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STILL IN THE CASKET: RECEPTION AND QUEER GENDERED BIAS IN
BRAM STOKER'S *DRACULA* AND SHERIDAN LE FANU'S *CARMILLA*

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BY

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ABSTRACT

STILL IN THE CASKET: RECEPTION AND QUEER GENDERED BIAS IN
BRAM STOKER'S *DRACULA* AND SHERIDAN LE FANU'S *CARMILLA*

BY SHIRLEY CRUZ

Gothic literature has been a staple in the literary world as well as queer representations. Focusing on Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), my project examines the queer elements embedded in each text and investigates why queer male-coded narratives have historically received more critical attention and cultural engagement than queer female-coded narratives. This study begins by establishing the queer subtexts present in both texts, paying attention to how desire, intimacy, and transgression appear differently and similarly across both novels. Chapter One focuses on identifying and analyzing these queer moments through close reading. Chapter Two examines the gendered disparity between male and female queer portrayals, arguing that male-centered queer interactions in *Dracula* are often treated with greater seriousness, depth, and scholarly interest than the overt female queer desire that drives *Carmilla*. Chapter Three builds on this by exploring the reception history of each text, highlighting how general audiences and academic critics alike have contributed to maintaining this imbalance and how gender bias continues to shape which queer stories are amplified or overlooked. By bringing together textual analysis and reception studies, this thesis argues for a more equitable approach to queer Gothic literature and queer studies in general, one that recognizes the significance of female queer narratives and acknowledges the longstanding biases that have kept works like *Carmilla* "in the casket," overshadowed by more frequently discussed male-associated queer texts.

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Fig. 1 – image *Carmilla* from The Dark Blue by David Henry Friston

INTRODUCTION

“Once unleashed, the vampire has proved impossible to lay to rest.” wrote Robert Luckhurst in his introduction to the Oxford Classic of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The Vampiric Gothic, a specific subsection of the influential Gothic genre, has made a lasting impact on modern media and culture. Vampires in literature have long been used to represent those excluded from societal norms, often symbolizing the “monstrous other.” This figure frequently aligns with queerness, a theme deeply explored through queer theory. Queer theory offers multiple lenses to examine these narratives and challenges the concept of fixed identity categories. Many scholars have explored sexuality, gender, and the uncanny in the Vampiric Gothic, but one critical gap remains in the distinct and unequal representations of male queerness and female queerness.

The Victorian Gothic is particularly invested in these tensions. Emerging within a society marked by strict moral codes and rigid gender roles,¹ Victorian Gothic texts frequently encode fears surrounding sexual regulation, deviance, and repression. Non-normative identities, especially those that challenge heterosexuality and patriarchal order, are often displaced onto supernatural figures, allowing authors to explore taboo subjects indirectly. Within this context, the vampire becomes a powerful symbol of cultural unease: a figure that embodies excess, contagion, and desire beyond acceptable boundaries.

Two of the most influential vampire texts of the nineteenth century, Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), exemplify this Gothic preoccupation with social and sexual instability. Published twenty-five years before *Dracula*, *Carmilla* is a

¹ Marcus, Steven. *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*. Basic Books, 1966.

foundational vampire narrative and one of the earliest Gothic texts to center an intense and intimate relationship between women. Framed as a confessional narrative, the novella foregrounds themes of secrecy, the female body, and emotional intimacy, while simultaneously presenting female desire as dangerous and corrupting. As a result, *Carmilla* has been read variously as a cautionary tale, a site of queer desire, and a text deeply invested in regulating feminine and sexual deviance.²

Dracula, by contrast, has come to define the Victorian vampire novel. Structured as an epistolary text composed of journals, letters, and official documents, it emphasizes themes of surveillance and control. Stoker's novel is deeply concerned with maintaining national, sexual, and patriarchal order, even as it reveals anxieties about gender inversion, homoerotic intimacy, and female sexual agency. While male queerness is suggested through subtext and displaced desire, it is often contained through violence, discipline, and reaffirmations of heterosexual masculinity. Despite their differences, *Carmilla* and *Dracula* participate in a shared Gothic vocabulary of fear, desire, and regulation.

Central to both texts is the vampire itself as a queer figure. Existing in a liminal state, neither living nor dead, neither fully moral nor immoral, neither clearly masculine nor feminine, the vampire disrupts stable identity categories. Vampirism functions as a metaphor for sexual transgression, non-reproductive desire, secrecy, and contagion. In both *Carmilla* and *Dracula*, queerness is not threatening solely because of whom the vampire desires, but because the vampire refuses normative social structures and destabilizes binaries upon which Victorian society depends.

² Signorotti, Elizabeth. *Repossessing the Body: Transgressive Desire in & Carmilla and Dracula*. *Criticism*, vol. 38, no. 4, Sept. 1996, pp. 607–33.

When considering the authors themselves, Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker, both prominent Irish writers working within the Gothic tradition, it might initially seem that their shared national and gender identities would afford their works a similar degree of cultural impact. However, this is not the case. *Dracula* secured Stoker far greater visibility and lasting recognition than *Carmilla* did for Le Fanu. This disparity suggests that authorship alone cannot account for differences in reception. When placed alongside the broader context of nineteenth-century literary culture, where even the limited number of female authors often struggled for recognition, particularly within the Gothic and vampiric genres, it becomes clear that texts centered on transgressive or non-normative desire were especially vulnerable to marginalization.³ In this sense, Le Fanu's treatment mirrors the broader devaluation associated with narratives that foreground destabilizing forms of sexuality. The relative neglect of *Carmilla*, despite its male authorship, underscores how gendered biases operate not only through who writes, but through what is represented, reinforcing the uneven reception of queer narratives.

In this study, queerness is understood as encompassing non-normative expressions of sexuality and desire, gender transgression, and resistance to heteropatriarchal structures. It is not limited to fixed sexual identities, but operates as a structural and symbolic disruption within the texts themselves. Alongside this, gender bias refers to the narrative mechanisms that punish, silence, or pathologize gender and sexual deviance, privileging heterosexual masculinity and reproductive femininity. In *Carmilla*, female desire is framed as predatory and invasive, requiring eradication, while in *Dracula*, male intimacy is displaced, denied, or sublimated through acts of control and violence.

³ Marryat, Florence. *The Blood of the Vampire*. 1897. *The Blood of the Vampire* is a pioneering Gothic novel by Florence Marryat that, unlike Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (published the same year), features a female, bisexual, and mixed-race "psychic vampire". Similarly to Le Fanu, both *Carmilla* and *The Blood of the Vampire* got cast aside in comparison to *Dracula*. This showcases the relevance of gender when discussing queer vampiric fiction.

Importantly, these biases do not end with the texts themselves but are deeply embedded in their reception histories. Upon publication, *Dracula* achieved far greater popular and critical success than *Carmilla*, quickly entering the Victorian literary mainstream, while Le Fanu's novella remained comparatively obscure. This early disparity shaped how each text's queer dimensions were received: *Carmilla*'s female same-sex desire was read as overt and dangerous, whereas *Dracula*'s male homoerotic subtexts were largely ignored but later sensationalized by audiences. Drawing on Wolfgang Iser's distinction between textual effect and reception, this study argues that while both texts generate queer meanings through ambiguity, absence, and contradiction, the realization of those meanings depends on historically conditioned readers and their judgments.⁴ Early reception was governed by patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks that constrained which interpretations could be acknowledged. Although queer theory has since legitimized non-normative readings, contemporary scholarship is not free from these inherited biases. Female queerness in *Carmilla* is still frequently mistreated, while male queerness in *Dracula* is often aestheticized. This imbalance is further reflected in modern audience reception, where *Dracula* continues to dominate popular culture through an overwhelming number of adaptations⁵, while *Carmilla* remains comparatively marginalized. From an Iserian perspective, both texts contain productive gaps that invite multiple interpretations, but the persistent privileging of *Dracula* reveals how readers continue to actualize meaning in ways shaped by gendered discomfort with visible female queer desire. As a result, reception, both scholarly and popular, reproduces the very Victorian gender biases that these Gothic texts expose.

