of a biological mother, alongside an imperfect father figure, leave Laura vulnerable to this threat, who uses the homoerotic comforts of Carmilla to fill the emotional gap in her life, as well as counteract her social powerlessness. Parenthood, therefore, exists at heart of the novel *Carmilla,* for it's the crux of the novel's central conflict. In Le Fanu's view, Carmilla herself isn't the problem, but the symptom, and perhaps even a victim herself; the problem is insufficient parenting, and the trauma and subsequent moral weakness that this produces in a child. A daughter requires emotional support from the mother, and—in a society which treats young women as a commodity to be exchanged—protection from the father, and when she is deprived of both, she may very well find alternative sources. In the modern viewpoint, *Carmilla* as a novella is clearly homophobic and highly offensive. However, in sympathizing with rather than outright villainizing female homosexuality, Le Fanu is decades ahead of his time.

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