⁴ Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

⁵ Besson, Luc. *Dracula: A Love Tale*. Luc Besson Productions, 2025. This is the most recent *Dracula* adaptation, which heavily focuses on the romance aspect of the story. The last *Carmilla* adaptation was released in 2019 by director Emily Harris.

This disparity in reception among both general readers and scholars becomes even more striking when considering if each text had original illustrations attached to them. *Carmilla* was originally published with illustrations by David Henry Friston, embedding visual interpretation into its earliest form. *Dracula*, by contrast, was published without accompanying illustrations, yet it has generated an extensive visual culture, including countless artworks, films, and television adaptations. Despite *Carmilla*'s initial integration of image and text, it is *Dracula* that has come to dominate the visual imagination of the vampire, further underscoring the imbalance in cultural and critical attention between the two works.

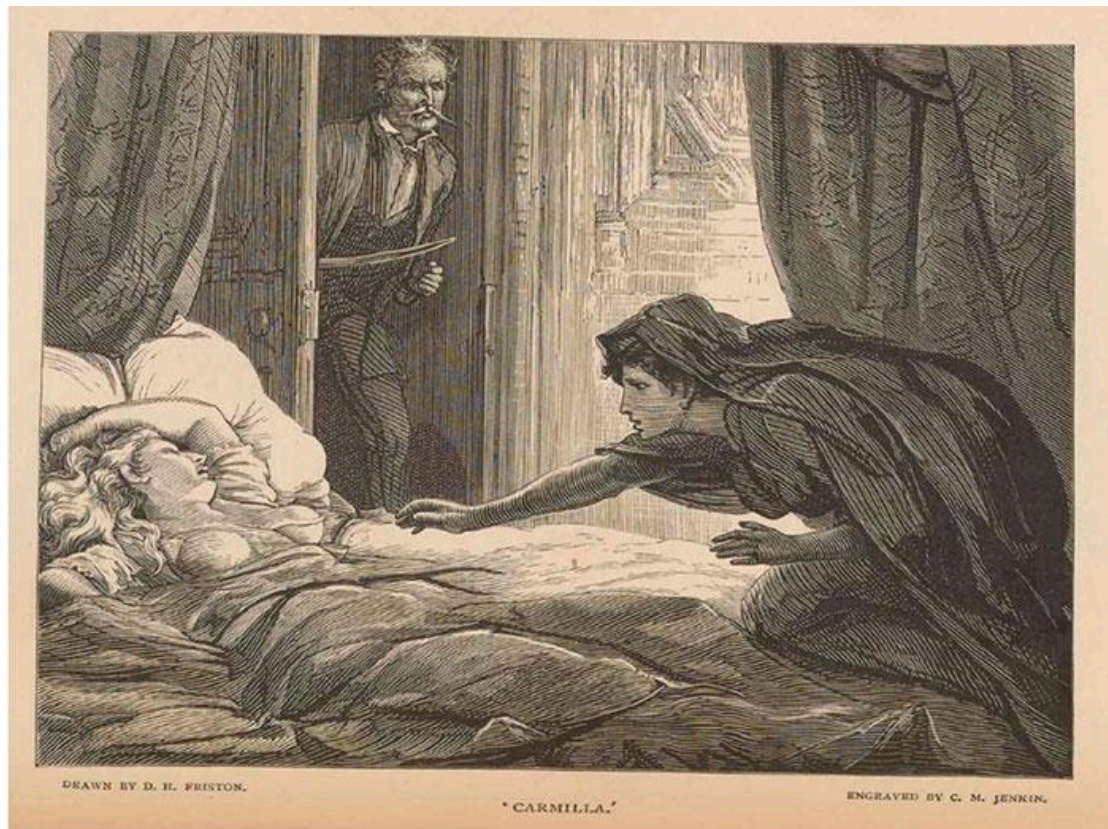


Figure 1. Illustration of *Carmilla* from *The Dark Blue* by David Henry Friston, 1872.

<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951000727873u?urlappend=%3Bseq=889%3Bownerid=13510798902626285-971>

This thesis analyzes *Carmilla* and *Dracula* through a queer and gender-critical lens in order to examine how Gothic conventions construct queerness as a destabilizing force. By comparing representations of female and male queerness, this study traces how Victorian gender biases shape narrative outcomes and persist in critical and popular reception today. Ultimately, it argues that while both texts encode anxieties about queerness, they do so unevenly, revealing a Gothic hierarchy of fear in which female queerness is made hyper-visible and punishable, while male queerness is obscured, displaced, and contained.

CHAPTER ONE: ESTABLISHING QUEER SUBTEXTS IN DRACULA AND
CARMILLA

This chapter understands queerness not as a fixed identity, but as non-heterosexual desire shown through intimacy, physical closeness, and emotional intensity. In nineteenth-century Gothic literature, queerness is rarely stated directly. Instead, it appears through suggestion, indirect language, and heightened emotion. Because Victorian society was shaped by strict legal and moral rules, writers often expressed non-normative sexuality in subtle ways, using metaphor, mood, and narrative tension to suggest what could not be openly described. In *Carmilla* and *Dracula*, queerness is therefore most visible in scenes of physical closeness, strong emotional attachment, and moments of pleasure that challenge heterosexual expectations.

For this study, queerness refers specifically to female and male non-heterosexual desire, rather than to broader theories about unstable or fluid identity. This distinction is important. Although queer theory often focuses on ideas of ambiguity and resistance to fixed categories, Victorian Gothic literature presents sexual transgression within a culture shaped by fear and strict gender expectations. Male and female queerness are not treated the same way in these texts. In *Carmilla*, female same-sex desire is rendered visible through an intense vocabulary of affection, physical contact, and emotional exclusivity. The novella repeatedly draws attention to the pleasures and dangers of intimacy between women, allowing erotic charge to surface in moments that hover between tenderness and threat. In *Dracula*, by contrast, male non-heteronormative desire is rarely named or directly enacted. Instead, it appears through homosocial bonds that verge on the erotic, scenes of bodily penetration and exchange, and moments of anxious proximity between men. These desires are not absent; rather, they are

displaced onto violence, discipline, and ritualized acts that reaffirm masculine authority even as they betray its instability.

Understanding queerness in these texts therefore requires attentiveness to how sexuality is structured, not simply whom characters desire. Acts of looking, touching, feeding, bleeding, and watching operate as charged sites where desire circulates. The vampire, as a figure who consumes bodies and collapses distinctions between self and other, provides a narrative mechanism through which forbidden sexualities can be explored under the guise of monstrosity. The Gothic mode allows sexuality to be dramatized as a problem of excess and contagion, transforming desire into something that spreads, invades, and overwhelms. Because explicit representations of same-sex sexuality were largely unavailable to Victorian writers, queer desire in Gothic fiction frequently operates at the level of subtext. Subtext here does not imply mere implication or accidental suggestion, but a deliberate narrative strategy shaped by historical constraint. What is unsaid in *Carmilla* and *Dracula* is as significant as what is articulated, and meaning emerges through patterns of repetition, contradiction, and excess rather than through direct statement.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential work on homosocial desire helps explain how close relationships between men can carry an erotic undertone while still remaining socially acceptable.⁶ Her framework is particularly useful for understanding the intense bonds between men in *Dracula*. However, this model does not fully account for how female desire is portrayed in *Carmilla*. In Le Fanu's novella, intimacy between women is not protected or normalized through social structures in the same way. Instead, it is quickly framed as suspicious, intrusive,

⁶ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men : English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Columbia University Press, 1985. Van Leer, David. "The Beast of the Closet: Homosexuality and the Pathology of Manhood." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1988, pp. 285–306. Sedgwick has been criticized by other scholars, specifically David Van Leer, for being a female queer theorist who heavily focuses or writes about queer men.

and dangerous. This contrast demonstrates that queerness cannot be understood apart from gender. Male same-sex intimacy in *Dracula* operates within systems of masculinity and social authority that shield it from immediate scrutiny, whereas female same-sex desire in *Carmilla* is shaped by expectations surrounding femininity, passivity, and reproductive duty. Sexuality in these texts does not function independently; it is filtered through gendered power structures that determine which forms of intimacy appear acceptable and which are labeled deviant. For this reason, male and female queerness must be examined separately rather than treated as a unified or identical experience.

Subtext functions differently in each text. In *Carmilla*, the language of affection is overt, but its sexual implications are denied through framing devices such as illness, dreams, and supernatural influence. Desire is present, but its legitimacy is continually undermined. In *Dracula*, the inverse occurs: moments that might be read as erotic are deflected through irony, humor, or violence, preventing male intimacy from crystallizing into acknowledged desire. Subtext thus becomes a gendered narrative tool, shaping how queerness is revealed and contained.

The Gothic's reliance on secrecy and revelation further intensifies this dynamic. Confessions, diaries, and fragmented documents structure both texts, creating a constant tension between disclosure and concealment. Characters frequently experience desire privately, in isolation, or under conditions of vulnerability, reinforcing the association between queerness and secrecy. The reader is positioned as a voyeur, invited to piece together meaning from incomplete evidence. This process mirrors the social realities of queer existence in the nineteenth century, where recognition often depended on reading between the lines.

This chapter employs close textual analysis informed by queer theory and gender criticism to trace how non-heteronormative sexuality is constructed in both novels. Rather than treating queerness as a stable thematic element, the analysis focuses on moments of narrative pressure, scenes where desire intensifies, boundaries blur, or language becomes excessive. Attention is paid to metaphor, bodily imagery, narrative voice, and structural repetition, as these elements often carry sexual significance that the plot itself disavows. Close reading is particularly necessary for Gothic texts, which frequently communicate meaning through atmosphere and affect rather than explicit exposition. Descriptions of touch, gaze, and physical sensation are examined for their erotic resonance, especially when such moments are framed as frightening or illicit. The chapter also considers how narrative authority shapes the representation of desire: whose perspective is privileged, whose experience is dismissed, and whose body becomes the site of meaning.

Alongside close textual analysis, this study engages with existing scholarship on queer readings of both novels, not to repeat established arguments but to situate this analysis within ongoing critical conversations. Amy Leal's examination of "unnameable" desire in *Carmilla* is particularly significant for understanding how female queerness operates through silence, euphemism, and linguistic ambiguity. Leal argues that Le Fanu's refusal to explicitly name lesbian desire reflects broader Victorian anxieties surrounding female sexuality, rendering same-sex attraction both visible and unspeakable. Her analysis of how language simultaneously conceals and reveals desire supports this study's claim that female queerness becomes especially threatening when it is made legible, even indirectly.⁷ In contrast, Christopher Craft's influential work on male homosexual desire in Victorian Gothic literature illuminates how *Dracula* encodes

⁷ Leal, Amy. "Unnameable Desires in Le Fanu's *Carmilla*. *Names*," vol. 55, no. 1, Mar. 2007, pp. 37–52. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*, <https://doi.org/10.1179/nam.2007.55.1.37>.

male same-sex desire through metaphor, displacement, and subtext. Craft demonstrates that vampirism functions as a symbolic site where anxieties about male queerness, bodily corruption, and inversion are negotiated rather than openly articulated.⁸ Together, Leal and Craft provide a critical foundation for examining how female and male queerness are constructed differently within Gothic fiction. Building on their insights, this chapter maintains a comparative focus that highlights how gender shapes not only the representation of queer desire but also its narrative management and cultural persistence.

Importantly, this methodology resists reading queerness solely as metaphor. While vampirism undeniably operates symbolically, the analysis remains attentive to the materiality of bodies and sensations within the texts. Blood, breath, touch, and pain are not abstract symbols but embodied experiences that generate intimacy. By foregrounding the physical dimensions of desire, this chapter underscores how queerness in the Gothic is felt as much as it is imagined.

Finally, this chapter is concerned with queerness before it is disciplined or destroyed. While both novels ultimately move toward restoration of social order, their most revealing moments occur earlier, when desire circulates relatively unchecked. By isolating these moments, the analysis resists the tendency to read queerness solely through its narrative outcome. Instead, it examines how queer desire is allowed to exist, however briefly, and what narrative work it performs before it is contained.

This focus allows for a clearer comparison between female and male queerness. Female desire in *Carmilla* is permitted a surprising degree of emotional and physical presence, even as it is framed as lethal. Male desire in *Dracula* is more thoroughly obscured, yet it permeates the text through acts of substitution and deferral. Reading these dynamics together reveals not only how

⁸ Craft, Christopher. *Another Kind of Love : Male Homosexual Desire in English Discourse, 1850-1920*. University of California Press, 1994.

queerness operates within Victorian Gothic fiction, but how gender determines the forms that queerness is allowed to take.

Having established queerness in this study as male and female non-heteronormative sexuality articulated through subtext, embodiment, and affect, this chapter now turns to sustained textual analysis. The following sections examine how each novel encodes queer desire within Gothic conventions, attending closely to moments where intimacy, bodily vulnerability, and transgressive pleasure emerge beneath the surface of narrative control. Beginning with *Dracula* allows for a consideration of how male queerness is structured through deferral, displacement, and homosocial mediation before turning to the other notable vampiric novel *Carmilla*, where female desire is rendered more overt yet more aggressively punished. Read together, these texts reveal how gender shapes the narrative legibility of queerness within the Victorian Gothic.

From its opening chapters, *Dracula* constructs a world in which male bodies are placed in unusually intimate proximity, even as the text works to neutralize the erotic implications of such closeness. Jonathan Harker's journey to Transylvania initiates a sustained encounter with male authority that is simultaneously seductive and threatening. Dracula himself is introduced not simply as a foreign aristocrat, but as a figure who exerts a compelling physical and psychological presence over Harker. Harker repeatedly notes the Count's intense gaze and controlling touch, describing how Dracula's eyes "blazed with a sort of demoniac fury, and he suddenly made a grab at my throat...the fury passed so quickly that I could hardly believe that it was ever there (Stoker 28). This physical domination establishes a charged bodily encounter that exceeds mere hospitality or violence.

The language of penetration and restraint that characterizes these early scenes lends itself to a queer reading. When Harker recounts being held by Dracula, immobilized and watched, the

emphasis falls not on pain but on proximity and power. The scene's affective tension derives from enforced closeness, the collapse of personal boundaries, and the surrender of bodily autonomy. While the narrative insists on reading this encounter as dangerous rather than erotic, the bodily dynamics mirror those of coerced intimacy, complicating the text's attempts at moral containment.

The episode with the three vampire women further intensifies this dynamic by explicitly juxtaposing heterosexual expectation with male vulnerability. As the women approach Harker, he admits to feeling "a wicked, burning desire" for their kiss, a confession that momentarily acknowledges erotic pleasure (Stoker 38). Yet this desire is abruptly interrupted by Dracula's intervention. The Count's jealous command, "This man belongs to me!" (Stoker 39) has long attracted critical attention for its possessive implications. The declaration asserts ownership over Harker's body, redirecting erotic energy away from the female vampires and re-centering it within a male-male dynamic. While the narrative presents Dracula's intervention as protective, the language of possession undermines that framing, introducing a form of desire that cannot be comfortably aligned with heterosexual norms.

Christopher Craft has argued that *Dracula* repeatedly stages "threats of male penetration" only to displace them onto women, thereby preserving masculine authority. However, what remains striking in this scene is not simply displacement, but the persistence of male-male desire even in the act of denial. *Dracula*'s violent interruption does not erase the homoerotic charge; rather, it exposes the novel's anxiety about where desire is permitted to circulate. Male queerness emerges here as something that must be immediately rerouted, yet cannot be fully suppressed.

As the novel progresses, queer subtext becomes increasingly bound to acts of blood exchange, particularly those involving male characters. Blood in the novel functions as more than a life-sustaining substance; it becomes a medium of intimacy that collapses distinctions between bodies. The transfusion scenes involving Lucy Westenra are especially revealing in this regard. Though ostensibly acts of medical intervention, these moments are marked by language that evokes penetration, union, and shared bodily essence.

Eve Sedgwick's theory of homosocial desire is particularly useful here, as it illuminates how male bonds are consolidated through a woman's body. However, *Dracula* complicates this model by emphasizing not rivalry but collective contribution. The men do not compete for Lucy; instead, they unite through her, producing a form of male intimacy that borders on the erotic. The repeated emphasis on bodily invasion, coupled with the emotional gravity of the scenes, suggests that desire circulates horizontally between men as much as it moves vertically toward a female object.

Importantly, these scenes are framed through medical discourse, which functions as a narrative alibi. Scientific language sanitizes the erotic potential of blood exchange, allowing male bodies to interact intimately without acknowledging sexual implication. Yet the novel's insistence on documenting each transfusion, complete with emotional reaction and ritual solemnity, betrays a fascination with the act itself. Male queerness in *Dracula* thus finds expression not through explicit desire, but through structured, socially sanctioned forms of bodily intimacy.

The epistolary structure of *Dracula* plays a crucial role in regulating queer subtext. Journals, letters, and memoranda create a system of surveillance that mirrors the novel's broader investment in control. Male characters are constantly recording their thoughts and actions,

transforming private experience into public record. This compulsion to document functions as a mechanism of discipline, ensuring that moments of vulnerability or intimacy are immediately subjected to rational explanation.

Jonathan Harker's journal is particularly revealing in this respect. His early entries are marked by confusion, fear, and sensory overload, especially during his encounters with Dracula. However, once he escapes the castle and rejoins English society, his tone shifts toward restraint and self-censorship. Mina's later editing of the journals further neutralizes any residual ambiguity, organizing the narrative into a coherent account that prioritizes action over effect. Queer moments are not erased, but they are reframed as errors, hallucinations, or foreign corruptions.

This narrative containment reflects a broader pattern in *Dracula*: male queerness is permitted to surface only under conditions of threat or otherness and must be managed through collective masculine authority. Violence becomes a key tool in this process. The staking of Lucy and the destruction of Dracula himself are ritualized acts that reaffirm heterosexual masculinity through penetration, mastery, and elimination. These acts not only destroy the vampire but symbolically purge the text of destabilizing desire. Taken together, the queer subtexts within the text reveal a pattern of male non-heteronormative sexuality that is neither fully articulated nor entirely absent. Instead, male queerness in the novel operates through deferral, substitution, and containment. Desire circulates between men in moments of bodily vulnerability, emotional dependence, and ritualized intimacy, yet it is consistently rerouted through structures that preserve masculine authority. These structures like homosocial bonding, documentation, and violence, do not eliminate queer desire so much as regulate its expression.

This displacement has significant implications. By denying male queerness the language of desire, the novel avoids confronting its erotic potential directly. Instead, queerness is externalized, onto foreign bodies, monstrous figures, or moments of crisis, where it can be framed as contamination rather than inclination. Dracula himself becomes the repository for what cannot be acknowledged among English men: possession, penetration, and pleasure unmoored from reproductive heterosexuality. In destroying the vampire, the male alliance symbolically eradicates the threat of queer desire while reaffirming their own normative identities.

Yet the persistence of these motifs suggests that containment is never complete. The novel's repeated return to imagery of penetration, exchange, and bodily invasion indicates a fascination that exceeds narrative necessity. Male queerness in *Dracula* is therefore best understood not as a hidden theme waiting to be uncovered, but as a structural pressure, a force that shapes the novel's form, its anxieties, and its obsession with control. This pressure is markedly gendered. While male queerness is diffused across homosocial networks and rendered ambiguous, it is never made fully visible or emotionally central. The novel ensures that male desire remains abstract, displaced, and ultimately deniable. This strategy stands in stark contrast to *Carmilla*, where female queerness is neither deferred nor diluted, but placed at the narrative's core.

Unlike *Dracula*, *Carmilla* foregrounds queer intimacy from its earliest pages, situating female same-sex desire not at the margins of the narrative but at its emotional center. The relationship between Laura and Carmilla is structured around sustained proximity, emotional dependency, and repeated physical contact. Where the main queer coupling of Jonathan and the

Count in *Dracula* disperses queer potential across multiple characters and events, *Carmilla* concentrates it within a single, intensely private bond.

Laura's narration emphasizes affective experience over action. From their first meeting, Carmilla is described not merely as strange, but as irresistibly captivating. Laura recalls feeling drawn to her guest by a sensation that is both pleasurable and unsettling: "I felt rather unaccountably towards her a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable, ever and anon, mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust" (Le Fanu 260). The simultaneity of pleasure and unease is crucial. Desire is not denied or displaced; it is explicitly named, even as it is framed as inexplicable. Physical intimacy between the two women is described with a frequency and tenderness absent from Dracula's male relationships. Carmilla's gestures towards Laura are rendered in language that blurs the line between romantic and erotic. At one point, Laura recounts how Carmilla would "draw me to her, and her hot lips travelled along my cheek in kisses" (Le Fanu 263). The specificity of this imagery, particularly the emphasis on lips, heat, and repeated touch, resists any purely platonic interpretation. Female desire here is not symbolic or deferred; it is enacted on the body.

Queer desire in *Carmilla* is reinforced through repetition. Carmilla repeatedly declares her devotion to Laura, framing their bond as exclusive and eternal: "You are mine, you shall be mine, you and I are one for ever" (Le Fanu 264). This language of unity and possession echoes the rhetoric often reserved for heterosexual romance, yet here it is articulated between women. Unlike Dracula's possessive claim over Jonathan Harker, which is swiftly neutralized by violence, Carmilla's declarations are allowed to linger, shaping the emotional texture of the narrative.

Secrecy plays a different role here than in *Dracula*. While both texts rely on concealment, secrecy in *Carmilla* enhances intimacy rather than dispersing it. Carmilla repeatedly insists that her bond with Laura must remain private, framing secrecy as a marker of trust and emotional depth. In this context, concealment intensifies closeness: what is withheld from the broader social world becomes the very condition of their intimacy. This dynamic mirrors historical realities of female same-sex relationships, which often relied on discretion to survive within Victorian social structures. However, as Sharon Marcus argues in *Between Women*, female intimacy in Victorian culture was not always hidden or unintelligible; it could be visible, socially legible, and even celebrated under the rubric of friendship. Marcus complicates the assumption that secrecy was the defining feature of all female same-sex bonds, showing instead that such relationships occupied an ambiguous space between publicity and privacy.⁹

Scholars have noted that Carmilla's desire is repeatedly described as invasive, entering Laura's body through both affection and attack. The vampire's nocturnal visits, though terrifying, are narrated with a dreamlike sensuality. Laura describes feeling a presence beside her bed, followed by a sensation of being touched and drained. These scenes merge erotic and violent imagery, presenting female desire as both pleasurable and consuming. Unlike *Dracula*, where penetration is displaced onto tools and rituals, *Carmilla* locates it directly within the intimate space of the female body.

This fusion of desire and danger reflects a broader cultural anxiety surrounding female sexuality. Whereas male queerness in *Dracula* is abstracted and managed through collective action, female queerness in *Carmilla* is individualized and pathologized. Desire is not a diffuse pressure but a personal threat, embodied within the text and her as a character.

⁹ Marcus, Sharon. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. Princeton University Press, 2007. Marcus also calls back on Eve Sedgwick's pivotal *Between Men* article with her choice of title.

What ultimately distinguishes *Carmilla* is how openly it acknowledges the erotic power of female same-sex desire before condemning it. The novella allows queer intimacy to flourish emotionally and physically, but only temporarily. *Carmilla*'s destruction is framed as necessary not merely to save Laura's life, but to restore normative social order. Female desire, having been rendered visible and compelling, must be eradicated. This narrative trajectory underscores the gendered imbalance at the heart of the Victorian Gothic. Female queerness is made legible, intimate, and emotionally central, only to be marked as monstrous. Male queerness, by contrast, is diffused and obscured, never granted the same degree of narrative presence. In *Carmilla*, queerness is dangerous because it is felt; in *Dracula*, it is dangerous because it threatens to be felt, and must therefore be managed before it can fully surface.

Reading *Dracula* and *Carmilla* in tandem reveals not simply two different expressions of queerness, but two fundamentally unequal narrative economies of non-heteronormative sexuality. While both texts rely on Gothic conventions to articulate desire that exceeds social norms, they distribute visibility, intimacy, and consequence along sharply gendered lines. Male queerness in *Dracula* is structurally present yet narratively evasive; female queerness in *Carmilla* is emotionally explicit yet violently curtailed. This imbalance is not incidental but central to how Victorian Gothic fiction manages sexual anxiety.

In *Dracula*, male queerness operates as a latent pressure embedded in the novel's form. It surfaces through bodily proximity, ritualized penetration, and intense homosocial bonds, yet it is rarely localized within a single relationship or consciousness. The dispersal of queer desire across multiple male characters prevents it from crystallizing into a recognizable sexual threat. Desire is transformed into action, intimacy into duty, and vulnerability into discipline. As a result, male queerness remains deniable, protected by abstraction and collective masculinity.

Carmilla adopts the opposite strategy. Female queerness is concentrated, personalized, and narratively foregrounded. The intimacy between Laura and Carmilla is sustained, emotionally articulated, and repeatedly enacted on the body. Desire is not displaced onto symbolic action but experienced directly as pleasure, longing, and fear. This concentration renders female queerness legible in ways male queerness never becomes. The narrative allows the reader to feel the allure of this intimacy before redefining it as pathological.

This asymmetry produces unequal narrative consequences. Because male queerness in *Dracula* is diffused and mediated, it can be neutralized without naming it. The destruction of Dracula eradicates the foreign and monstrous source of transgression while leaving English masculinity intact. Male bonds emerge strengthened rather than compromised, and heterosexual order is reaffirmed without requiring a direct confrontation with same-sex desire. In contrast, *Carmilla* requires the literal elimination of the queer female body. Carmilla herself must be hunted, exposed, and destroyed, her intimacy with Laura reframed as predation rather than mutual desire. The difference lies not in the presence of queerness, but in its legibility. Female queerness is made too visible to tolerate. Its emotional depth and bodily immediacy render it threatening to patriarchal structures that depend on reproductive femininity and sexual passivity. Male queerness, shielded by homosocial norms and institutional authority, never fully disrupts the social order. It can be redirected into violence and governance without destabilizing masculinity itself.

What emerges from these readings is a Gothic hierarchy of sexual threat. The vampire, as a figure of excess and transgression, becomes a testing ground for which forms of queerness Victorian culture could acknowledge and which it could not. Female same-sex desire is acknowledged only to be condemned; male same-sex desire is obscured to avoid

acknowledgment altogether. Both strategies serve the same end: the preservation of heteropatriarchal order. Yet they do so unevenly, revealing the gendered logic underpinning Victorian anxieties about sexuality.

This chapter has demonstrated that queerness in *Dracula* and *Carmilla* cannot be understood through a singular interpretive framework. The texts deploy different narrative mechanisms to manage non-heteronormative sexuality, and those mechanisms are shaped by assumptions about gender, power, and visibility. By attending to how queerness is allowed to appear, or prevented from appearing, this analysis exposes the limitations of readings that treat Gothic queerness as universal or ungendered. In foregrounding unequal representation, this chapter lays the groundwork for examining how these gendered dynamics extend beyond the texts themselves. The patterns of visibility and suppression identified here do not end with narrative closure; they shape how readers, critics, and adaptors have continued to engage with these works. The Gothic vampire may be endlessly resurrected, but the terms on which its queerness is recognized remain deeply uneven.

CHAPTER TWO: GENDERED DISPARITIES IN QUEER PORTRAYAL

Having established queerness in this study as non-heteronormative desire articulated through subtext, embodiment, and affect, this chapter shifts from identification to differentiation. Rather than asking whether *Dracula* and *Carmilla* encode queer desire, it examines how that queerness is structured through Victorian gender ideology. In both texts, intimacy, bodily vulnerability, and transgressive pleasure emerge through Gothic conventions; however, these elements are distributed unevenly. Male-coded queerness in *Dracula* is diffused and mediated through subtextual homosocial structures, while female-coded queerness in *Carmilla* is rendered visible, emotionally central, and narratively explicit. This distinction reveals that queerness in the Victorian Gothic is not inherently subversive, but is shaped, and constrained, by gendered expectations about desire, visibility, and control.

In *Dracula*, male queerness is most apparent in scenes of enforced proximity and bodily vulnerability, particularly in Jonathan Harker's encounters with the Count. The language of restraint, penetration, and immobilization foregrounds the collapse of personal boundaries, yet the narrative consistently frames these moments as danger rather than desire. Harker's body becomes an object of control, watched, held, and threatened, but never allowed to register pleasure. This framing is crucial: it permits intimate male-male contact to exist while denying it erotic legitimacy. Male queerness is thus invoked at the level of bodily experience, but contained at the level of narrative interpretation.

This dynamic intensifies in the episode involving the three vampire women, where heterosexual expectation is momentarily introduced only to be disrupted. Harker anticipates an encounter structured around female desire, yet this possibility is abruptly foreclosed by Dracula's intervention. The Count's possessive assertion of control over Harker's body redirects the scene's

erotic energy away from heterosexuality and into a male-centered dynamic. While the narrative attempts to frame this interruption as protective, the language of ownership and jealousy complicates that reading. What emerges is not the absence of queer desire, but its redirection into a form that remains unacknowledged yet structurally present.

Rather than understanding these moments solely as acts of narrative displacement, they can be more productively read through an intersectional queer framework that foregrounds how gender shapes the articulation and regulation of desire. As scholars such as Christian D. Chan and Lionel C. Howard argue, queerness does not operate as a singular or universal category, but is structured through overlapping systems of power, including gender, which determine how non-normative desire is expressed and received.¹⁰ Within this context, male queerness in *Dracula* is not simply displaced but strategically managed. The novel thus avoids eliminating queer potential altogether; instead, it reshapes it into configurations that remain legible within dominant gender norms. Even as the narrative refuses to name male-male desire explicitly, it continues to reproduce it through patterns of intimacy, control, and bodily exchange. What emerges is a form of queerness that is structurally embedded yet carefully regulated—pervasive in its presence, but ultimately deniable in its articulation.

This strategy becomes even more apparent in the novel's recurring emphasis on blood exchange. The transfusion scenes involving Lucy Westenra, though framed as medical interventions, are saturated with imagery of penetration, union, and shared bodily essence. Male characters participate in intimate acts that blur distinctions between bodies, creating a network of physical and symbolic connection. Yet these exchanges are legitimized through scientific

¹⁰ Chan, Christian D., and Lionel C. Howard. "When Queerness Meets Intersectional Thinking: Revolutionizing Parallels, Histories, and Contestations." *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 67, no. 3, Feb. 2020, pp. 346–66. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1530882>.

discourse, transforming potentially erotic acts into acts of duty and care. In this way, male queerness is absorbed into institutional frameworks that neutralize its disruptive potential.

The epistolary structure of *Dracula* further reinforces this process of containment. The constant production of journals, letters, and memoranda creates a system of surveillance in which private experiences are immediately translated into public record. This documentation serves not only to advance the plot, but to regulate meaning. Moments of confusion, vulnerability, or excess are quickly rationalized, categorized, and stripped of ambiguity. Queerness is not erased, but disciplined through narration. Jonathan Harker's journal exemplifies this shift. His early entries are marked by sensory disorientation and emotional intensity, particularly in his encounters with Dracula. However, once he returns to England, his tone becomes markedly restrained. Mina's subsequent editing of the narrative imposes further order, organizing fragmented experiences into a coherent, rational account. Through this process, moments that might suggest queer intimacy are reframed as errors, hallucinations, or foreign contamination. Narrative coherence thus functions as a mechanism of ideological control.

Violence operates as the final stage of this containment. The staking of Lucy and the destruction of Dracula are framed as acts of purification, reaffirming heterosexual masculinity through ritualized penetration and mastery. These acts symbolically eliminate the threat of non-normative desire while consolidating male authority. Yet the excessiveness of these scenes suggests not resolution, but anxiety. The novel's fixation on penetration and bodily destruction echoes the very dynamics it seeks to suppress, revealing the persistence of what cannot be fully contained.

Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that male queerness in *Dracula* is structured through deferral, displacement, and regulation. It emerges in moments of vulnerability and intimacy, but is consistently mediated through narrative strategies that preserve masculine authority. Rather than confronting queer desire directly, the novel externalizes it, onto foreign bodies, monstrous figures, and moments of crisis, where it can be managed without destabilizing the social order. Male queerness is therefore not absent, but rendered abstract, diffuse, and ultimately deniable. *Carmilla* adopts a markedly different approach, foregrounding female queerness as both emotionally central and narratively explicit. From its earliest pages, the novella situates the relationship between Laura and Carmilla at the core of its narrative, structuring it through sustained proximity, emotional dependency, and repeated physical intimacy. Unlike *Dracula*, which disperses queer potential across multiple characters and events, *Carmilla* concentrates it within a single, intensely personal bond.

This concentration renders female desire both visible and reciprocal. Carmilla's gestures—embracing Laura, caressing her, whispering affection—are described in language that blurs the boundary between romantic and erotic attachment. Crucially, Laura responds in kind. She anticipates Carmilla's presence, experiences longing in her absence, and expresses confusion at the intensity of her own feelings. Female queerness is thus not merely imposed upon the protagonist, but experienced from within. The narrative grants it an emotional depth and interiority that male queerness in *Dracula* is denied.

Secrecy functions differently in this context. While both texts rely on concealment, secrecy in *Carmilla* intensifies intimacy rather than dispersing it. Carmilla frames her private relationship with Laura as a bond of trust, aligning hiddenness with emotional depth. At the same time, the narrative codes this secrecy as dangerous, linking it to deception and predation. Female

queerness is therefore not displaced, but contained within a framework that renders it simultaneously desirable and threatening.

The novella's treatment of bodily experience further underscores this distinction. Carmilla's nocturnal visits merge erotic and violent imagery, presenting intimacy as both pleasurable and invasive. Laura describes sensations of touch, proximity, and physical depletion in terms that evoke both desire and violation. Unlike *Dracula*, where penetration is displaced onto tools and rituals, *Carmilla* locates it directly within the female body. This immediacy makes female queerness impossible to abstract or deny.

Yet it is precisely this visibility that necessitates punishment. Carmilla's destruction as a character is framed as essential to restoring social order, not only to save Laura but to eliminate a form of desire that has been made too legible to tolerate. The narrative allows female queerness to exist fully only to eradicate it. Visibility becomes the condition of both recognition and annihilation. The contrast between these texts reveals a broader Gothic logic of gendered regulation. Male queerness in *Dracula* is mediated, allowing it to persist without direct acknowledgment. Female queerness in *Carmilla* is concentrated and embodied, making it both legible and intolerable. This asymmetry produces unequal narrative consequences: male queerness can be neutralized without being named, while female queerness must be explicitly identified and destroyed.

What emerges, then, is a hierarchy of queer legibility. The threat posed by non-heteronormative desire is not determined solely by its presence, but by its visibility and its relation to gendered expectations. Male queerness, shielded by homosocial structures and institutional authority, can be redirected into forms that reinforce rather than destabilize

masculinity. Female queerness, by contrast, disrupts foundational assumptions about passivity, reproduction, and social order, making it far more difficult to contain.

This hierarchy does not remain confined to the texts themselves. The gendered structuring of queerness within *Dracula* and *Carmilla* provides a framework for understanding their divergent critical and cultural trajectories. If male queerness is more easily obscured, it is also more easily assimilated into dominant interpretive frameworks. Female queerness, by virtue of its visibility, resists such assimilation and is more likely to be marginalized or reduced to spectacle. By foregrounding these disparities, this chapter demonstrates that Gothic queerness is neither uniform nor neutral. It is shaped by deeply ingrained assumptions about gender, desire, and power that determine how non-normative sexuality can be represented and understood. These patterns of visibility and suppression extend beyond narrative form, influencing how these texts have been read, valued, and remembered.

The following chapter builds on this foundation by turning to reception, examining how readers, critics, and popular culture have continued to reproduce these gendered distinctions. If the vampire remains an enduring figure of transgression, the terms on which its queerness is recognized, and the forms it is allowed to take, remain profoundly uneven.

CHAPTER THREE: RECEPTION, SCHOLARSHIP, AND QUEER GENDERED BIAS

The initial reception of both *Dracula* (1897) and *Carmilla* (1872) reveals the extent to which Victorian cultural frameworks shaped not only the difference in literary value between these two works but also the legibility of queer desire. Although both texts participate in a shared Gothic discourse of transgression, their early critical receptions diverge significantly, particularly in how gender and sexuality were perceived.

Upon its publication, *Dracula* was met with a generally favorable critical response. Contemporary reviews often praised the novel's sensational plot, atmospheric tension, and narrative structure. Critics highlighted its effectiveness as a work of horror and its ability to evoke fear through a carefully constructed sense of dread. Reviews in periodicals such as *The Daily Mail* and *The Spectator* commended Stoker's skill in sustaining suspense and noted the novel's imaginative engagement with folklore and modern anxieties.¹¹ With *The Spectator* stating "The story is told in such a realistic way that one actually accepts its wildest flights of fancy as real facts. It is a superb tour de force which stamps itself on the memory." With this praise though, some critics found the novel excessive or overly gruesome; these critiques were largely framed within acceptable boundaries of Gothic sensationalism rather than moral outrage.

Significantly, early reviewers of *Dracula* did not overtly engage with the novel's queer subtexts. The intense homosocial bonds between male characters, the exchange of blood, and moments of physical intimacy, particularly between Jonathan Harker and Count Dracula or among the band of men, were not recognized as sites of sexual ambiguity. Instead, these

¹¹ "Review of *Dracula*." *Daily Mail*, 1 June 1897. *Dracula: A Norton Critical Edition*, edited by Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal, W. W. Norton, 1997. PDF file.

<https://blogs.dickinson.edu/secretlives/files/2017/08/Dracula-Contemporray-Reviews.pdf> "Recent Novels." *The Spectator*, 31 July 1897, pp. 150–51. *Dracula: A Norton Critical Edition*, edited by Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal, W. W. Norton, 1997. PDF file.
<https://blogs.dickinson.edu/secretlives/files/2017/08/Dracula-Contemporray-Reviews.pdf>

interactions were subsumed under themes of camaraderie, imperial anxiety, and moral conflict. This silence is telling. Victorian society, governed by rigid heteronormative expectations, often rendered male queerness invisible unless explicitly named or criminalized. As a result, *Dracula* was able to circulate within mainstream literary culture without provoking significant moral panic regarding its underlying sexual tensions.

In contrast, *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu presents a more complicated case. Unlike *Dracula*, *Carmilla* did not initially appear as a standalone novel but was published as part of Le Fanu's collection *In a Glass Darkly*. This mode of publication, combined with Le Fanu's already established reputation as a writer of supernatural tales, meant that *Carmilla* entered the literary marketplace with less visibility and critical attention than Stoker's later work. Consequently, direct contemporary reviews specifically addressing the text are scarce, making it difficult to reconstruct a precise account of its initial reception. However, the relative absence of documented reviews does not indicate a lack of cultural significance. Rather, it reflects the marginalization of texts that engage too directly with taboo subjects. Scholars have suggested that Victorian readers likely perceived *Carmilla*'s overt depiction of female same-sex desire as more immediately transgressive than the veiled ambiguities present in *Dracula*. The relationship between Carmilla and Laura is characterized by emotional intimacy, physical closeness, and explicitly sensual language, which resists easy containment within heteronormative frameworks. Unlike Stoker's novel, where queerness is displaced and obscured, Le Fanu's novel foregrounds it, making it more difficult for contemporary audiences to ignore or reinterpret.

Victorian anxieties surrounding female sexuality further intensified this reaction. Female desire, particularly when detached from reproduction and male control, was frequently pathologized as dangerous, excessive, or unnatural. Within this context, Carmilla's character,

predatory yet alluring presence, would have been read not only as a supernatural threat but also as a manifestation of deviant femininity. Even in the absence of extensive critical documentation, the cultural climate suggests that *Carmilla* occupied a more precarious position, one that limited its immediate acceptance and contributed to its relative obscurity. Thus, the disparity in initial reception between *Dracula* and *Carmilla* is not merely a matter of literary merit or timing but reflects deeper ideological constraints. Male queerness, when encoded indirectly, could pass unnoticed or be assimilated into acceptable narratives, whereas female queerness, when made visible, provoked discomfort and required suppression. This dynamic established an early hierarchy that would continue to shape the reception of both texts.

This absence of recognition is not incidental but structurally produced. As Wolfgang Iser argues in *The Implied Reader*, literary texts are inherently incomplete; they contain gaps, ambiguities, and indeterminate spaces that must be filled by the reader. Meaning is not fixed within the text itself but emerges through the interaction between text and reader. Within this framework, the Victorian reader of *Dracula* can be understood as an “implied reader” shaped by heteronormative assumptions. The text presents moments of ambiguity—particularly in scenes of male intimacy—but these moments are structured in such a way that they can be resolved without invoking non-heterosexual desire. The “gaps” that might invite a queer reading are instead filled with culturally dominant interpretations that reinforce normative masculinity. Male queerness, though present at the level of textual possibility, remains unrealized at the level of reception because the implied reader is not positioned to recognize it as such. In this sense, queerness in *Dracula* is not simply hidden; it is rendered unreadable within the interpretive frameworks available to its initial audience.

Where *Dracula* offers gaps that can be safely resolved, *Carmilla* presents a different kind of textual challenge. The relationship between Carmilla and Laura is marked by sustained emotional and physical intimacy, expressed through language that is both affectionate and erotically charged. These moments do not function as gaps in the same way; instead, they create what Iser would describe as sites of heightened indeterminacy that demand interpretive engagement. However, unlike the ambiguities in *Dracula*, these moments cannot be easily reconciled with heteronormative expectations. The implied reader of *Carmilla* is therefore placed in a position of interpretive strain. The text invites recognition of desire that the cultural framework resists acknowledging.

This tension helps explain the relative scarcity of contemporary reviews. The absence of critical engagement can be read not as a lack of significance, but as a symptom of what Iser identifies as a breakdown in the reading process. When a text's gaps cannot be comfortably filled, when its indeterminacies exceed the reader's interpretive capacity, it risks marginalization. *Carmilla*'s overt representation of female queerness produces precisely this effect. Its meanings are not easily stabilized, and as a result, the text is less readily absorbed into dominant literary discourse.

Victorian anxieties surrounding female sexuality further intensify this dynamic. Female desire, particularly when detached from male authority and reproductive function, was frequently pathologized as excessive or deviant. Within this context, Carmilla's expressions of longing, attachment, and possession would have been read not merely as supernatural aberrations but as manifestations of dangerous femininity. Unlike male queerness in *Dracula*, which could be subsumed under acceptable social practices, female queerness within the novel resists such assimilation. It is not hidden within narrative gaps but articulated through visible, embodied

experience. As a result, it demands a response that Victorian culture was unequipped, or unwilling, to provide.

Thus, the disparity in initial reception between *Dracula* and *Carmilla* is not simply a matter of literary merit or historical timing. It reflects a deeper interpretive asymmetry shaped by gender. Male queerness, when encoded through ambiguity, can pass unnoticed because it aligns with the expectations of the implied reader. Female queerness, when rendered explicit, disrupts those expectations, creating a breakdown in the reading process that results in silence, marginalization, or suppression. The “gap” in this case is not only textual but critical: a gap in recognition, a gap in discourse, and ultimately a gap in literary value.

Over time, the divergence in reception between *Dracula* and *Carmilla* has only become more pronounced. While both texts have endured as foundational works of the Vampiric Gothic, their positions within popular culture and literary discourse differ dramatically. *Dracula* has achieved an unparalleled level of cultural saturation. The figure of Count Dracula has become synonymous with the vampire itself, transcending its literary origins to become a global cultural icon. Adaptations across film, theater, television, and other media have continually reinterpreted the character, ensuring the novel’s ongoing relevance. From early cinematic portrayals such as *Nosferatu* (1922) to later adaptations like *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992), the narrative has been repeatedly reshaped to reflect contemporary anxieties and desires.¹² This proliferation has solidified *Dracula*’s status not only as a literary classic but also as a cornerstone of popular culture.

¹² Murnau, F. W., director. *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*. Prana Film, 1922. Coppola, Francis Ford, director. *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*. Columbia Pictures, 1992. Eggers, Robert, director. *Nosferatu*. Focus Features, 2024. Coogler, Ryan, director. *Sinners*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2025. We can continue to see gothic conventions come into the mainstream once again with the recent releases of *Nosferatu* (2024) and *Sinners* (2025). Both films earned a significant amount of critical praise.

In contrast, *Carmilla* has remained comparatively marginalized. Although it is increasingly recognized by scholars as a foundational vampire text, predating *Dracula* and influencing its development, it has not achieved the same level of mainstream visibility. Adaptations of *Carmilla* exist, including web series and independent films, but they have not penetrated popular culture to the same extent. As a result, the novella is often overshadowed, its contributions acknowledged primarily within specialized academic contexts rather than broader cultural discourse. This disparity is particularly striking given *Carmilla*'s thematic significance. Many contemporary critics argue that *Carmilla* represents a more explicit and radical exploration of vampirism as a metaphor for queer desire. One notable critique Paulina Parmer states in her book on the Lesbian Gothic, "LeFanu, although depicting Carmilla's transgressive behaviour as being punished with death, portrays her with unexpected sensitivity. Her unconventional sexual attentions, though producing the usual symptoms of pallor and lethargy in her victims, elicit a response of pleasure from Laura, the young woman whom she loves" (100).¹³ The novel's focus on female intimacy and bodily vulnerability offers a perspective largely absent from later vampire narratives dominated by male figures. Yet, despite—or perhaps because of—this explicitness, *Carmilla* has been historically overlooked.

The ongoing reception of these texts reflects a continuation of the gendered biases evident in their initial reception. *Dracula*'s adaptability and enduring popularity can be attributed, in part, to its ability to accommodate multiple interpretations while maintaining a core narrative that ultimately reaffirms social order. The defeat of Count Dracula restores patriarchal and national stability, allowing audiences to engage with transgression without fully confronting its implications. *Carmilla*, on the other hand, resists such containment. Although the novella

¹³ Palmer, Paulina. *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions*. Cassell, 1999.

ends with the destruction of the vampire, the emotional intensity of the relationship between Carmilla and Laura complicates any straightforward moral resolution. The lingering ambiguity and unresolved desire make the text less easily assimilated into dominant cultural narratives. Consequently, it remains on the periphery, valued for its originality but not fully integrated into the mainstream canon.

These patterns of popular and historical reception are mirrored, and in some cases amplified, within academic scholarship. While *Dracula* has generated an extensive body of critical analysis across disciplines, including psychoanalytic, feminist, postcolonial, and queer readings, *Carmilla* has received comparatively limited attention. This imbalance is not merely quantitative but also qualitative, reflecting broader tendencies within literary studies to prioritize certain narratives over others.

The scholarly canonization of *Dracula* has positioned it as the definitive Victorian vampire text, often relegating *Carmilla* to the status of precursor or footnote. Even when acknowledged, Le Fanu's work is frequently discussed primarily in relation to Stoker's novel, rather than as a text deserving independent analysis. This framing reinforces the hierarchy established in earlier reception, privileging narratives that align more comfortably with dominant critical paradigms. At the same time, the rise of queer theory has prompted renewed interest in both texts, offering new frameworks for interpreting their representations of sexuality and desire. However, as this study argues, contemporary scholarship is not immune to the biases inherited from Victorian culture. Many prominent queer theorists have been criticized for their lack of written exploration of female queerness, like Sedgwick, who prominently focuses on male queerness in her scholarship. Male queerness in *Dracula* is often explored in abstract or

symbolic terms, while female queerness in *Carmilla* continues to be treated as excessive or self-evident, limiting the depth of critical engagement.

In this sense, the reception histories of *Dracula* and *Carmilla* do not simply reflect changing literary tastes but reveal the persistence of gendered assumptions about visibility, legitimacy, and interpretive value. The transition from popular to scholarly reception thus underscores a central tension of this thesis: that the unequal treatment of male and female queerness is not confined to the texts themselves but is reproduced through the very frameworks used to read and evaluate them.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have traced the textual and cultural trajectories of both novels to examine how Victorian Gothic literature encodes queerness and how gender shapes its reception. By situating these works within the social, moral, and literary frameworks of the late nineteenth century, I have demonstrated that queerness is both produced and policed through narrative form, thematic content, and audience interpretation. Both texts employ the Gothic vampire to explore desire, intimacy, and transgression, yet the ways in which male- and female-coded queerness are represented—and subsequently received—reveal not only differences in narrative strategy but also enduring cultural hierarchies surrounding gender and sexuality.

The early reception of these texts reveals the extent to which Victorian moral and gender norms structured interpretive possibility. *Dracula* was widely reviewed and celebrated for its suspense, epistolary innovation, and Gothic spectacle, while its homoerotic undertones were largely overlooked, absorbed into frameworks of homosocial bonding and masculine duty. This critical silence was not accidental but indicative of a broader cultural logic that rendered male queerness legible only when it could be denied or displaced. *Carmilla*, by contrast, confronted readers more directly with female same-sex desire, presenting emotional and physical intimacy between women as central rather than peripheral to its narrative. Its overt engagement with queer female embodiment and desire resisted such displacement, making it more difficult to assimilate into acceptable interpretive paradigms. The novella's relative marginalization, reflected in its limited contemporary reception, demonstrates how gender mediates not only the visibility of queerness but also its cultural acceptability and critical legitimacy.

As this study has shown, these patterns of reception are not confined to the nineteenth century but persist across time, shaping the afterlives of both texts. *Dracula* has achieved an

unparalleled level of cultural saturation, its titular figure becoming synonymous with the vampire itself. Through continuous adaptation and reinterpretation, the novel has secured a central place in both popular culture and academic discourse. Its queerness, embedded within ambiguity and subtext, has proven remarkably adaptable, allowing the text to be read through multiple critical lenses without destabilizing its canonical status. In contrast, *Carmilla* has remained comparatively peripheral, despite its foundational role in the development of vampire fiction. Its exploration of female intimacy, desire, and bodily vulnerability has often been acknowledged only within specialized scholarly contexts, rather than integrated into mainstream literary or cultural narratives. This disparity underscores the extent to which visibility can function as a double-edged condition: what is most explicitly articulated is not necessarily what is most readily preserved.

This dynamic is further reinforced within academic scholarship, where the privileging of *Dracula* has contributed to its elevation as the definitive Victorian vampire text. While Bram Stoker's novel has generated extensive critical engagement across disciplines, Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* has often been positioned as a precursor rather than a text of equal analytical weight. Even within queer theory, where both works have been revisited, there remains a tendency to prioritize male-coded queerness as complex, symbolic, and theoretically rich, while female-coded queerness is treated as more immediately legible and therefore less in need of sustained interpretation. This imbalance reflects not only the inheritance of Victorian gender norms but also the persistence of critical frameworks that continue to shape how queerness is read and valued.

By bringing together close textual analysis and reception studies, this thesis has sought to demonstrate that queerness in Gothic literature cannot be understood as a singular or uniform

phenomenon. Rather, it is structured through a series of asymmetries that determine how desire is represented, perceived, and ultimately remembered. In *Dracula*, male queerness operates through deferral, displacement, and abstraction. It is present in moments of bodily vulnerability, homosocial intimacy, and ritualized exchange, yet it is consistently mediated through narrative strategies that prevent it from becoming fully legible. This diffusion allows male queerness to persist without direct acknowledgment, enabling the text to engage with transgressive desire while maintaining alignment with dominant social norms.

Carmilla, by contrast, adopts a mode of concentration rather than diffusion. Female queerness is localized within the relationship between Carmilla and Laura, rendered visible through sustained emotional and physical intimacy. Desire is not displaced but embodied, experienced directly rather than mediated through symbolic structures. This immediacy grants female queerness a degree of narrative centrality that male queerness in *Dracula* is denied. Yet it is precisely this centrality that necessitates containment. Because female desire is made visible and emotionally resonant, it becomes more difficult to ignore, and therefore more urgent to regulate. The destruction of Carmilla thus functions not only as narrative resolution but as ideological correction, reaffirming the boundaries that her presence threatens to dissolve.

What emerges from this comparison is a hierarchy of queer legibility shaped by gender. Male-coded queerness, when obscured through narrative indirection, can be assimilated into existing frameworks of meaning. Female-coded queerness, when rendered explicit, resists such assimilation and is more likely to be marginalized, sensationalized, or erased. This hierarchy operates not only within the texts themselves but across their reception histories, influencing which narratives are preserved, which are adapted, and which are relegated to the margins of literary and cultural memory.

Importantly, this thesis has also emphasized the role of the reader in producing these hierarchies. Drawing on the work of Wolfgang Iser, the analysis has shown that meaning emerges through the interaction between text and reader, and that this interaction is shaped by historically specific assumptions about gender and sexuality. The “gaps” within *Dracula* invite interpretations that align with heteronormative expectations, allowing queer subtext to remain unarticulated. In *Carmilla*, however, the relative absence of such gaps—or their resistance to normative resolution—places greater pressure on the reader to confront the implications of female desire. The resulting discomfort contributes to the text’s marginalization, revealing how interpretive frameworks can function as mechanisms of exclusion as much as understanding.

The implications of this study extend beyond the specific texts under consideration. By foregrounding the gendered dynamics of queer representation and reception, this thesis contributes to broader conversations within Gothic studies, queer theory, and literary criticism. It challenges the assumption that queerness in literature operates uniformly or that its presence alone is sufficient to guarantee critical recognition. Instead, it demonstrates that the legibility and value of queer narratives are contingent upon the ways in which they intersect with structures of gender, power, and cultural expectation.

This recognition invites a reconsideration of the literary canon itself. If texts like *Carmilla* have been historically marginalized not because of a lack of complexity but because of the form their queerness takes, then expanding the scope of queer literary scholarship requires more than the inclusion of overlooked works. It demands a re-evaluation of the criteria by which texts are deemed significant, as well as the interpretive habits that sustain those judgments. Attending to female-coded queerness not as an exception but as a central component of Gothic

literature opens new possibilities for understanding the genre's engagement with sexuality, embodiment, and transgression.

Moreover, this study suggests that the Gothic vampire, as a figure of excess and instability, remains a powerful site for exploring the limits of normative identity. In both *Dracula* and *Carmilla*, the vampire disrupts boundaries between self and other, desire and danger, life and death. Yet the meanings attached to this disruption are not fixed; they are shaped by the cultural frameworks through which the texts are read. Recognizing this fluidity allows for a more nuanced understanding of how literature participates in the construction—and contestation—of sexual norms.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that a more equitable approach to queer Gothic literature requires sustained attention to the interplay between representation and reception. By examining how gender influences not only the depiction of queerness but also its critical and cultural afterlives, this study highlights the need for a more inclusive and self-reflexive mode of analysis. Expanding queer literary scholarship to foreground female-coded desire, and to interrogate the biases that have historically limited its recognition, enables a richer and more accurate account of the Gothic tradition.

Just as the vampire unsettles the boundaries it inhabits, so too can critical engagement unsettle the hierarchies that structure literary interpretation. In attending to what has been obscured, overlooked, or dismissed, we do not simply recover marginalized texts; we transform the frameworks through which all texts are understood. In doing so, we move toward a more expansive conception of queerness in literature, one that acknowledges its multiplicity, its contradictions, and its capacity to challenge the limits of both narrative and critical imagination.

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